

2022 College World Series

Friday, June 24, 2022

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Ole Miss Rebels

Coach Mike Bianco

Justin Bench

Hunter Elliott

Pregame Press Conference



MIKE BIANCO: Well, obviously a good morning for us to still be here in Omaha and to wake up with a great opportunity in front of us. I know the guys are excited. Probably the No. 1 question most asked is who we'll start on Saturday, and I'm sorry to inform you, and Hunter is sitting here, we're not sure who we'll go with.

Obviously a little short rest, I don't think it's not manageable, but we weren't sure how we were going to use the pitchers. We're just trying to get through last night's game. So to have this conference -- a little premature, I think, on our standpoint, to make that decision. We'll try, from your standpoint, from the media's standpoint, try to release that as soon as we know something.

But I don't think it's fair to Hunter or any of the other pitchers that we could possibly pitch tomorrow. Certainly Hunter is going to either pitch Saturday or Sunday. We'll just get to practice today, let him stretch, let him throw a little bit, and we certainly want to make sure that he's ready and capable, and on normal rest. That's not going to be the case this weekend, so we need to know when is his best shot to give us the best opportunity to win a baseball game, so we'll wait.

I don't know if that squelches some of the questions after that, but that's all I've got, so thank you.

Q. For both players, a lot has been made of the fact that you guys were the last team picked as an at-large for the tournament. Now that you're kind of on the doorstep, could you share your thoughts on just how you process that, that you were where you were back on Memorial Day wondering if you were going to get in and now here you are?

JUSTIN BENCH: Yeah, I mean, we were 7-14 at one point. I think it's a lot about belief. I think all 40 guys we

had on our team at the time, we never stopped believing. We're here now, and the NCAA put us in. Now we're playing for a national championship.

HUNTER ELLIOTT: Yeah, like he said, just a ton of belief in the guys. We've always thought we were this good. I think at one point we were ranked No. 1 or whatever. But like in baseball, sometimes you scuffle, and we were scuffling there for a while, but we just continued to believe and knew we were good enough, and we ended up here.

Q. Hunter, a year, year and a half ago you're pitching in high school at Tupelo. Now here in the College World Series Championship Series. What has this ride been like, and have you taken a moment to take it in, what the last year has been like?

HUNTER ELLIOTT: It's been a lot of fun. Had a lot of ups and downs, like Coach B, our motto this year is enjoy the ride, enjoy the ups and the downs. And we've had those, and I've had those. I think everyone on the team has had those.

But it's been a fun journey, obviously, like everything in sports, and in baseball, you just enjoy every minute of it. So it's been a lot of fun.

Q. Justin and Hunter, I asked this to the Sooner student-athletes: Besides playing the game, as a fan of college baseball, what are your thoughts on Oklahoma and their style of play, your opponent for the next three days?

HUNTER ELLIOTT: Yeah, obviously they're a really good team if they're here. I mean, we haven't done a ton of scouting yet. I'm sure we'll do that later today and tomorrow morning. We don't know a ton about their hitters or stuff like that yet.

They're obviously really good. Their pitching staff is really good. We know that. Their hitters are really good, and all the respect in the world for them.

JUSTIN BENCH: Yeah, similar to Hunter, you have to be a good team to make it to the national championship. I know



they have some good arms and some good hitters, and like you said, we're going to go over that later today and early tomorrow to learn more about it.

Q. For both of you guys, Justin, you played in a ton of games for this program, but would you say this year's group, y'all's confidence is at an all-time high at this point?

JUSTIN BENCH: Yeah, I honestly don't think we've ever lost confidence or belief. But right now, winning eight of the last nine games we've played, it's just -- when we step on that field, we're going to have the belief and confidence to get the job done.

Q. Talk about that moment watching DeLucia out there dealing, and talk about the locker room after and talk about the environment. You guys really seem to be believing in something bigger than yourself right now, and talk about that term because you were left for dead and now here you are in the national Championship Series.

HUNTER ELLIOTT: Yeah, I kind of lost track of the question. Yeah, it was awesome watching DeLucia out there. Honestly, from him, you expect stuff like that. He's a special guy, a special pitcher, our ace and our guy. When you run him out there even on short rest, even on times like that, you expect him to do big things.

And that's what he did last night. He really lifted this team, and we're excited for him and everybody.

Just after the game on the bus in the locker room, just a ton of excitement, but a feeling of we're not done. We came here to win a national championship, and that was our only goal.

JUSTIN BENCH: I think he covered it all.

