

2022 College World Series

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Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Auburn Tigers

Coach Butch Thompson

Sonny DiChiara

Carson Skipper

Jason Howell

Press Conference

BUTCH THOMPSON: Auburn Tigers, this is our sixth trip to Omaha, and our university is ecstatic. We were here in 2019. We do have a few of those players that returned. And those are probably some of our best leaders.

We've added some pieces along the way to get back here, two of the last three tournaments. Couldn't be happier. Had an amazing journey through the rigorous SEC and still looks like we'll have to compete against some of those foes here this week.

But it's been a great journey, amazing group of coaches. Our coaches have so much experience. They've done an amazing job. All the members of our staff that's helped us and an amazing group of ball players.

This is personally year 30, and it may have been the finest journey for me. And that's because of our players, our student-athletes, and how they've worked for us, watching amazing moments, having a front seat to some amazing things they've done along this journey.

They've been challenged with low expectations and it just drove them even more to this point. And we're kind of walking in here thinking we're not done yet. And that's a great feeling for a baseball team.

And we hope the best is yet to come this week but we're sure thankful to be here. And this is kind of the pinnacle for us and for college baseball. And glad the Auburn Tigers are part of this session.

Q. Sonny, when you transferred here I'm sure these are the moments you envisioned. For this to be a reality what's it mean to be on this stage?

SONNY DICHARA: Man, it's everything everybody



dreams of playing baseball. All of us, we're so excited. We worked so hard to get here. It's like Coach Thompson said, our motto this week is we're not done.

Q. Sonny, how many players on mid-major rosters do you believe are capable of transferring, moving up and making the kind of impact that you and also RJ Yeager at Mississippi State another? Is that number 50 percent? Is it higher, lower?

SONNY DICHARA: It could be 100 percent. I mean, if those guys want to transfer and go somewhere where they believe they can play and work hard enough, they'll be able to do it.

Q. Here at Omaha, how different does this trip feel than the first time around in 2019?

KASON HOWELL: I think this time around, kind of our motto of not done yet is really sticking with us. It's really taken a hold of this team. And I think that we have a great vision of winning a national championship, bringing home that trophy for the first time in this program.

In 2019 we had a great vision, too, but I think this team is just so unified that it feels like it's very -- we're in a good position.

CARSON SKIPPER: Like Kason said, the motto back in 2019 was let's make it to Omaha. And this year it's, go out and let's win a national championship. Just making it here is not good enough for us. We'll go out and do everything we can to prove it and prove ourselves.

Q. You started four years ago, starter heading into this one. How different does it feel as a senior all the stuff you guys have gone through heading out there as one of the veterans on the team in Omaha?

KASON HOWELL: I think kind of like I was saying in 2019, as a freshman, it took me probably three innings to realize what was going on when I was out there, because I was just amazed how cool the stadium was and everything.

And now it's just, with the leadership that this team has and

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being there and going through it, the motto of not done yet and we have to prove it. Like Coach Thompson said the low expectations have driven us all year. It's still driving us. It hasn't stopped.

I think just this team is just very unified and we have a great chance to do it.

Q. Carson, in the first inning in game one against Oregon State, the entire bullpen went out running out to the bullpen. Oregon State fans got on you. Was that kind of a motivating factor when you guys came in and shut the door on them?

CARSON SKIPPER: It was kind of weird. Trace has been a rock for us all year, and he's still a rock. Having to go help him out, it's a team game. And hearing those fans, it was kind of shaking, but at the same time it's like, all right, it's time to work, time to go do our thing.

Q. Kason and Carson, wonder what your first impressions were when Sonny shows up on the scene and kind of just captivates the whole Auburn fan base. And Sonny did you imagine that you would hit this well as quickly as you did and carry it through like you did?

KASON HOWELL: I played against Sonny for a long time when he was at Sanford. And every time it was, don't pitch to this guy, don't let him beat you. When he came to Auburn, I was not surprised at how well he did fit in. And I'd heard nothing but good things about him from everybody who knew him.

And so him just coming in and just being a great locker room presence, everybody loves him. Obviously the fan base loves him. And his professionalism, he goes about every day in practice and the way he goes about his business is just -- it's infectious, and it's really just helped our team become a lot stronger.

CARSON SKIPPER: I would say for me, me and Sonny have grown up playing together since we were, what, 6 years old? Yeah, 6 years old all the way through high school. And played against each other while he was at Stanford.

And I've been able to see him grow throughout his whole life, how good of a hitter he really is. And for him to come here and be able to do his thing it's been amazing to see.

