

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Saturday, May 25, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Tony Vitello

Zander Sechrist

Christian Moore

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee - 6, Vanderbilt - 4

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the players.

TONY VITELLO: Obviously if you're fortunate enough to get to this portion of the tournament, pitching is at a premium, as is energy level and stuff like that. You just got to grit it out, and our team followed Zander's lead today. So we were blessed to have him out there and he pretty much kind of in the Beam category can know what to expect, but I think he was even better tonight and kind of built off of last time out. So it was good the team followed him.

And then Chris Burke and I were talking, and some other guys, too, chimed in. If you don't think you got it perfectly lined up, that means someone has got to -- I hesitate to say elevate, but be the best version of themselves or at least be true to themselves, and Peebles certainly was that, as was Bargo, but Marcus Phillips is the one I'm getting at.

He's from the Dakotas and he hasn't played a whole lot. He's working on presence and confidence and self-belief and probably -- or definitely did overdo it in that one situation where he got out of the bases-loaded jam, but I don't think anybody can take away from him how he was throwing the ball tonight, and ultimately, that helped us keep a lead against a team that was swinging it as good as anybody in the tournament, I think.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll start with questions for the players.

Q. Zander, you talked last week after your start in the



regular season about how disappointed you were following your start against Vanderbilt in Nashville. Does that make today a little more special for you and what was different about today compared to that start in Nashville?

ZANDER SECHRIST: Yeah, I would say obviously it's a little different going six innings compared to two, but it was just getting back to work and looking at film, comparing it to last time I faced them, and like I said -- I think I told media earlier, I was cutting the ball over the middle and just missing my spot. I wasn't doing that, fortunately, tonight, so obviously it showed.

Q. What was it like seeing what Marcus did today, just with the presence, but also with the stuff that he was able to show?

CHRISTIAN MOORE: It was definitely cool. That's something that we've been waiting for for the whole season, for him to come out there and just do him and throw 98 and be that guy for us. He did it tonight and we're so grateful for him.

ZANDER SECHRIST: Yeah, it was good to see that and obviously he's still growing as a young guy. He's got -- hey, he's got good presence. I'm not going to lie. He's got good presence. But obviously being, like, new to the SEC, he'll work on a lot more stuff, but it was great to see that tonight.

Q. Zander, do you feel like it was kind of the same things that led to you having success last week that carried over to a good outing today?

ZANDER SECHRIST: Yeah, just kind of teach every outing the same. I don't try to have two -- be too high or be too low. I kind of just stay even-keel. If it goes my way, it goes my way. If it doesn't, it doesn't. But at the same time, at the end of the day, I'll still be the same person.

Q. Zander, Tony said yesterday you might have been mad in the pen because you got quite hot but never got to the field. How much did that fuel you today?



ZANDER SECHRIST: Well, to be honest, I was never mad. I kind of knew the plan going into the game, and I kind of knew the plan after the game, so I guess you can say, sure, we'll just say I was super mad and that really fueled the fire tonight.

TONY VITELLO: AirPods, AirPods.

ZANDER SECHRIST: And then the AirPods.

TONY VITELLO: I found 'em.

Q. Zander, how nice was it to have that outfield behind you tracking fly balls, especially in this bigger ballpark?

ZANDER SECHRIST: Yeah, playing, I guess, in front of them, because they're behind me, but it's great to have a defense, especially a guy like Christian Moore too -- he made a few plays tonight, and just all around the defense played very good and I can't be more happy than getting quick outs.

Q. You were quite vocal cheering on Marcus Phillips when he was on the mound. What's your connection with him and what encouraged you to be so vocal in your cheers?

CHRISTIAN MOORE: We're next door neighbors, so I see him a lot and just I know it's tough to be in that situation. You know, your first time being on a big stage like this and a bunch of noise and crowd and you got their dugout hyped. So trying to be a good friend, a good teammate, just being in his ear, just trying to reel him back in to just throw strikes and be confident.

