

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Saturday, May 25, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

LSU Tigers

Coach Jay Johnson

Steven Milam

Will Helmers

Postgame Press Conference

LSU 12, South Carolina 11

JAY JOHNSON: What a game. I think there's a lot of stories in this game, but it's about toughness. The toughness that this team has displayed since the middle of the season is special.

We were in a tough spot, and now we're one of the best teams in the country. It's our 40th win of the season, four obviously here. I don't know how many in a row.

That happens when you have tough-minded people that deliver great individual performances.

Steven with the walk-off homer, he's been exceptional in this tournament. I don't know that there's been a better player on the field this entire tournament.

We won the game because of Will Helmers tonight, coming in and getting two Os right there. Hadn't pitched in a while, but so engaged in what's happening.

Some really good hitters in that lineup, obviously. I tip my hat to South Carolina. Tremendous team, tremendous program. They earned their way into the NCAA Tournament this week.

I'm happy we're moving on because these guys are so deserving to play for a championship tomorrow, and we're really excited about that.

Q. Can you talk about the Hoover magic and the enthusiasm from the LSU fans?

WILL HELMERS: I mean, the support here is miraculous. To have all the fans and all the supporters around us,



around this team is something that's so special that you don't find in every program in college baseball.

I'm happy, more than happy to be a part of it, and for the last four years, most definitely. It's something really special to me and to the rest of our players, as well.

Q. Will, your number hasn't necessarily been called many times this season, especially recently. How did you prepare for a spot this big and to succeed like you did?

WILL HELMERS: I think it's mostly a matter of just staying focused and engaged in every pitch, whether in the dugout or in the bullpen, off that day, whatever it is. Even if you're not active on a roster, I think that's important to hone into every pitch.

You kind of learn tendencies of guys if you really watch the game. It's something that I've really taken to because you never know when your number is going to get called. You have to be ready. You've got to stay ready, not get ready.

Q. Steven, can you describe that at-bat and then the following 10, 15 minutes?

STEVEN MILAM: Yeah, so (indiscernible) a good walk on a pitch clock violation, and Coach Yeskie, he was just telling me, slow down.

I actually thought he gave me the bunt sign, if I'm being honest. Then I took one, and he was like -- he did it again, and I swore it was a bunt sign. And he's like, no, just hit, just hit. Him and chief were like, just hit.

I got something down that I could handle, and I stayed calm and I put a good swing on it.

JAY JOHNSON: Tell me you're never going to check that again. It sounds like no one knows the signals.

STEVEN MILAM: Put a good swing on it and that's what happened. I was just trying to stay calm and get something I could handle and pass it to the next guy.



Q. Will and Steven, what was your perspective of that crazy play in the top of the 10th?

WILL HELMERS: I still don't know what happened to tell you the truth. Obviously it's not what we wanted to happen and obviously we thought it was unfair in some aspect, but you just keep playing. That's the only thing you can do when stuff like that happens. When things go wrong, I think the best thing you can do is keep pushing forward.

Q. Will, there's a belief around this conference in the LSU voodoo in the ninth inning. It's like you guys always have a will to win no matter the circumstances, and the rest of the conference believes in it, but do the Tigers believe in the LSU voodoo, that no matter what happens, some how some way you're going to win ballgames?

WILL HELMERS: I think that's a big part of it. Like I said, if everybody is engaged in every pitch for every game, then that's what's going to happen. We have a team that loves each other, that plays for each other, and when you have a group of guys like that, that's how it goes.

You find ways to win, whether it's a homer or whether it's a pitch clock violation, whatever it is. If it's an error, you just find ways to win no matter what.

Q. For both of the players, Jay gets ejected. What is going on in the dugout? When a coach gets ejected it can go one of two ways.

STEVEN MILAM: Yeah, we learned from past experiences. He got ejected for us earlier in the season and we didn't do what we needed to do to win that game, so we took what we had to do and we learned from that.

Coach Wanaka and Coach Yeskie talked to us right before that at-bat and slowed us down and he said past the sticks and see what happens. Ball doesn't lie. We were supposed to win that game. That's just kind of how it went out.