SONNY DICHIARA: When I showed up day one and saw these guys and met everybody, and just how hard they worked and saw how hard they work, it infected me. And I just really put my nose down and wanted to win so bad with these guys. Spring comes around and we're hungry.

We still are.

Q. You obviously go on the road to a tough Regional in Corvallis, come out of that. How well has this team been clicking the last few weeks?

CARSON SKIPPER: I would say we've been clicking really good. Our offense has been picking it up, swing the bats really good. Our pitching staff has pulled together when we needed to. There's not really much outside of that other than the fight and the grit that this team has.

KASON HOWELL: I think we picked each other up really well. We've had some really good offensive games in that Regional and then struggled with the bats a little bit. And our pitchers have continued to fill up the strike zone.

We play great defense every day. We take pride in that. When you lean on each other and you pick each other up, good results happen. And I think that's shown in the Regional and the Super Regional.

SONNY DICHIARA: Our defense and pitching and hitting, everything is going to work out timely. The Regional we scored I don't know however many runs, 51 games in three games. And come to the Super Regionals and we're relying on pitching more. Everything has gone full circle and our defense has been rock solid as well.

Q. I know you're focused on the weekend, but two College World Series appearances in three years. Just what does that say about the program that's being built, and the direction that things are going with Auburn baseball?

SONNY DICHIARA: I think it just kind of shows the testament to this man right here, how hard he works every day. How much he enjoys us and how much he just loves investing in us and get more people to come. I didn't know Coach Thompson that well until I got on campus. So just the way he's invested in me, I know that's how every new player is. He just invests in them.

KASON HOWELL: Coach Thompson has been incredible for this program. He's done everything. He works hard. When I got on campus in 2018, coming from -- preparing for the 2019 season, that 2018 team that had a heartbreaking loss in the Super Regional in Florida, you could tell like something was happening with the program that we were striving for this moment right now, for two College World Series appearances in three years.

And you could tell it was starting to roll and that if you didn't want to be a part of it then you could go somewhere else and that this team was built to win and to win national

championships. And that all started with Coach Thompson.

CARSON SKIPPER: Same motto as Sonny and Kason just presented out there. It all starts with Coach Thompson. He's got the work and drive and just desire to make us better, not just better baseball players, but better men. And I think that's very special in a program. I think that speaks more to him than just being a great baseball coach.

Q. Carson, how confident and how much confidence does it give you to have someone like Blake Burkhalter come in, can get eight outs when needed, can come in and save the ninth? How much confidence does it give you as a pitcher and defense behind him?

CARSON SKIPPER: As a pitcher, having him follow you up it's a big confidence boost. You don't have to worry about being too perfect and putting too much pressure on yourself. I know a lot of times if I'm going out for the seventh, it's always, hey, Burkhalter is in the pen, he's protecting you. And so for me it frees me up for that inning.

And I think our defense and hitters can kind of say the same thing, too, I feel like. They don't have to press and worry and stress about anything. They know he's going to go out there and be solid for everybody.

Q. You played Ole Miss this year. They were the No. 1 team in the country at the time. It's been a while. How would you say you guys have grown as a unit since then?

SONNY DICHIARA: I think we've just kind of grown, like growing into our team identity. And I mean those first couple of weeks you're playing other people when you hit the SEC in conference play, you kind of hit the ground running, you have to figure out who you are real quick. From that weekend on we just figured out who we were going to be and what we were going to do.

KASON HOWELL: I think that we're on a little bit more autopilot than we were that first SEC weekend where things are just happening and we're not having to think about it. And obviously this deep into the season, that's what you want from a team is things just to happen. You don't think, you just do.

That's one of Coach Thompson's quotes. And I think that's what we're looking forward to is we're not going to think about the first time we played them, we're just going to play our game and try to play at a high level.

CARSON SKIPPER: Since we played them the first time we've kind of hit our stride. That first weekend, SEC weekend, everybody's jittery and ready to go. But at the same time, not everything is solidified. Not everything's where you want it to be. So it's kind of two different teams playing Saturday. It will be fun to see.

Q. Roy Cresap was talking to me earlier this week and he kind of took credit I guess for your philosophy of pitching to batters in 0-2 counts. He said you were more aggressive, less likely to waste a pitch. Does Roy remember that right? Is that still your philosophy?

BUTCH THOMPSON: I have no idea what Roy's talking about. I'm kidding. Roy Cresap was like a father to me. All I ever wanted as a head coach was be a coach at Itawamba Community College, where I played. And that road absolutely changed and we had our first daughter, who is here.