Q. Zander, with Cannon out, I imagine this hasn't been the season he expected, but what have you seen from him throughout the season and the way he carried himself and maybe what's led up to him to have a nice week here in Hoover and a nice game today to help y'all get to the championship game?

ZANDER SECHRIST: Yeah, he's still the same guy every day. He works very hard. He just puts his head down and grinds. Obviously for him to have a game like this, you know, being back there blocking up balls and framing pitches for strikes, I mean, it was good to see and obviously it gave Cal a little rest.

But it's good to have depth in that position and obviously Peebs is a great player and he's had his up and downs, but it's good to see him get a multi-hit tonight.

Q. Christian, Tim Corbin was talking about how

difficult it is for opposing pitchers to have you and then Blake Burke kind of leading the charge. How dangerous do you think the combo of you and Burke are?

CHRISTIAN MOORE: I think he said it right there. With me and Burke, I think we go back to freshman year hitting back-to-back. We did it last year a little bit. But I think it's something they got to prep for and I'm glad that Burke's on our team.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the players and take questions for Coach.

Q. What was different for Phillips tonight compared to Wednesday?

TONY VITELLO: I think just the conviction. You can kind of see it when he's steering it in there. It's been pretty cool that as long as it was official, I think that makes in seven years nine guys that have thrown a hundred or -- it's a pretty good stat, whatever it is. But that's never been Frank's emphasis and it certainly isn't mine. But with him in particular, the harder he throws the better he throws because he's so big and strong and the stuff is so good. But you can kind of see when he's guiding it in there as opposed to letting it rip. It can come for different pitchers too. Obviously Zander's stuff is different, but the way I heard him describe it was the last time he faced this team he was kind of guiding some pitches in. They end up bleeding over the middle of the plate, and tonight they got into some balls, we played good defense behind him. But you could see it from the get-go that it was coming out of his hand with conviction, which at the end of the day, that's what being a competitor is, is put your best stuff or your best approach out on the field and just see where it gets you.

Q. I believe you played 12 of 14 SEC schools this year. In my mind, that qualifies you as an expert on this conference. So, in your expert opinion, does the SEC deserve 11 teams in a tournament, which would be a record, and six host sites, considering that this is the top college RPI conference in the country?

TONY VITELLO: I think the host sites is a definite yes because if you look at the way those rosters are stacked up and the fan bases they're going to have, it's better for college baseball, and they have earned it by surviving this league.

Then I think it is a unique year. It's going to be an interesting deal when we add Texas and Oklahoma next year. But for this year in particular, there are 11 teams that have shown -- and part of it was some guys -- I think you



all voiced your opinion, that they needed to show well here and I think it went that way. So I think you kind of have the maximum amount of teams that we would have.

I'm stealing a quote from a video coordinator of ours, so if anyone doesn't like it, it's not my fault, but just compare. I'm not in that room, but if you're sitting there, compare those teams you're talking about to the other options and the schedule they have played and the talent they have on the roster, and I'm willing to bet all those 11 teams are better than the other options.

Q. With Marcus, why did you choose to stay with him with the bases loaded there in the 8th and then again when two guys got on in the 9th?

TONY VITELLO: Tough one to answer other than just gut feel. I mean, there was -- you know, we had Lloyd down there hot and he was -- it was a couple times. And he was even told, You're going to get this guy, and then we just stuck with him, and part of it is just communication with Frank, and a lot of times you just got to go with your gut. But I like it better in the corner when Coach Elander speaks up from a catcher's point of view and what he's seeing. It's a little easier when you're in that spot because you're not so emotional and you're not stressing, well, what if I make the wrong decision and what if not.

And then Frank's feedback is outstanding because he's the one calling pitches. We've probably done that more this year than ever by nature of our staff where we've just kind of communicated and made a group decision. He certainly made it difficult to take him out after that first inning, but there were some dicey moments in there where obviously we're glad we stuck with him. He grew up a lot today. It was good.

Q. You're focused on making sure your team is prepared for next weekend and beyond, but third title tournament in four years, is there any bit of you that's able to take a moment and reflect and appreciate that?