Q. Hunter, what have you taken away the most from some of these more older and experienced guys like Justin Bench and Tim Elko from a leadership standpoint?

HUNTER ELLIOTT: Yeah, it's a long season. You've got to keep going and just keep believing. Like I said, I don't think I've ever been in a season this long or this many games, and I don't think I've probably ever pitched this many innings, but it's just coming to the ballpark every day looking to get better, looking to be the best teammate you can be, and those guys have done a great job of showing that.

Q. Justin, I think a similar question was asked to OU,

but you were part of that 2020 team that was on a roll and then the season got cut short. How much more meaningful is it for you now to have made it to this point?

JUSTIN BENCH: Yeah, I mean, that season was unfortunate. We were on a good run there.

A lot of players came back the next two years, and our job is not finished. We have two more games to win, and that's what we're here to do.

Q. Justin, you've been on some teams that were close to Omaha in the past. I'm curious what's maybe the single biggest thing about this team that's allowed you guys to get here and now to where you are?

JUSTIN BENCH: I mean, I've said it before, our belief, I would say. Freshman year and junior year we were that one game away. But just keep putting ourselves in that situation to make it to Omaha every year, coming down to that one game. And we got to do it this year, and it's a cool feeling.

Q. Hunter, just when you throw what is the process for figuring out how you feel for Saturday or Sunday? What's the goal there?

HUNTER ELLIOTT: Yeah, I'll show up to practice today, stretch it out, throw a little bit, do some arm care, see how I'm recovering, see how I feel. Obviously I want the ball tomorrow or whatever day I can get it. We'll just have to see.

Q. Justin, have you and Tim and Kevin and Cioffi kind of had any chance to reflect while you've been here about getting here as seniors, or have you kind of been laser focused on the task ahead?

JUSTIN BENCH: I mean, we've just been focusing one game at a time, but you can't help but look around and see that you're playing for the World Series. It's a speechless moment for all of us and this team and Coach and everything.

Q. Mike, Butch Thompson was talking earlier this week about trying to come from the losers' bracket, and he had reached out and talked to some coaches who had done that here. I'm wondering, do you reach out and talk to anyone about the championship round? And what experiences do you take from championship teams that you were part of at LSU?

MIKE BIANCO: It just happened last night, and our path here obviously a little different than Oklahoma's. They sat

on Wednesday, or won, and have been sitting for a couple days. One of the questions earlier, the guys haven't seen or heard anything about Oklahoma besides what they've watched on the College World Series. Let them enjoy last night. We'll practice today and we'll start breaking down video and kind of get more into our three-day routine as far as our prep for the game.

As far as specific to your question, the only one I've spoken to is Coach Bertman, and spoke to him I think it was Tuesday, and gave some advice. Don't want to be too specific with it, but talked about some of the things that I talked about earlier, I think, especially with the beat writers, about being conscious of the time and the time off to make sure that you keep them busy, that it's structured, that you know what you're doing, but you give them time to enjoy it, to stay loose and stay calm.

I think it's kind of a juggle with that, but not as much, I think, playing yesterday would have been a little bit more of a juggle with the two days off for us. But now it becomes fast and furious. We got back to the hotel last night, eat dinner and try to answer a lot of texts and emails, as many as you can, anyway.

And then you wake up this morning and have all of this. You've got a couple of hours of media and ESPN and photo shoots and those types of things, then you've got practice. We'll have a team dinner tonight with all the players and their families and whatnot. But yeah, the only one I've spoken to is Coach.

Q. You mentioned the advice you gave those guys, and you shared that with us a couple days ago. While it's a business trip, you want them to enjoy it. What about you? How much have you been enjoying it, and what have the last 12 hours been like for you?

MIKE BIANCO: The last 12 hours, like I said, I went back home after the game, ate a sandwich in the hotel, started to answer a lot of text messages and emails. A lot of ticket requests and a lot of "I'm sorry, I'm out of tickets."

But it's been awesome, as you can imagine. We've tried to do that. My whole family is here, so that's a cool thing, to have your entire family here. They've been really generous with me, where when I go to my room, they let me go to my room and do what I need to do.

But they've enjoyed it, and it's been cool to see them after the games and get the hugs and the kisses and all that.

It's been a neat part, and I think that's what this is. You're here for a long time. When you get to this point, you've been here for 10-plus days, and there's got to be some

time where you decompress a little bit and sit back and enjoy it.

And I think that's what Justin was saying. You want to stay locked in, and you realize it's one game at a time, one pitch at a time, and that's how we play everything. But because this is so long, there's got to be times that you step away.