So the opportunity I had to come to Itawamba Community College passed me because Robin was eight months pregnant. But Roy was 25 years there. And he cut me at Itawamba Community College. And he had a Dodge pickup -- I remember because I followed him back to his office.

And I said, you cannot cut me. And my freshman year at Itawamba, I had to buy my uniform and I had to pay for all my meals on the road because he only had 27 uniforms.

So he taught me more than just two strikes or anything. That's what Glavine and Maddux would do with 0-2. Maddux might throw it right down the middle. Our game's changed a lot since Roy Cresap was coaching. He's the first man that loved pitching like I did.

It's the first time I've been coached in pitching in my career. So I was kind of slow and a late bloomer. But we still talk to this day because him and Brenda mean the world to me.

And he taught me so, so much. And there's so many people -- when a coach gets to this stage and you get to come to Omaha and you start looking around, you think of a Roy Cresap and Brian Shoop and a John Cohen. You think of every coach that you've worked for and every influence that you have had.

And it's a great time to, back in the hotel, during these downtimes when you are by yourself to thank these people. I just appreciate you bringing up the name Roy Cresap. He's very dear to me.

Q. He said there was a particular game -- he called it a

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College World Series game where you attacked a hitter in an 0-2 count and lost on a three-run homer in the ninth or something like that. I couldn't connect the dots on it. I couldn't find it. Do you have that memory?

BUTCH THOMPSON: I don't think that ever happened either. (Laughter).

I remember running in the other team's dugout. I gave up a bunch. That's why I've been coaching so long.

Q. Obviously Sonny's brought a lot to your lineup. Talk about the impact he's had and what initially appealed to you about him?

BUTCH THOMPSON: When you meet him initially. I think if we get to hang around, if we play good enough baseball, however many they put out here is going to love him and respect him.

I thought it was instant with our people. It was instant with our clubhouse, as you can hear these people talk about. He'll do the same thing. It's genuine, it's not manufactured. It's real and he's good.

If you look at it from analytical met standpoint he may have more impact on any team than any other player in college baseball if you look at the numbers. But him rivalling that as person and the genuineness of it.

You'll see it. He's had us from hello. And I'm so thankful that a player like him, with that much charisma and that much game, gets an opportunity to play in a setting like this.

Q. Could you tell us who your starter is going to be Saturday? And just your thoughts on playing Ole Miss?

BUTCH THOMPSON: Our starter will be Joseph Gonzalez. He's pitched for us a lot this year he was out the first portion of the year. I know he did not pitch against Ole Miss the first time around.

But he's kind of been throwing in the 3 hole for us or third slot there. And as we worked through, we got him to the 2 slot. And we eventually got to the 1 slot because he missed some time early in the year.

Arguably, at the end of the day, he's probably our best starter. Has gone the longest per start. And we're excited to let Joseph get an opportunity to start us off here.

All eight teams are at the halfway point. To win the big one

you've got to win a Regional, a Super, and basically all you're doing is entering another Regional now and there will be one more Super Regional.

We're lining it up. We know those first two games of a Regional is so important for every club. But Joseph gets us off to a good start. Parrish (phonetic) may be able to help me. Did DeLucia pitch against us? Three innings out of the pen. And he did an amazing job how he hooked it up for Ole Miss in the stretch run.

We saw him three innings out of the pen, and I think he'll be Ole Miss' starter.

And it should be interesting for the two clubs. I know the fans are going to enjoy every bit of it. But that pitching matchup with these two guys that didn't really play this role the first time around, that's another piece to the intrigue, I guess.

Q. Obviously your familiarity with both State and Ole Miss throughout your life. I'm sure you're incredibly familiar. Now this will be the fourth conservative year that a team from Mississippi is in the College World Series. Based on being from there and having such a passion for it, how big do you think it is for the state?

BUTCH THOMPSON: I think it's huge, especially a state so small and so much pride. And I think about a lot of things. I think about Walter Payton and Favre. I think some of the best in everything -- Jerry Rice.

And the people that came out of our state, some of the guys are second to none. It's been pretty incredible. We have each other's back. Bryson Ware is an outfielder that plays for us. He's from the Jackson metro area there. Every time you see someone from the state of Mississippi we're rooting for somebody from the state of Mississippi.

