

2022 College World Series

Friday, June 24, 2022

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach Skip Johnson

Tanner Tredaway

Jimmy Crooks

Pregame Press Conference



of those guys, he's going to do his role and he's just going to help us out in any way he can.

TANNER TREDAWAY: Well said.

Q. Jimmy and Tanner, I always ask this question. As fans of the game yourselves, besides playing the game, what do you admire about your opponent, Mississippi, just your thoughts on their style of play?

JIMMY CROOKS: They're a great group. They're a good team. Any team that makes it here, they're going to be awesome. We're going to have to respect them, and we're going to have to stick with our game plan and do our thing.

TANNER TREDAWAY: No, yeah, in a lot of ways they're similar to us. They do a lot of small things well. They've got power in the lineup. They're a really good ballclub. They've been playing with a chip on their shoulder just like we have. They were in question for a regional, and they're here to make a statement just like we are. They're going to be tough. But we're going to be ready for it.

Q. Tanner, after the game the other day I asked Skip about Jimmy and what he brings to the team in leadership. Can you talk about what he brings in terms of leadership but also what he brings offensively and defensively?

TANNER TREDAWAY: Yeah, no, Jimmy is a huge part of our team. One of the big things about Jimmy is he'll get onto you when he needs to. There's not a whole lot of guys on the team that do that, call you out on stuff that's going on in the game.

It's not just in the game of baseball, it's in life, too. He's just always been that guy. He's a leader for us, but he's also a very explosive player. Jimmy -- we call him Jimmy Barrels for a reason. The guy can swing it. He's a great leader behind the plate. Just does a really good job for us and really calms the pitchers down more than anything.

Q. Tanner, how would you describe -- you guys have been here now over a week. How would you describe the vibe around the team throughout all these days?

SKIP JOHNSON: I think we're excited about playing Ole Miss. Congratulations to Ole Miss for making it, too, as well as us, and looking forward to the opportunity to play the great game we love that's baseball.

That's about it from me.

Q. Jimmy and Tanner, this is obviously where you guys want to be, playing in the series this weekend, but is there any sadness that this is kind of the end of the journey for you guys, specifically with this group, knowing how great the chemistry has been throughout the year?

TANNER TREDAWAY: Yeah, I don't think there's any sadness. This is what we've worked for the entire year. Everything has been leading up to this moment.

I think we're just extremely excited to be in the position that we are. We have this opportunity with this group of guys. How else would you want to finish it off?

JIMMY CROOKS: Yeah, no doubt, finishing this year with this type of group, we're going to be sharing memories for a lifetime. There's definitely no sadness. We're one big family and we're going to be sticking through thick and thin with these guys. Yeah, we're just going to enjoy every moment and just keep going.

Q. Jimmy and Tanner, I think there's a Tweet from one of Brett's old coaches saying that even when he's injured, he's one of those guys that's going to be able to help his teammates get better from the dugout. Is that what you've seen from him?

JIMMY CROOKS: No doubt. I've been playing with him since junior college. He's one of those guys that brings electricity to the dugout, which is key for us, because once he brings energy to us, we take it out on the field. He's one



You've played fewer games and practices it seems like. Is it different than it was super regionals, or is it kind of the same as it's been the last couple months?

TANNER TREDAWAY: No, to me I think it's been pretty much the same. Obviously all the extra things that we're doing here has been happening, but we're getting new fans left and right.

Other than that, the team charisma and everything like that has all been pretty the same, practices have been the same. We're just taking it one day at a time. It's not like we're trying to make this bigger than it is. We're here to take charge and do what we do and win a championship.

That's all we've been looking at for the last four weeks.

Q. Jimmy, Tanner, curious as you look back as what has gotten you guys to this point. Obviously you have to cite the starting pitching. Gotten outstanding outings from Jake Bennet as well as Cade Horton and most recently David Sandlin. From an offensive perspective, would you talk a little bit about what a boost that is, what a lift that is to you guys' lineup when you've got a guy on the mound that's dealing?

