

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Sunday, May 26, 2024

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium



Tennessee Volunteers

Tony Vitello

Cal Stark

Dylan Loy

Hunter Ensley

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 4, LSU 3.

TONY VITELLO: Blessed to have Frank Anderson be a part of our staff with pitching, worked out the way it did, multiple guys did some special things, and being in that dugout is reminiscent for me of Camden a couple years ago. Ens was on the team and we were playing Florida. Didn't have a starter ready to go and he was nothing short of spectacular. And Zander did it for us out of that dugout, and now Loy today.

Certainly the plan was to see how many outs he could get, and he far exceeded expectations. And overall the tournament was out standing in part because LSU is the hottest team in the country and they didn't stop today in my opinion. They played really good ball, and maybe just ran out of time because that thing was obviously very hairy at the end.

Q. From your perspective, how much has the depth of the pitching staff increased not only this week but kind of over the last month or so?

CAL STARK: I think we have always had depth. We just got to be able to show it this week. It was good for guys to get out there, show what they can do. You know, I think it just adds to their confidence. You know, this was big-time baseball on a big stage. So I think it just adds to their confidence going forward.

Q. Dylan, what was working so well for you today and your mindset being thrown into the mix there after A.J., and Cal what did you see from Dylan working with him behind the plate?

DYLAN LOY: So basically I just went in trusting my guy behind the plate and what was working so well was just the connection between me and him and him calming me down throughout the whole thing.

CAL STARK: I think as a freshman coming into the ballgame like that, I thought he would be a lot more amped up and stuff. But I could see him out there breathing which was a good sign from me. And he just competed his tail off. I think he was throwing everything for strikes. Made the adjustments when he needed to and just, you know, let the defense work, which is always a good sign.

Q. Dylan, as a Tennessee kid in your first SEC tournament, to be able to bring a championship back to Rockie Top, what does it mean to you personally?

DYLAN LOY: Wearing the orange means so much to me, and being able to bring back the trophy is one of my lifetime goals growing up.

Q. 4-for-4 day at the plate, what was working well for you at the plate?

HUNTER ENSLEY: I was just trying to slow everything down today. Huge crowd. Obviously a great opponent that we have the utmost respect for in LSU. So really for me it was just getting in the box, slow everything down and breathe as much as possible to relax.

Q. Just take us through that back pick that you had to get out of that inning and how early in that at-bat did you know you were going to go to it? 20202020 something me and Blake obviously enjoy doing. So we kind of talked about it earlier on in the game. Certain opportunity, stuff like that, we were always looking for it. So he just put it on. I got a good pitch to do it on. Made a good throw and that's really it.

Q. Describe what it felt when this childhood dream of yours came true.

DYLAN LOY: Third inning, I came off the mound and expressed probably too much emotion for it being that



early in the game and so I tried to channel that and just calmed down.

But that's kind of what I was feeling.

Q. Are there things you know about this team leaving Hoover that you didn't know for sure when you came down here?

HUNTER ENSLEY: I think one thing for sure: There's a lot of guys who can get the job done. We showed that on the offensive side defensively and especially on the mound. It was a big weekend for guys to step up and there was for sure a few guys that absolutely did.

CAL STARK: I think that's a lot of different ways that we can win a ballgame. Building off of that, like Hunt said, there's a lot of guys that can be put in and get the job done. We're not relying on just a handful of guys, and I think top to bottom, all of them, 40 of us can go in and I feel like we're confident that we are going to put our best foot forward and hopefully win a baseball game.

Q. How does a week like this and playing games back-to-back and going all week prepare you for what's to come next weekend and the weekend after that hopefully?

CAL STARK: I mean, I guess extra baseball. Extra at-bats. Extra innings that our pitchers can throw. More work. You know, more reps. More ground balls, stuff like that. I think just stacking the reps and the ABs just builds us doing into next week. I think that's the positive side of it.

Q. Did it feel like a home game for you guys or at times was it even as far as the crowd noise?

HUNTER ENSLEY: Probably 50/50. You always know when you play LSU they are going to bring a lot of purple and gold. The other half was orange and white, so it was a great show out. It was a lot of fun.

Q. You were on the team two years ago that won the regular season championship, the tournament, the No. 1 overall seed and kind of the story lines are aligning once again. What do you want to take away maybe from that first experience and apply to this one to maybe make sure that things go a different way than it did two years ago?

HUNTER ENSLEY: I think for right now, all we can do is keep playing our best baseball regardless of the results of the '22 year. Just because we win this tournament has no correlation between a regional or super regional.

For us, the guys in the locker room, focusing on the next day, really, the next task mentality, and going game by game.