TONY VITELLO: Not really. There's been so much emotion poured out there the last two nights, and we've kind of finished later at night. Then you're preparing for the next day because it comes pretty quick. This was a little quicker turnaround, it will be even quicker tomorrow. It's a fun game to be a part of. The fan situation is insane. LSU, I think we know what they will be cooking out there in the parking lot. I wish I had time to have some of it. But you know what their fan base will be like. I think our folks do a great job. The National Anthem is always, it gives me chills at this thing. So I think it will be a good final and everyone will kind of have to piece together the pitching, but it's hard to worry about anything other than tomorrow.

We'll get our guys ready, I mean, you bring up -- I go on a dang tangent with you here -- but when you get into the postseason there's good teams and one team wins and the other team doesn't. So, I think the fatigue thing can be beaten to death a little bit. At least I know from my experience with a couple of the teams that I've been a part of, only once can I remember where I think it was really an issue. And that was an Arkansas team that really didn't get home until Tuesday, and then we played a game until 3:30 a.m. because of the rain, and I mean the regional was just a hot mess. And we also had Oral Roberts as a four seed, which, if you guys are interested, I know at least one guy will be interested in here, do a little research on when Oral Roberts is your four seed how it goes, because they're not a four seed, but they're a four seed, so do research on that deal there. So, other times it just, you get beat.

Everybody's a little tired and everyone's logged a bunch of innings and stuff like that. We're blessed to be in the final, sure, I'm sure there's some teams at home getting a little extra rest, but when next week starts, by then, everybody should be pretty juiced up and pretty fresh, and it will be a matter of how do you do on that given day. I think one thing that will benefit us regardless of how tomorrow goes is we've spaced out our pitching pretty well. Yesterday I talked about how willing our staff is. Kirby was not on the list, I said if you want, you can face Hines. He said, I'll be good to go. I want to face more than that. And Sned was not on the list, and he came to me before the game and said, I want to pitch today. Those are the two guys that finished the game. I think that kind of represents how we've been able to piece that pitching together.

Q. You faced LSU earlier in the season. You swept them at home, but they seem to be on a different level here. How do you feel like what you scouted for earlier in the season prepares you for tomorrow?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, they're different. You will look at it and reflect on it, but I don't think -- I don't know what they will have, I don't know that we'll have the benefit of worrying too much about matchups from the pitching end of things. These guys see so many good arms, it's funny, in the dugout it's, like, Don't you remember facing guy, and more times than not they don't. Blake Burke said it the other day, I wish I had a good memory. But their job isn't to study these guys, it's just to go play. That's kind of what this time of year is anyway. The scouting report stuff helps and there might be split second decisions that need to be made, but the athletes will determine it out on the field. The one thing about playing them tomorrow is they had some people travel with 'em but it will be 50/50 or 40/40 with 20 percent of other people in here. They will have their fans with 'em, which I think helps them in this tournament and other tournaments, but also they are a different team, they're playing better right now and have

found themselves a little bit, which is good.

Q. You anticipate Russell throwing tomorrow and who are some other guys that could potentially pitch?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, we talked about let's not push it today. He kind of flirted back and forth with it, and then at the worst we talked about either Monday or Tuesday facing hitters. We're past the point of throwing a bullpen to prepare, so he's ready for next Friday, that's the goal. We'll focus on whatever he's got to do to be ready for next Friday. Maybe it will be a conversation with him in the morning or even after he plays catch. So were you just talking about the other pitchers?

Q. Yeah, what other guys are available?

TONY VITELLO: We'll use a couple guys and then we'll probably go to you, to be honest with you. Or, you know, who knows, Christian Moore thinks he's available -- he's not -- but there's a couple position guys that could be called on and, hey, we'll approach it as intelligently as we see fit, it would be disrespectful to not put your best foot forward, but at the same time I don't think we're looking to gas anybody out tomorrow that's already put in good work for us in this tournament and got us to this point. So some guys will have to look at Mr. Andrew Behnke and Marcus Phillips and say, I can do that as well.

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