

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Sunday, May 26, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

LSU Tigers

Jay Johnson

Alex Milazzo

Postgame Press Conference



Tennessee 4, LSU 3

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, very proud of our team this week. A accomplished a lot. Four wins. You know, in the toughest league and toughest tournament in baseball. You know, congratulations to Tennessee for winning the championship today. They got a great program. Great players. But I think the story is how we played all week long. We had two dominant pitching performances. We had two dominant offensive performances and came up a little bit short.

And really liked what I saw in terms of the depth of our pitching staff and guys that can make a positive contribution moving forward in the NCAA Tournament and feel pretty good about the ten or 11 position players that we're going to roll with, and I feel like we're well-positioned for success in the next couple weeks.

It was a great week in Hoover. Obviously would have liked to get one more hit there and won the tournament, but eyes ahead for the Tigers.

Q. Alex, what does it say about your team, what you guys did this week, and postseason positioning, as well?

ALEX MILAZZO: Yeah, this team has been resilient all year. I think playing throughout the SEC, it's the toughest league in college baseball. You're going to get hit in the mouth quite a few times in that conference.

We took our licks early on but you know, a lot of guys on this team grew up and matured as we were going on, and I think just the message was, hey, it's not time to throw in the towel, and Coach did a great job of showing up to work every day, and so did we. We took it one game at a time, and slowly but surely, you could start seeing the pieces

coming along.

I don't think any -- either one of us is shocked of what we just did in this tournament, but got to move on, and we've been playing playoff baseball for the past, I don't know, five or six weeks to get to where we are now, and look forward to making a good postseason run.

Q. What did you see from all the different guys who threw today, given pretty much all of them were short rest or no rest at all?

ALEX MILAZZO: Each guy, first of all, went out there and competed against a very good offensive lineup. Hats off to Tennessee. They swing the bats very well. But each guy went out there and competed they are butts off. I really liked what I saw from Thatcher. That's one of the biggest takeaways from this SEC tournament for me as a catcher is how good he looked and how much he's battled throughout the season. Getting him where he's at right now is a big addition to our pitching staff, but Will Hellmers, too, couldn't be more proud of him. A guy that probably has not pitched in the last month, and he comes out and throws up, I don't know, four or five innings of zeros.

So just overall as a staff, I'm super proud of them. I think it was big to get all of the guys in this environment going forward.

Q. I guess, what did you learn about your team this week that you didn't know going into the week?

JAY JOHNSON: I mean, nothing really shocked me. I knew what we were capable of, you know, coming in. You know, coming into this, I think the biggest thing was we had some very clutch hits and throughout the game, there was no panic, whether we were down 8-0 at one point in time or the four or five lead changes in the first South Carolina game.

Very proud of just staying with the plan, staying with the approach. Guys not getting outside of themselves, and comes down to it, we were just short of one hit.

Q. The freshmen had a monster week. What did you



see -- he doesn't play like a true freshman, and he's been clutch for y'all in back-to-back games.

ALEX MILAZZO: Yeah, he's just a competitor. There's no other way to put it. The guy competes. I wouldn't want any other second baseman. I wouldn't trade him for anybody else. That's our guy right there. He's a competitor.

Q. After catching five or six games in a row in this sort of humidity, how are you feeling?

JAY JOHNSON: Feel fine. I was built for this. I've been catching since I was nine years old. It's just the toughness aspect of it.

Q. How big of a week was it for your team, you talked about the adversity, but to really show the world that you guys aren't backing down and to essentially lock up a No. 2 seed?

JAY JOHNSON: I think I'm just proud of the play and I'm proud of the growth. We are in a tough spot as we talked about throughout the week, halfway through league, a lot of that had to do with the league, you know what I mean. And to kind of flip the script in the second half and play consistently and then come here and then win four games and be a base hit way from being in extra innings in this thing.

And these guys wanted to win today but I think they emptied the tank pretty good. I mean, my man is up here talking about toughness, and he's all good but we need to sit him down for a couple days and get recouped. But he did a terrific job, as did all of the rest of the players.

So we'll fly home tonight and we'll get it some good rest. We'll get them up. We'll celebrate being in the NCAA Tournament tomorrow when the bracket pops up and then we'll give them a good itinerary, where we know where we're going, who we are playing and when we're leaving and get prepared because that's the next phase of this. This was a good week but this wasn't the end game for this team.

They respected the game. They respected this conference. They respected their university in terms of how they played and competed for a championship today, but we are excited about what's ahead.

Q. What did you tell your guys about this is a situation you want to be in down the road?

JAY JOHNSON: That one is five games in four days if you don't play it right, so we can try from this experience in terms of what it takes to win, and you know, I'm assuming it

will be on the road, obviously.

You know, get there early. Get prepared. Get rested. Get focused on what the game calls for out of winning baseball, and I think we are well-positioned to do that. I think we have a clear identity now. I think roles are pretty established in terms of what we are going to do and how we are going to do it, and they are playing credibly hard. It's a team that I'm proud of and really excited to attack the postseason, you know what I mean.