JIMMY CROOKS: Yeah, no doubt. Whenever pitching is dominant, it's going to help us as hitters because we know those guys are going to do their thing on the mound. Same thing with our bullpen guys. They've been really stepping up and doing their thing and just pounding the zone and just letting our defense work.

As a hitter, both of us hitters, once they do that, I think it gives us all the confidence in the world because we're just going to stick with our approach and just stay relaxed in the box. Not let the moment get too big and stay composed and do our thing.

TANNER TREDAWAY: I think what's been so great is that we're feeding off each other. Like when the offense isn't so good, the pitching is picking us up; and when the pitching is not so good, the offense is picking us up.

I think that's part of the reason why we've been so successful, having that mindset, taking one pitch at a time, goes for both pitchers and the hitters. We've been able to execute it, and it's been working.

Q. Jimmy, Tanner already talked about this, but does it seem like Ole Miss's journey has kind of been similar to you guys', and has that been something you've thought about in terms of getting to this moment?

JIMMY CROOKS: Oh, no doubt. Like he said, they have a

chip on their shoulder, and so do we. Yeah, they had a real tough journey. They were the last four in, and they've been battling their way all the way here. Same with us.

We take it into consideration, yes, but like I said, we're just going to stay composed and do our thing, and we're going to respect our opponent and stick with our game plan.

Q. Guys, I'm wondering what have been your impressions, a lot of SEC teams in this College World Series. What have been your impressions of SEC baseball, and how do you see Oklahoma and Texas in the conference in the future relative to baseball?

TANNER TREDAWAY: Well, I think almost all the SEC teams are powerhouses. They're really good at recruiting. They've got all the facilities and all that stuff. They bring a lot to the table. They're hard competition, a lot of talent, a lot of strength.

But at the same time, that's not what baseball is all about. Baseball is about being a team and creating a good culture for your team.

In college baseball it's about winning.

I think Texas and Oklahoma are going to fit just right in with the SEC. I don't think we're going to make it bigger than it is. We're just going to go into it balls to the wall and just get after it.

JIMMY CROOKS: Yeah, he hit it right on the spot.

Q. Tanner, I talked to Elko about this on the other side; what does it mean for you older guys who went through all that in 2020 to be here on this stage now when this place was sitting empty in June just two years ago?

TANNER TREDAWAY: It's pretty special. And that year for us was hard for us too because I truly felt like that was another Omaha-caliber team. So it was difficult to take that in and accept that.

To be here two years later and to be doing what we're doing here now has just been unbelievable.

I never would have thought that I'd be in this position. So it's just been awesome, especially being my last year and everything. I'm just so grateful, and glory to God.

Q. For both of the players, early on in the season Blake was so strong for you guys. I remember Skip saying that if the whole team kind of took his approach to every at-bat, you guys would be a lot better. Now it



seems like everybody is doing that. Can you talk about how much he might have helped you or what turned the page for that?

JIMMY CROOKS: Yeah, Blake was one of those guys that we kind of leaned on because he pretty much leads the team in walks. We took that into consideration with our approach. We're going to try to swing at strikes most of the time and just try and hit middle away.

That's what B-Rob did so well this year. He's getting the right pitches to hit. That was a whole game plan coming into this, just swing at good pitches and just staying composed at the plate. And that's what pretty much B-Rob taught us pretty much in the cages, the little work we did with him. That's pretty much what he did with us, yeah.

TANNER TREDAWAY: I think at the same time he's just a very relentless player. He hates striking out. Like it really bothers him. When it comes to that stuff, he's all seriousness.

I think that's good in the sense that you're not backing down from your pitcher. He's a perfect example of that, and I think he's carried that on throughout the whole team.

Q. Skip, because the starting pitching has been so good, Carter, Carson, Ben, Chazz, those guys haven't pitched in two weeks. Is there any concern that they haven't been out there in a real game in the setting that they're going to be in possibly this weekend?

SKIP JOHNSON: A little bit but not much. You just pound the strike zone is the biggest thing. They're not going to lose any rhythm. They've been in their own bullpens. Every time we practice we throw bullpens. It's different. We've got to go through a process of trying to make the bullpen game-like, but it's hard trying to use it as purpose.

We do that a lot. I'm really proud of those guys as much as anything.