Q. You mentioned earlier a number of guys stepping up, one of them being Billy, he had a tough start but came up clutch in the three-run home run. What's that payoff like for a hitter to finally get that hit and the confidence it can build going into postseason?

HUNTER ENSLEY: Yeah, that guy is a stud, first of all. I mean, maybe the results were not there all weekend, but I think you can go back from every single game and pick out a couple positives that guy had at the plate, whether it was moving a runner, hitting a ball hard just right at somebody.

But I mean, getting a result, for sure helps the confidence, and a game like that, it can really get you going.

Q. Kirby came in late, had good relief. He's been in this program for a while. What are your thoughts on him?

TONY VITELLO: He got the biggest cheer out of anybody the entire weekend, the fans included, and there were some big ones. It shows you how much people enjoy the way he operates his business at our park. If you're at our home games, you see it, and how he is in the community and how he is when he competes.

If you look at what he did -- I know Blake Burke won the MVP of the tournament, you've got to give it to somebody, and I know he had a couple big hits but I think more than anything, he was one of our best leaders.

But Kirby pitched four times this tournament and was massive for us, and you know, it's always difficult knowing you've got to come in here and answer questions as a coach, especially when you have huge fan bases because even when the game is over, I'm kind of thinking about four or five things I wish I would have done different.

I'm building up to the point, you could argue, we could have just left him out there and I think he had what it took to finish the game.

Q. With A.J., the TV broadcast showed Woody looking at his arm coming out of the game. What did he feel like after his outing, and how do you think Dylan was able to thrive in that moment?

TONY VITELLO: I don't know what the broadcast showed but Woody and him were going to sync up, regardless, how do you feel and where are you at with everything.

I think he was wanting to press the issue and throw a certain amount of pitches or probably go until maybe he's in a jam. We kind of knew all long, we wanted him to start the game. Give us a little bit of calmness because we know how he competes and he'll throw strikes, and he did that. Obviously he gives up the home run but a lot of people have done that to Mr. Jones. It's kind of the cost of doing business, throwing strikes trite interest.

D-Loy, he was down there, and I don't know if he feels this way, but if I'm him, I'm itching to get in that game last night. And there were a couple moments where it's like next hitter, you're in, and he never came in the game. Not only did he get his work in but, that anticipation of getting out there was probably great.

But overall he reminded me of Stam. I said it to ESPN out there, copy the answer; that both those guys pitch with a lot of fire. But you've got to control it. And it was this fun balance. Same thing, Combs, at times last year, he would get so fired up like he did after he record the first out tout there that he would forget there's something else to do after that. He's about as wild as his walkout song, but he seems to have he loved a little bit where he can kind of, you know, manage those emotions and that passion.

Q. You came into the weekend knowing you'd be hosting the regional, now that the tournament is over what can be said about the run that you guys went on this weekend and the fashion in which you did it, fighting all the way through the losers bracket that you can take into tournament play?

TONY VITELLO: Well, I think that we balanced out other than Kirby who probably wants to be out there every day. We balance the workload pretty well, even behind the plate with Cal would be the other spot.

The other guys just need to play. You're not going to feel good this time of year. That's not going to happen. And kudos to Beth, our nutritionist. She was a maniac all week long with the food and the hydration and everything else, and of course Q helps her out, our strength coach.

But you know, it helped us to experience a lot of the different things that we did. We did some foolish things, and we pointed those out, and we also accomplished a lot. If you need to know where we stand, you look at what we were able to survive.

First of all, Vanderbilt beat our brains in but we beat Texas A&M. No one is going to enjoy going there, at all.

Mississippi State is worthy of a host. We have all seen Starkville. No one is going to enjoy going there.

And this is the hottest team in the country that we were able to beat today.

So I think kind of what we were able to overcome in this tournament, which you have to do every year to win it, tells you a lot about yourself. It should build some confidence.

Q. What's led to the growth of the pitching staff in the last six weeks or so?

TONY VITELLO: Just Frank. I say it. I don't owe him anything. Now that we've been through a lot of this phone call and this text message and under the radar and working with administration, this is where he's going to finish his career if I can speak for him.

So I don't have any reason to say it other than I'm being honest with you when you say it. If you want, look at what he did for Augie. Look at what he did for a legendary coast at Texas Tech; what he did for Houston Baseball when he was there. Blessed to have him.

Now, Coach E is pretty dang good with those catchers, and it takes two to tangos. Our peeps caught tremendously well receiving-wise and just Cal controlling the game the way he did does. There's a lot that goes into it, but it starts with Coach Anderson. You know, your players have to meet you in the middle and I've used the word and I want to use it again, "willing" -- the "willingness" out of the pitching staff to take the ball. And there's no complaints out of Zander that he got hot, or Dylan that he got hot and didn't get in the game. You had Snead and Stam wanted to go in the game today and that was not going to happen.

