

World Baseball Classic: Semifinals - Mexico vs Japan

Monday, 20 March, 2023

Miami, Florida, USA

LoanDepot Park

Team Japan

Lars Nootbaar

Pregame Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started. Who has the first question?

Q. What do you know about the Mexico national team and, in your opinion, what does Japan need to do and especially not to do in order to beat Mexico and get to the final tomorrow?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, I'm personally pretty familiar with the team. I've played against or with a lot of these guys, so I know they have a really talented roster, they have a talented bunch. Obviously, Sandoval today, he's an Angel too, so Shohei knows him pretty well, and then you got JoJo and Gio and Jesus Cruz coming out of the pen for them. So those are three guys that I've played -- that currently play with.

So we're expecting a good battle, and I think today we just got to take good at-bats. Sandoval proved year-in and year-out and obviously against USA that he's a dominant pitcher. So we got to take good at-bats, make sure we're swinging at strikes, not expanding the zone or anything like that, staying disciplined and relying on what's got us here, and that's pitching, good defense, and timely hitting.

Q. First off, I wanted to talk about, so you guys have already been in a dynamic environment in the Tokyo Dome. You got to see some of your MLB teammates last night in this arena. What are you most looking forward to about this game tonight, and then alongside getting to play with Shohei Ohtani as well?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, I think you nailed it. I think playing in an environment that rivals the Tokyo Dome, that's going to be exciting. Personally, I kind of feed off that energy, so I love playing in an environment like that.

As far as playing alongside Shohei Ohtani, I get to play with Goldie and Nolan during the season, you know, and watching them go about their business and perform every



day, it's a humbling experience. Then during the WBC, I get to watch Shohei Ohtani pitch and hit, and that's also a humbling experience. So playing with him has been special. He's a great guy, obviously a great player. Everybody knows that. It's been awesome to watch.

Q. For those of us who are on this side of the pond while you were becoming a folk hero in Japan, can you describe how your experience playing for Japan met and maybe even exceeded your expectations?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, I think I could confidently say it exceeded my expectations, for sure. I had never played in the Tokyo Dome before, so I didn't really know exactly what to expect. Obviously, my mom being born and raised there I had idea of what it would be like. But being able to play in front of those fans was unbelievable, how accepting they were of me. Obviously, the first American-born to play on that team, didn't really know exactly how I would be perceived or received.

So that was amazing. I'm so thankful for the opportunity that I was able to do that. Yeah, I think it exceeded all expectations for me, that's for sure.

Q. Obviously in Major Leagues you face some great, great pitching staffs. Where does this one rank, playing for Japan particularly tonight with Sasaki?

LARS NOOTBAAR: In terms of our pitching staff?

Q. Yes.

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, I don't want to say anything that's going to get me in trouble or anything like that, but Roki throwing today, he's special. I went out there, and I think it was in Nagoya the first time I was out there, and we're doing the kilometers per miles per hour that I have the sheet, a piece of paper, trying to translate the difference, and he hit 165 on there, which I don't think we had on there. I think it maxed out at 160, which was 100.

So that was kind of my glimpse into Roki Sasaki. From then on -- I knew about him before, obviously, and my family and my agents everything like that had warned me about this nasty 21-year-old. So this staff is a very

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competitive bunch and, like you said, I think it could rival any Big League staff.

Q. Do you think Sasaki could be as good as any pitcher in the Major Leagues?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, I don't see why not. He's competitive. Obviously, he's quiet and he's a younger player with kind of a veteran staff, but he's got that quiet confidence about him that I really like to see. He's a young pitcher that's got a lot of talent, and I think that fire that burns inside of him is kind of what I respect most about him and that's why I think that he's going to ultimately be one of those better pitchers in the league.

Q. After seeing what Adam Wainwright did yesterday and Goldie and Nolan, he called it a Cardinals win. Does it get you kind of more excited of the anticipation of maybe being Team Japan versus Team USA?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, I think this whole time leading up to this WBC that's kind of what I have wanted and envisioned. Those guys, with Miles as well, those are four of the better guys on our team and in the league. So for me being a competitor that's something that I want to do and I want to hopefully win tonight and go up against them and beat them.

Obviously we got to win tonight. That's first and foremost. But I can't sit here and tell you that I haven't stayed up at night these past two weeks or whatever it is and thought about that and thought about coming out on top of those guys just for bragging rights in the clubhouse. So I already talked a little probably too much to those guys and they keep me in my place, but love those guys. But, yeah, it would be a great experience to be competitors against them for a game.

Q. Did you already text Giovanny Gallegos and tell him what's going to happen against Team Mexico today?

LARS NOOTBAAR: No, no, I think -- I don't want to fire -- I don't want to fuel his fire any more than -- he's already a great pitcher, so I don't need to do any of that.

But, yeah, I'm excited to do that, and JoJo too. I had a great relationship with Jesus Cruz. So those are three of my buddies and my teammates, and so I'm excited for that one.

But in terms of any friendly fire, I'm not going to do any of that. But looking forward to it.