Q. Will, you're a Louisiana kid; been on this team a long time. What's it mean for you to come into Hoover, get that situation again and get the win for the team?

WILL HELMERS: Definitely. It's a cool stage. I felt like I was in Louisiana being here to tell you the truth. But it's an awesome stage, and I think just keeping a slow heartbeat in a situation like that where you know you need a couple Os is the key to it.

It's crucial to be just cool, calm, and collected in that kind of situation. That's kind of how I took it.

Q. I think back to February about how special it was to have all of those LSU fans in Omaha. Kind of the same question that was for the players. Talk about how special it was to make that (indiscernible)?

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, it's one of the huge reasons I came here. Nobody has a following like us. Nobody has a care level about their team like the LSU Tigers. Just an unbelievable -- I really want to tip my hat to our fans this season.

It's very easy for them to get down on you when you're, whatever, 22-15 or 3-12 in the SEC, but they didn't. They kept showing up. They kept showing up when we played Auburn at home. They kept showing up when we played Texas A&M and home. And they should.

They should because of the effort of these guys. This is two elite human beings that were up here talking right now, and that's across our entire team. The baseball talent is one thing. There's future pro players, White, Holman, Jump, Hurd, on and on and on and on.

But they're all better people than they are players. That's the only way you're sitting where we are right now, which is a great team in a great position to take advantage of the opportunities in front of it.

Q. Coach, how did the umpires explain that play to you in the top of the 10th inning?

JAY JOHNSON: I don't want to get too much into all of that. It's a good crew. They basically called it a catcher balk and basically said Brady came out in front of the plate before the pitch.

I think I was upset because it's not a reviewable play. Now, the foundation of umpiring is always to get the call right, and I do respect that. I'm going to have to look at it again and get an explanation and all those types of things.

But at least it was explained to me that it was a catcher balk, but the first thing he said is, you're not going to like this. Then yeah.

I've never seen that called before. I've got to be honest. Long time coaching college baseball, 24 years now or whatever. I've never seen that called.

Q. I have a two-parter. Milam walking it off with a hurt foot, but also your guys get the job done and you run out there. What are the emotions for you especially with the craziness?

JAY JOHNSON: It was awesome. My heart was sunk, like broken, not because of the score or any of that. It's like, wait a minute -- we were down 8-0. Does anybody remember that? We were losing the game 8-0. Then we tie it, get a beautiful bunt by Alex, get a guy to second with no outs and we don't score, and you want to find a way to push my buttons, let's find a way to get a guy to second with no outs and not score.

That's like top 10 of the worst for me, especially when it could have been a game-winning run and we could have avoided all the drama.

But you know, I liked what Steven said there. Being with them -- we didn't even need to talk. You could just see in their faces the emotion, the excitement. It matters to them. Their 40th win on the season mattered to them.

Q. You said recently in a press conference that if you were in another league you guys could probably be in first place. Now there's projections of 11 teams from the SEC would make the NCAA Tournament. What are your thoughts about that and the depth of the league this year, because every year it seems like things just get bigger and better around here?

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, and I have a great perspective on this from where I came from. And being here now for three years, there's one that's just not like the others. It can't be looked at the same. It can't be evaluated the same. The players aren't the same. The fans aren't the same. The environments aren't the same. The athletes aren't the same.

I always really believed we had a good team. We did win the national championship last year. We have 20 players from that roster that were here. We added Luke Holman and Gage Jump. We had a really tough schedule. We opened up at Mississippi State.

That's who I picked in those preseason polls, is like who's your Omaha sleeper. The only reason they're a sleeper is because they hadn't been in the postseason. That is who I picked.

Then we're playing the team we beat to win the national championship in week two.

Then we're going to Arkansas week 3, who's been the most consistent program in college baseball for the last 10 years in terms of just pure winning.

Then we had Vanderbilt at home. I think they're the only two-time national champion since South Carolina did it '10 and '11.