When you have 27 guys on your team, every one of them have value at some point. Your job, if you're not in the lineup that day, is to pull for your teammate. We talk about that. The game is not fair at times to them, either, and it's really -- in our world today, it's got to be as selfless as it can be, especially when you can just go: You know what? I'm not pitching anymore. I'm just going to go somewhere else and get on the portal.

That's what we have to deal with every day. Unfortunately, it's a bad system, and we've got to continue to create hope. We've got to continue to finish. We've got to continue to talk to those guys to try to build them up: Hey, man, you

never know who's going to make the most important pitch or who's going to be -- have the most important at-bat.

Q. I want to ask you about Brett. Just what have you seen out of him in terms of leadership post-injury?

SKIP JOHNSON: Yeah, that's the thing that he does really well. He's been through it twice this year, and so he understands that side of it. He might pick something in a game itself or help somebody through an at-bat or try to get into an at-bat with that hitter.

That's what we talk about is trying to put yourself on the field even though you're not playing, and he's done a great job with that. And the leadership, that role that he's done in that has been super.

Q. Especially during the postseason you guys have won in a variety of ways, whether it's explosive offenses or it's more of a defensive battle. What can you say about your team's ability to find ways to win, and how big is that going into this Championship Series?

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, just trying to win pitches. That's the biggest thing. If it's hitting a home run, moving a guy over or throwing a quality strike or a quality breaking ball or making a play in the middle of the field or diving over -- whatever it means, those guys are going to do what they can to win a baseball game and to win that pitch. We talk about winning pitch and being present and being in the moment on that pitch.

Q. Coach, Tanner was talking about how the team is feeling kind of the same way it has been ever since this run began. When you have the mantra of Team of Davids, but you're the only unbeaten team left in this tournament, is it difficult to make sure the guys still have that mentality that they are the Team of Davids, that you're the only team left that hasn't lost a game?

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, they're going to play the game one pitch at a time and try to play against the baseball. That's what we talk about. That's what we do. They're going to pick each other up. It's going to be fun.

It's fun watching those guys play. You're kind of -- as a coach, you're just like a bus driver. You're just trying to figure out who's going to be on the bus, and they're going to give you effort. That's all you can ask out of them.

You can't ask those guys to be somebody they're not. Just go out and give a good effort. If we win that day, we win that day. If we don't win that day, guys, the sun is going to hopefully come up tomorrow and you're going to wake up.

That's what it's going to be like.

Q. Ole Miss has pitched so well this postseason. What have you seen from them in your scout or even just watching games here that's allowed them to have that success?

SKIP JOHNSON: Yeah, they pitch fearless. They pound the strike zone. They do a good job. Coach Bianco has been around for a long time. He understands that environment. He's a really, really good coach and runs a great program.

It's who they are, what they do. They've had -- they were the No. 1 team in the country when we started. Look at them. How many people y'all got coming to your games? Thousands and thousands and thousands. You look at the environment, what they play in, this environment is not any bigger environment than they play in at home all the time.

He does a great job, and it's fun to be on the other side watching, and it's going to be fun coaching against him.

Q. I think Jimmy and Tanner alluded to it, but can you talk about the similarities between your team and Ole Miss and the journeys you guys have had this year?

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, John said it best. You look at the journey, they've been told they might not get in or might get in or whatever, they're going to fire Bianco, whatever, that was a joke. I mean, it's incredible because that guy has been -- last year they're wanting -- LSU was wanting to hire him. It's really what we live in our world, in coaching in baseball every day. You're only as good as your last outing, which is not good.

I think the similarities are they're really talented, and we've got some talented folks in the middle of our field, as well. Their shortstop is really good. Catcher is really good. Bench plays with his heart. We have guys that do the same thing. Their pitching has been really good. Our starting pitching has been really good.

They've played with a chip on their shoulder ever since they got in. It's been fun to watch those guys. They played against a good Southern Miss team. Scott Berry is a great friend of mine. I had one of the best players I've ever had -- best player I've ever seen in my life died in 2001. His name was Brian Cole. He played for me at Navarro in 1998. I don't know if you know who Brian Cole is, but he was a pretty special person. He's from Mississippi and had a lot of good friends, Corky from Meridian, Mississippi. So it's a great fit.