I grew up about 50 minutes, 45 minutes, an hour from Starkville, about an hour and 10 from Oxford and about an hour and a half from Alabama -- I call it the Bermuda Triangle growing up. If you cared about sports -- and I loved baseball -- and once I latched into baseball it's just been a mecca.

When you think about at our school Hal Baird and a Ron Polk and what those guys have built this SEC brand that we get to experience today. I was with Keith Madison in the hotel today, at Kentucky for 25 years. Those men, they have paved the way for us to get our league to where it is now. And there's been a lot of Mississippi imprint on it.

Scott Berry is a good man at Southern Miss. I got to talk to him today. Had a club that Ole Miss had to go through, a

tall order -- whoever gets here had to go through a pretty tough road to get here.

In baseball in the state of Mississippi there's a lot of pride. Even though I'm at Auburn in a neighboring state, I have a lot of pride in the folks that have done so well and came out of the great state of Mississippi.

Q. Who did you grow up rooting for?

BUTCH THOMPSON: I was an Ole Miss fan. My father was -- there was a time there, I was born in '70 -- I am 51 even though I look 38 -- it was Archie Manning, Archie Manning. And that created a whole generation that just drew people -- when you're right in the middle and you choose sides, that Archie Manning era, it got my dad. It captured my dad.

He was one of those shift workers. And a week once a year we'd go to one football game a year. That would be a special thing. I'd go try to steal all the souvenir cups. I'd try to get 70 or 80 of those when I was young. That changed.

I remember my dad, who passed in '18, so he never got to see me be a head coach and bring a team here in '19 when we played Mississippi State. But I didn't let him know I got the pitching job at Mississippi State when I took it the first time because he was such an Ole Miss guy. He wouldn't ever let it go.

And I got home before he ever heard of it because you don't hear about anything from (indiscernible), Mississippi. I had a week to play with it. It wasn't on the social media stuff. I walked in and he's sitting there at the table and I threw a Mississippi State hat. He's like, boy, get that out the house. I said, I'm the pitching coach at Mississippi State. He put his head down and said, I guess blood's thicker than water, let's go.

But Ole Miss is the answer. I'm sorry to take you on my personal journey, but I was probably a Rebel when I grew up. I was there -- I was a pitching coach at Georgia. Vince Dooley, first time I sat down with him as a new employee, he asked me what I knew about the SEC. I said I remember I was in Oxford the day Herschel jumped over that line. He jumped over the pile and landed on his feet and ran into the end zone. I was absolutely there and I hated y'all. But there's some neat stories through the years, for sure.

Q. When did Sonny first get on your radar and how? And were you as surprised as some of the rest of us at how well he handled SEC pitching right from the start?

BUTCH THOMPSON: I'll start at the end, yes, he hit .270 last year and Casey Dunn was his head coach. Casey as big as a good a hitting coach as is out there. And he hit 21 home runs. And it's not rocket science. We had Tyler Miller, 16 homes runs for us playing first base for us. And we knew he was going to sign and move on. This is the first year that portal stuff meaning something we're going to attack was last year.

And it came to our attention that Casey was leaving Sanford, and going to be the coach at UAB, and a couple of good players. It's not just Sonny. It's Chase Isbell that's coming on for us late. His last 11 innings look back at that.

He was a surgery guy about 13 months now. He's starting to make an impact for us. That's another one. And there's also Brooks Carlson, who will probably be in our lineup as a DH.

So it's all three of them. Sonny has made the biggest jump and impact off his numbers from last year. Sonny's honest answer, because I've asked him -- I beat you to the punch on that -- why .560 on base percentage? He's probably getting close to 70 walks now.

When you look at his RBIs, and you look at his home runs -- there's some guys in college baseball that had more -- when you take those 70 at-bats out of there, because most of those 70 are them not wanting to fool with him. His numbers could have been astronomical, but they've elected not to pitch to him a bunch. He really credited the four umpire system, the advent of the TrackMan. I'm trying to find the right, proper words of respect, that strike zone is where he's not having to chase and try to do other things to have at-bats.

He had to carry something. He doesn't have to carry as much for us. And I think it's a little better strike zone where that slider rolls off, three or four balls off the plate he can get a ball out of it now because so much is on TV. So much is evaluated with our SEC umpires, et cetera.

But in the past, when that ball is called two or three balls off the plate consistently, has to go for it. And nobody's good at hitting a pitch a foot outside or a foot above or foot in, two balls in. I think it's allowed him to get to his truest smallest strike zone of his career.