There's 300 schools playing baseball, and 310, something like that. There's only 64 having practice tomorrow or Tuesday, and we're one of those and we have earned the right to compete to go to the College World Series and play for the National Championship that we currently have, and that's pretty awesome.

Q. Any update on Christian Little?

JAY JOHNSON: He came out of the game and he didn't feel good, his lat. It's not an arm issue. It was a lat issue. I don't have anything other than that. He wanted to throw a few more pitches and I was like, no, we're not going to do that.

I'm optimistic, whatever treatment we can get him, we'll get him. I will say that I'm optimistic about our staff. Obviously he's a big piece but I feel like this week showed we have more guys that I'm comfortable going to.

Q. You mentioned yesterday that when you guys got swept by Tennessee in mid April, you had hit rock bottom, so to speak, but now you go out there and push them to the brink. How far has this team come since then and how noticeable are the changes?

JAY JOHNSON: I think we've come a long ways. I always believed we had a good team. There was a lot to that where we were at that time.

But I think it's a good -- it's not a story. It's a good life lesson, as I would say, that sometimes when it's hard, you just put your head down and work and focus on what's relevant and try to execute your job to help your team win better day after day after day, that you can become a better player. You can positively impact your team both on and off the field, and I think it's a locker room full of guys that have done that and are doing that.

I'm really excited about what's ahead, and I'm really excited about playing in the postseason and the opportunity that that presents this particular team, and I think we are well-positioned to be successful.

Q. Record attendance for the week. Second-largest single-game attendance today. Can you add any more superlatives about what people have said in this event in this venue, and do you think it will carry over to next year when we have a new format and two more teams?

JAY JOHNSON: I sure hope. So I tell you, the National Anthem was finishing up, the fly over and the whole crowd chanting "LSU," I had some chills, and I only remember feeling that in Omaha last year. There's nothing like this.

There's always these things going on and debates, how many teams and this and that. Like there's college baseball, and then there's this thing that's happening here, and they are not the same right now.

You know, I'm proud to be a part of the conference. I'm proud to compete against the teams that we're competing against, and you know, I think we'll be well-represented in the postseason, not just in bids but in terms of how everybody plays. The programs have just advanced so far, and let's just call it whatever, the last 20 to 30 years that it allows for an environment to be like this.

This is my third one. This is the most successful we've been in this, and you know, watching it on TV all those years in the west, the 9:30 a.m. games, it's 7:30 a.m., I'm eating my oatmeal in my office, I've got a game on. I always thought this was really cool, and it just continues to separate itself from the pack.

Q. What do you think Lloyd did to put the game in a sleeper hold there?

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, he did a nice job. They pitch well. They pitch really, really well. You know, they didn't miss over the plate very much. They seem to deep the ball away from the hitters eyes well. They change speeds. They pitch. He did that today.

And he's deceptive. He hides the ball really well. And nice performance by him.

Q. Looking ahead to the NCAA Tournament, obviously the title run from last year, how can you use that wisdom for your team heading into this one this year?

JAY JOHNSON: I think there's a lot of things that are relevant. It will be a little different. We played at home for both rounds, so that's a little bit different. I think we can utilize this week in terms of things that can be really positive for our team in terms of preparing.

But I think perspective is important. There's a few things. You're five wins from the College World Series and you're

ten wins from a National Championship, okay. When you say it in that terms, it feels a little more attainable.

And then there's the whole, like the movie Hoosiers thing, you don't look at the next step until you cross the one in front of you and the self-discipline to do that. That's one of my strengths as a coach and helping them do that.

I think this team has the self-discipline and the maturity now to be able to take whatever the challenge is and do the things required to help us play well in postseason baseball.

It's a great opportunity for this team.

Q. You mentioned that there are some guys in the bullpen outside of obviously just Christian who have maybe risen in your estimation over this past week. Who are some of those guys over the last three games or so?

JAY JOHNSON: I feel like there's a lot more, like we can get guys in and out in short spurts, and feeling a little better about their niche for certain types of hitters.

We had two high-scoring games the last two days. However, however, the tipping point, we got zeros at the end of the game when we needed to, to be able to win one-run games, and that's something I take a lot of pride in. We lost one today.

But I mean, Alex mentioned Thatcher throwing the ball well. I have a lot of trust in Sam Dutton, obviously. Kade Anderson that, was really good to see out of him the last two days. Will Hellmers, they are all different, they are all a little different and unique. I credit Tennessee because they seem to have that, too. They have a lot of variety in their arms and what they can do out of the bullpen and matchup, and they pitch to their strengths very, very well.

We are starting to round into that form a little bit closer with more guys, and it gives us a little bit more options. I'm excited about that, and you know, I think we are as good at the front of the game for two games as anybody. I really believe that with all my heart and can't wait to flip the ball to those guys again.

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