Q. What's been your impression of Yoshida and how

good of a Big League player do you think he's going to be for the Red Sox?

LARS NOOTBAAR: I think he's every bit of -- as advertised. He's really disciplined at the plate. That's something that stood out to me early was that he wasn't getting hits in the first couple exhibition games or whatever it was, but you could see that confidence in him and how he just controlled the zone, didn't get rattled or anything like that. The next thing you know he's 5-5 or whatever it is against Korea and then starts going off.

I think as a hitter that's super important to be able to maintain that strike zone discipline when things aren't going well. He does such a great job of that. Obviously he showed a little power last game that we played. So I think the sky's the limit for him. Like I said, he's just a professional hitter and you could see right it away, it stood out right away for me. That's the first impression I got from him.

Q. You spoke about playing with Shohei, but just in terms of the uniqueness of his ability, he's still been the only two-way player in this tournament, so how much does that say about sort of this once-in-a-generation talent that you've been playing with?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, it almost seems like I'm shortchanging him saying once in a generation. It's lifetime. I texted some of my buddies, and obviously, me and Nolan have a pretty close relationship. I talked to him a little bit throughout this thing. But the first day I met him he was great, a super nice guy. That was the first thing that popped out to me was he was so welcoming.

But then threw a bullpen, probably hit a hundred, and then we went in the cage. He was hitting balls 118, first game hits two home runs, and then I watch him squat 400, 500 pounds. You know, it's just -- there's things that you're like, well, you can't make this up. He gets off the squat rack, and then he's joking around. It's inhumane stuff. I've never obviously seen anything like it, and for him to be as humble and as genuine as a guy he is, it's -- he, along with the experience in Japan, has exceeded my expectations as well.

Q. Obviously the Cardinals were the team before the tournament with the most ball players in the tournament. You almost faced another ex-Cardinal that retired, Yadier Molina. Did you watch any Puerto Rico game about his management? Do you think he's going to be like a great MLB manager in the future?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, you know, I think if I said he

wouldn't be, then he would probably come and beat me up or something like that. But, no, no, Yadi, I mean, playing with him those past two years has been absolutely amazing. He's one of those guys where he's got a baseball mind. Obviously, he grew up in a baseball family and it's indescribable, like, what goes on in his head throughout games.

Watching him manage you can tell he's still got that competitive fire in him. I think very shortly he'll probably be a manager in the Big Leagues if that's what he wants to do. He's a special guy, future Hall of Famer, and potentially a future Big League manager. I think he's one of those guys that anything he puts his mind to he's going to be great at. That's just who Yadi is.

Q. I know a lot of these guys on the Japanese team you've met for the first time. Is there like one or two guys that you've like talked to the most or gotten to know the best?

LARS NOOTBAAR: I would say probably Shohei, being that Ipepi, his interpreter here in America, is my interpreter here. Kondo too, the two-hitter. He's been great to me. He's been awesome, and he's my senpai, so he's my older guy that I got to respect.

But then also like Murakami too, Sasaki, Yamamoto, we've gone out to dinner and stuff like that. It's been a really cool dynamic. Those are the guys that I meshed with the most. I've got a really special relationship with a lot of these guys. But the fact that they were asking me to go to dinner with them and doing all that stuff in Japan, it helped bridge that relationship so much quicker and so much better for me, and I think that's kind of helped the team dynamic, and them allowing me to be a part of their family as much as just this random guy coming on their team, because they have been practicing for so long.

Q. You referenced Team Mexico a little bit in some of your teammates. How dangerous is Team Mexico for Team Japan from what you've seen?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yeah, I mean, I think they're as dangerous as any team that's currently in the tournament or was in the tournament. They proved that against USA and how they played throughout. Shoot, I don't know if there's a better, there's ever been a better lineup assembled than the one that Team USA had and Sandy, the guy we're facing today, kind of shut them down. And I've seen Rowdy too many times in division have some good swings. And Randy, those guys too. So this lineup is dangerous, along with the starters and relievers that we're facing too. So we're in the semifinals of the WBC, you can't take anybody lightly but especially these guys. They

have a track record too. So we're not taking anybody lightly. We're going out there and we're going to give it our all and we're going to have to because they're a handful. So we're excited for the competition ahead, but that's what it's going to be. It's going to be a nail biter. So we're excited for it.

Q. If you win, we're going to have, you have two more games to play if we won. So after this WBC what will be the next one, Darvish and Otonari and Yoshida, I think you'll be playing against them. How do you feel about that? You'll be playing against them. What do you think about that situation?

LARS NOOTBAAR: Yes, playing with these guys, I built such a great relationship with them, but playing against them -- I think it's going to be cool having a familiar face across the diamond throughout year, but I'm not looking forward to it by any means. Like I was saying before, Mas is going to be an unbelievable hit hitter in the Big Leagues, Shohei and Yu Darvish have proven their stature in the Big Leagues as well. So I'm no fool, I'm not looking forward to those at-bats or that competition against Yoshida. So it will be great to have a friend on the other side of the field, but by no means am I looking forward to it as a competitor.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you so much.

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