He does have great evaluation skills. He has two things at an extreme high level. And once you can get past his body type -- because that's the elephant in the room with him -- his evaluation of being able to take balls and swing at strikes is elite, and his bat quickness is that of like a Dylan Crews. And Crews looks like he's ready to be in a big league game tomorrow.

Sonny possesses a couple of those skills. They're exactly the same, with bat quickness, shortness to the ball, exit velocities and his evaluation of the strike zone. And I think this year he's playing with a smaller strike zone than what he did the last two years by being in our conference.

Q. Kason, the guy that has done so much for your team, people, what do they need to know about him other than looking at the offensive numbers and how important he is for you guys?

BUTCH THOMPSON: Howell. A winner. Kason recruited us. His story's neat. He had Big 12, other awesome teams. They were in Auburn, Alabama when he was like 10, 12 years old. His father was working at a football program.

They left. They'd been living in Texas ever since. Never heard of Kason Howell until he called me. He said, I've got these offers, would you all look at me?

I'm like, yeah, I'll call you back. I called him back two hours later. I said come on. That's how super recruiters we are.

He made some plays. It was national that catch he made at Jacksonville State over the wall.

But really it's all those intermediate plays that he makes that looks like he's not even hustling.

We're pretty good up the middle. This should be a World Series ballclub, when you take Nate LaRue behind the plate, Foster and Moore in the middle infield and Kason Howell. Kason Howell makes us a World Series team. He did it in his freshman year, and he's done it again.

These guys, my best guys, that's three of them right there, they do more for our team than what you see them do. And their at-bats or how they play defense, it's what they're doing with the rest of the ballclub, Kason Howell would run through any wall for us. Has had trouble staying healthy because he always goes for it.

These guys are leading other guys. Carson Skipper, will grab somebody and I don't have to, and get with anybody to make things right and keep us making our boat go faster, if you will. And Kason has that as well. He's just a steady presence.

He's probably started more games for us in the last four years than anybody. And George, maybe look and see most games started ever in the Auburn uniform. If he comes back next year, I think he'll have a chance to pass that. Ought to be getting close now. He's been

unbelievable. And he actually recruited himself to Auburn because he had such an impression on it as a young person.

When somebody's a really good player, they have great work ethic and rather be at your place than any place in America, that's going out of style right now, that makes him a special, special person, player.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Tim Hudson and just what the impact has been that he's had on your pitching staff since he joined your squad.

BUTCH THOMPSON: He's had a hell of a tough time. 2020 we play 18 games. Welcome to college baseball. He was on the Hall of Fame ballot last year. He's been able to pitch at an extremely high level and gifted athlete. He only missed games or starts when he was having an arm surgery.

So he's a gifted, phenomenal athlete. Coaching is a different ball game. I think everybody knows that. Tony had that. And a bunch of his boys got hurt last year. And it was tough, and he grinded it out.

I think somebody could do a quick Google search and see that Tim Hudson does not have to be getting up every day grinding to coach college baseball to make ends meet.

He's very gifted. This is his heart as a player where he played here in Omaha and how cool was it that he gets to coach here. I don't think he'll do it for 20 years. I think this was his deal in '20. And we're here in '22. And he's grown himself. And he's absolutely made a difference in these players. They would run through any wall for Tim.

But I've seen him grow so much. But all he wanted to do was give back to Auburn. And you have to get in there pretty early. Gotta be on your top of your game to beat him.

Some of these guys that are uber elite athletes, they don't just have the skill, they have the ability to focus for a long period of time. Tim Hudson can walk in the room and stay there for eight hours.

When we have a camp, he'll make sure that he touches and watches every pitch of every kid that paid to come and invest in that camp.

There's some special elite stuff with what he's done by being able to come back into our program that I'll never forget. And I'm going to enjoy every day that he continues to want to do this for the program, whether it's over at the end of this year and we got three, four more years

together, who knows, but he wanted to give back to Auburn because Auburn created -- springboarded a career for him. And I'll forever be grateful.

I told him today as we're taking that picture at that statue how much I respected him, how much I appreciated him and how excited I am that not only was he a great player and won the national player of the year as a hitter and a pitcher, but he gets to coach an Auburn pitching staff at Omaha as well. It's a really nice piece, icing on top of the cake for him to put on his Auburn deal.

And he graduated last year. Only took 25 years or whatever. But he's got an Auburn degree and he's leading his pitching staff. He's in a great place. And I am so thankful.

It's been invaluable to have him part of our coaching staff and being part of our program. I probably can't put it in good words for you to get out there. But I think you know what I mean.

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