Then we have Tennessee, who's the No. 1 team in the country. Nobody else did that.

So we were in a tough spot, you know, when we left that. But I knew if we could just kind of hang in there enough, we would be okay. The players deserve all the credit for staying positive, continuing to work hard. It's a great life lesson for everybody to put your head down, work, stay positive, and good things can happen, and that was our only choice because of this league.

It's just not like anything else. I say that with great respect for teams all over the country. There's great teams. It's going to be an unbelievable NCAA Tournament with the North Carolinas, the Florida States, the Clemsons, the Arizonas, all the -- the Oklahomas, the Oklahoma States, Dallas Baptist, Southern Miss.

There's great college baseball everywhere. There's 14 teams out of 14 that could play in the NCAA Tournament and find their way to Omaha.

Q. You've talked about it a bit so far, but why is this team so resilient right now?

JAY JOHNSON: I think because they got cut, they got bloodied, they got punched in the gut, and they found a way to get back up. So they know they can overcome anything. That's another great deal right there. It's 8-0.

I can't wait to go back and watch the game and see how it all kind of matriculated. I know there was two outs and we didn't have a run in when it was 8-0, and then we ended up with 6. That's clutch hitting. That's passing the stick as Steven talked about, competitiveness in the at-bats.

I think they just learned they could take the bullet. We actually played good at Tennessee. We played good at Tennessee and we got swept. I've never said that in my entire coaching career. We had the lead at Arkansas. We were down to the last strike to win the series against Florida and lost.

If you can overcome all of that and be where we were going into this game today, being down in a baseball game, that's not going to faze them. I'm super proud of them for that.

Q. You've been really emotional, especially here, jumping into the mosh pit, today running out of the tunnel. What are you feeling, and how wild is this ride for you?

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, I can't run as fast anymore as



when I was a player. But I love these guys. Love our team, love this program. I know where we were. I remember vividly we were playing New Orleans on a Tuesday, we just got back from Tennessee, I walked in the room, and I said, hey, look, it's not going to get any worse than this, but we have to stay with it. I am going to remain positive. Nobody is getting blown up. Nobody is cussing anybody out, calling anybody soft. We're just going to keep working because I believe in our team.

The good thing about playing in this league is it still provides you opportunities. I mean, I'm elated that we've played as well as we have here and have won four games and are playing for a championship tomorrow. We were a postseason team coming here. Now I think everybody can probably understand what I'm talking about.

But I'm proud of them, and we've come this far. We might as well give it another great effort tomorrow.

Q. I think it was somewhere toward the middle of the season and either me or someone else asked about some of the leaders, veteran leaders and who those people were for this team. Those answers weren't fully clear at the time. Now with the way you guys are playing, who has sort of stepped up for this team and helped right the ship from a player perspective?

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, I would want to give credit to all of them. Leadership, I have a different view on that. Honestly, the players will all say they want to lead by example. Leading by example is just doing what you're supposed to do. That's what leading by example is, just doing what you're supposed to do, and they're all comfortable with that because for the most part they do what they're supposed to do.

As far as pushing it to the front, I look at small things. I got into one of these with Tommy the other day, and he was like, hey, man, I am not taking this jersey off. That's a guy that's going to be in the College Baseball Hall of Fame, has the world in front of him at his fingertips, and all he's thinking about is that.

I do think about Hayden's emotion. Alex came up to me today and he could tell maybe I was going to make a move, and he said, if you want to win this game today, don't take me out of this game, and said it with such conviction, and then we put those runs up, like all right, Big Hoss, keep going.

I think of that. I think of guys like Will. Those are big outs. We won the game because of him today. He's never made it about him in four years here. He's made it about the team. He wasn't on the roster in Omaha last year, but we

had room for like one extra person outside of the staff. Will Helmers, because that's how great he is about that and the type of stuff.

I think to a man, it's been a lot of growing up. I think all of them have emerged as guys that are going to do the right thing all the time, positively affect everybody around them, and they're a 40-win team and playing as good as anybody in college baseball right now.

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