So it's a good approach out of this group, which has made it enjoyable, like we said the other night to, come to work.

Q. What was your perception of the pitching staff's depth going into this week, and do you feel differently about that leaving here with what you got Behnke, Phillips and Loy?

TONY VITELLO: One thing, I don't think it mattered but I kept saying, especially with this group that we are facing today, and the crowd gets excited, we don't need zero. Don't put that pressure on yourselves. We just need you to go out and throw strikes, and it's a staple of Coach A's staff.

So if you are talking about throwing strikes and guys that are capable of going, we had no questions about our depth. But what version are you going to get out of each guy? Dylan has been very consistent. He's kind of been our Zander this year.

But it is his first postseason effort, so you wonder a little bit what's it like. Are we going to get the Marcus Phillips where we have to calm him down with his attitude, or kind of like, Hey, dude, none of our guys want to hit off you. And we saw the version we got. We probably need to meet a little in the middle there.

Behnke, we did not want to use him there again because of how he threw the other night. He left it all out there, and that's the best version of him.

So again it was just a matter of stay true to yourself because it is a pretty good group and a pretty deep group when they do.

Q. Last year you made a habit of making deep runs in Hoover. Is there a commonality that you can point to that allows your program to do that?

TONY VITELLO: Tuesday's stuff, and we draw that last year. I think it was Lonsing (ph) was incredible against us after we chased him really early. So you're going to run into that guy. He's going to get you or you're going to get him. It just kind of works out that way.

And you know, as far as the main part of your question, having success, I don't really have an answer for it other than there's been good leadership on our teams. Fergie and Liam were so fun to be around in the middle of the diamond as our middle infield in '21. And we come back the next year and all the guys that worked so hard and cheered hard for those guys that got us in the final where Arkansas beat us, we're now getting to play, and they relish in that opportunity.

They kind of educated -- that's when -- the first time came in the program in 2022 where the players started to become as much of the teachers as the coaches are. So there's been a nice little lineage, and blessed to be around good leadership.

Q. Going back to the willingness of the pitching staff, is that something that has to do with the personalities of who you have or did you notice it early on, or is there a moment where that culture was built?

TONY VITELLO: I think like anything, there's probably no one magic answer. I think part of it is the makeup or the personality of the kids and then you've got to trust, there's a lot of different philosophies.

But if you're wearing purple and gold and you've got to trust what those guys are saying. If you are wearing orange, you have to trust what we have to say, and it

makes everything better when you do.

I think nature of the personalities and then recognizing they have a lot of people that are fairly skilled, at the very least, at coaching them but also really care about them, too.

There's been good communication, good going back-and-forth, and there's been a hunger to improve and get better, and maybe one of the special ingredients in there is there's a lot up for grabs this year coming into the year. You name it.

We went into the opening weekend, I think, with some people excited about our team but Drew Beam was the only, if you were going to reference the past, he was the one for sure constant that we knew we wanted to do, and Kirby out of the pen.

But there was a lot up for grabs. I think it's good for players to have that hunger and something to work for.

Q. Looks last week you all are going to be the No. 1 seed tomorrow and there's obviously the jokes about the curse of the No. 1 seed --

TONY VITELLO: You on that committee?

Q. No. But people who are smarter than me say you are going to be the No. 1 seed tomorrow. I guess what are your thoughts on the quirky conversations about the supposed curse, but also why it's so difficult for teams to win in the NCAA Tournament?

TONY VITELLO: I think it's difficult for any team to win in the NCAA Tournament, and it's also very difficult to win this tournament because of the caliber of athlete that you're surrounded by, and we were able to do that. Then to me, and I'm not trying to pat ourselves on the back.

But one of the things I always thought as a little kid, big sports fan, Big Ten baseball, I don't think they had a tournament back then but it was admonish impressive for Indiana or Michigan to win the regular season because it's a huge body of work. We were able to do that in one of the most competitive amateur lesion of any sport.

So we did that but it's over with, and we were able to do this, and it's over with. So this should give you confidence. No one can take it away from you, but it's time to move on to the next thing. There's no point about talking about a Super Regional for us or any of the top eight seed because it's all about next weekend.

We'll get back. We have Q and Beth, so our players, that won't be an excuse. But we'll be playing good teams that

are capable of beating us, so we'll just have to go out there and win on Friday, whoever the committee wants us to play, and then we'll see what's going on on Saturday afternoon. If anything, at least you know it will be rowdy in Lindsey Nelson Stadium.

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