And for the kids to go eat a steak in Omaha with their family and enjoy this, this is what it's all about. You do it to have fun, and you're hoping that they're all going to find some enjoyment of this.

Q. About that group from 2020 when everybody's seasons were cut short and the start you had, what has it meant now to get those older guys, to take this journey with them and get them here and what has it meant? If you're able to think about it that way.

MIKE BIANCO: Yeah, I guess I don't -- the COVID-shortened season, that seems forever ago. It really does. I think it would have -- not to criticize your question, that would have been a better question last year if we were to make it. That team was off to a great start.

But as we've seen, just great starts don't do it. You've got to play the whole season. There's a lot of guys that are in our dugout now that were in that meeting room on whatever day it was, March 15th, where we had to tell them to go home, and a lot of tears, a very emotional day for us. And.

For the rest of the country and the world, right? We didn't really know what to tell them at that point except we were told that they have to leave and they have to go home, and we don't really know what this is all about, but the season is canceled at least as far as we know.

So that was a tough, tough day. I remember that. It'll always be cemented in my brain.

But as far as the players and how it affects, relates to this point, I think it's -- I know this is not what your question was, but I think it's really cool, the story of the Bench and Elko and Graham and others that had opportunities last year after that season, a great season that ended up one game short of being here to come back for one more ride and one more chance at it. How cool is that to be here and to still be here with the two teams remaining.

Q. Skip was talking a little bit about the recruiting trips that you and Dan would take when he was coaching a JuCo. What do you remember about those trips, and do you see any similarities between his teams now compared to the kids he was coaching all that time

ago?

MIKE BIANCO: Again, back to the default, we haven't watched them. I've looked at a lot of stats last night and this morning, but I haven't started watching video.

Just a really crazy good offense. When you look, you don't see those types of numbers, in our league especially. I think 145 stolen bases out of 188 attempts. We probably haven't had 188 attempts in three years of stolen bases.

So not only do they steal, they steal at a high percentage. They have three guys that have over 20 stolen bases, and I think -- somebody will pull this up, but I can't remember playing a team that had a guy that had over 20 stolen bases this year except for Vanderbilt and Enrique Bradfield.

I don't remember looking down at a stat sheet and seeing somebody that had over 20 stolen bases. They have three of them, have three more that have double digits. But they still hit the homer. They've got 70-plus homers. They hit about .300 as a team. They score a lot of runs and do it in different ways. They bunt. They've got almost 40 sacrifice bunts. So just a really good offense.

I don't know Skip well. We're in two different leagues, and our paths, besides some recruiting, the early days with Dan McDonnell, trying to get as many players out of the Texas JuCo system as possible. But beyond that, to watch -- we missed him when I think he got to Texas in '07, '08, somewhere in there. So he wasn't part of the '05 staff when they came to Oxford for that super regional.

But he did a great job obviously at Texas, and what he's done at Oklahoma obviously speaks for itself. So a lot of respect.

The people that I do know that know him speak so highly of him, what a class act he is and does it the right way. He's done a terrific job.

Q. Obviously you're wearing the powder blue uniform today, and the question around town is when are the Rebs going to wear the powder blue uniforms. So are we going to see the powder blue uniforms on Saturday.

MIKE BIANCO: Wow, pressure. Let me explain it so we can really get -- we let the starting pitcher decide. DeLucia usually wears red, and he wore it the whole second half of the season. I can't believe we're doing this in a press conference.

So when we got to the regional and we had to play the

opening game, we had to play Arizona, who was also red and navy, they were the home team, and they got to choose what uniform. So they chose red. And so DeLucia said, Oh, wear navy. So he wore navy, pitched really well, and we won.

Hunter has always worn navy. So we wear navy the next day. We wore red in Game 3 in Coral Gables, but then DeLucia, it kind of went that way. And really even Gaddis's start, the NCAA asked us uniform choice before we chose pitcher. We've been pretty good in the navy, I guess we'll go navy.

So it's kind of been that. It's probably been less superstition than people have said. But I thought we made a rookie mistake the first day when we came for the media, because I forgot we were going to do a lot of video, and I thought, gosh, we should have worn the powder blue because that would have been a little more pop for the ESPN videos and whatnot. So that was really the reason we're wearing it today, because we wanted to look good.

Now you know the rest of the story.