Q. You mentioned it with the question about the

pitching, but Hunter Elliott, what have you seen from him and what impresses you the most about the left-hander?

SKIP JOHNSON: I mean, his delivery. He's kind of funky a little bit. He's going to pound the strike zone. It's going to be a great matchup, and it's going to be a great opportunity for us.

He is tough, and that's what Coach Bianco brings. You can see the toughness in their team and how they play. It's going to be fun to go up against him.

Q. You've kind of touched on this in the past, but now that you're on the doorstep, could you just kind of comment a little bit on the potential for the sweep with softball on national titles and just how big of a deal that would be?

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, that's what University of Oklahoma is known about. There's only one. We talk about that, and Patty has done a great job. She reminds me of Coach Garrido, and just being around her and her presence has been incredible.

If we get the opportunity to do the same thing, we're here. If it happens, that's great. If it doesn't happen, what are we going to do, go fishing? That's the way I look at it. Go recruiting.

Q. You've spoken about Mike, and I know you were both in Omaha in 2014. I wonder if you guys have any other previous connections before this week in Omaha.

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, Coach McDonnell coached for him at Ole Miss when he was a head coach at Louisville. When I was at Navarro, they would come over and recruit our players, when I was at Navarro. That's really the only action I've had really with Coach Bianco.

I've always -- you go out and you watch the things that he's done and you respect the things that he's done as a head coach and how he handles his business. I think his son made the last out against a no-hitter against LSU in 2020, and it was a rocket hit in the 6-0, and Zaragoza backhanded throw across the infield. And you could see both his sons are really good players, and it's been fun to watch those guys and watch him coach as a leader and a person that he is.

Q. Skip, obviously Kendall was a huge part of getting you here, hasn't found it with the bat here yet in Omaha. What have you seen from his at-bats this week, and how have you seen him respond?

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, don't write about his first hit or not his first hit because then he's going to start trying even harder. Hitting is hard. It's really hard. He just continues to process seeing good pitches. If he starts trying really hard, he's going to fail. That's what the game does to you.

I know he's going to give us good effort, and I know he'll run into that wall. He'll try to climb the fence to catch a ball. He'll take a 95-mile-an-hour fastball off his jaw.

I know all those things about him, and that's one thing that has been really good. When he starts trying to get hits, it makes it about himself and not about the team, then we won't be very good and it won't matter. He's going to be playing left field because he plays with a position similar to guys that we want to play.

Q. Talk about the importance of that first game tomorrow night, and who's your starter going to be?

SKIP JOHNSON: Jake Bennett. What was the first question?

Q. The importance of the first game tomorrow night.

SKIP JOHNSON: No, Jake Bennett will throw first and then Horton on Saturday, and then we'll figure it out on Sunday -- or Monday.

Q. Skip, I asked this of your players, but can you talk about what you think college baseball looks like when Texas and Oklahoma join the SEC.

SKIP JOHNSON: The SEC is a lot like -- the baseball programs are a lot like our football program. It's incredible. Looking forward for the opportunity.

I love the Big 12. I've been in the Big 12 for a long time. It's great. We decided -- we had the best athletic director in the country. We decided to go to the SEC, that's great. We're looking forward to the opportunity, looking forward to playing against all those great teams.

I know it's a big environment. It's going to be great for our kids, good recruiting tool. Not that the Big 12 hasn't been.

We're here today representing the Big 12, and I said it this morning on ESPN Radio, like, man, you look at West Virginia, they could be sitting right where we're at. Our conference was a really good conference this year, and it has been for the last 15 years that I've been in it.

We're just looking forward to the opportunity, and going to the SEC is a new step moving forward. And college

baseball is changing, and we've got to continue to grow. At one time, baseball was the national pastime, and we've got to continue to grow in that area because the game of college baseball, it's about the spirit of the game, and you get up there and you hear "Boomer Sooner," people screaming and yelling like they have here, that's what's incredible about it. It'll raise the hair on your neck. That's what it's about. It's a passion that those guys put into it.

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