Q. How is T.J.'s thumb holding up? How has he handled that this week?

MIKE BIANCO: Good. I don't really think the thumb is an issue. As you can see, it's heavily taped, but I don't think it's necessarily an issue of does he play or not play or what he can do. I don't think it limits him.

Q. Same question I asked the players. You guys, the last team in, and here you are. I guess how do you kind of process that to the journey you've been on since Memorial Day?

MIKE BIANCO: Well, I've said it before. I don't remember a time in my 22 years, with COVID 21 years of tournament play or postseason, sitting there waiting for your name to be called on Memorial Day. Some years we knew because we were already a host. Some years maybe we weren't host but we felt very comfortably in. And there's been years like this year where we didn't know.

Sometimes it doesn't go the way you want, and three times out of the 21 years we didn't. In those years we were 14-16 twice and 13-17 once. So we were right in there, right on that bubble. And it didn't work.

There was, I think, a very uncomfortable feeling on that day. I don't remember ever hearing our name called on that day and seeing just joy and just the enthusiasm that I saw in the guys. They were -- certainly you could use relieved, but I think maybe a better word would be excited,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

and since that moment -- we weren't the 64th team. I try to say that. We were a good baseball team, and I think everybody would vouch for that.

There's 31 automatic bids and 33 at-large bids. Now, were we the 33rd at-large bid? Maybe. But one that we felt sitting in that room we deserved to get in. You just don't ever know. We're really glad they let us in.

Q. Coach, you and I talked about in the preseason on the podcast about what the program meant to you, and obviously meant a lot to you and your family. I want to ask you about what this team in particular means to you. You've mentioned that you guys have overcome a lot. Now you're sitting here playing for a national championship. What does this team in particular mean to you?

MIKE BIANCO: They're all special. I say that as a coach. Every team is different. Every year is different. The players, the personnel is different, the coaching staff is different, and the season is different.

This year is no different.

But this is a really neat group of guys, guys that are just not only terrific players and terrific teammates, but just genuine, I think, great representatives of our university, that do it the right way. They're just really good kids.

You know our story. We haven't had the easiest road to get here. I think it teaches us all, I think even as a coach that's been in it 30-plus years, it teaches you these lessons that I'm sure we'll use down the road when you hit some adversity; that, yeah, you think you have it tough now, but this team did this. This is where they were, and this is where they ended up.

As Justin said several times and Hunter, I think it came from belief, belief in themselves first, that they were good players, but then also belief in one another that we're a good team and we can do this, especially if we stick together.

It's been really neat, as you can imagine. A lot of these questions are tough to answer I think right now in the moment. Sometimes it's a little easier to answer those questions when you have a little more perspective after the year. But it's been -- as Hunter said, it's been a neat ride, and it's been a pleasure to be a part of.

Q. You've talked a lot about the whole season and leading up to the point of getting into the postseason, but how tough was the SEC for you guys this year, and how much did it prepare you guys for this run that you

have been on through regionals, super regionals and now the College World Series?

MIKE BIANCO: You know, the SEC, for those that aren't -- it's just a gauntlet to navigate through. There's no off weekends. There's no bye weekends. It's every weekend. You'd better be ready to go to war. You play in the nicest stadiums in front of the largest crowds against the best players in the country week in and week out.

This is not a surprise, and I don't mean it for us, but a team that went 14-16 in our league, that came in ninth place is sitting here. I think Vanderbilt -- some of my beat writers out here might know better. When Vanderbilt in '14 won a national championship, I want to say they were 15-15 in our league, something like that.

But more to your question, I think going through that 10-week gauntlet, going from week to week, it does prepare you, I think, for postseason. It prepares you for big crowds. It prepares you for great competition, prepares you for pressure-type games and being able to make pitches and make plays and get the big hits.

Unfortunately it will beat you up, and it's very unforgiving. There's such a thin line in our league from winning and losing and not on the weekend but every single game. You can be pretty good, but this, playing in our league, can make you not feel that way. I'm sure there was probably times this year where it was tough to feel like you had a great team because that's what the SEC can do to you.

Q. I'm curious from a coaching perspective, because we hear this from the players a lot, but in particular yesterday there's a photo of you tipping your cap to the fans after the game. From a coaching perspective, what does it mean to see that fan support in the stands in moments like this?

MIKE BIANCO: Yeah, it's unbelievable, but never a doubt. You saw it in '14 when we got here. I don't look up in the stands a lot, but I heard what a tremendous crowd we had, and what a neat atmosphere on a Thursday. I don't know how many people were here, but I would think one of the most attended mid-week events here in the College World Series, two great fan bases. But when you look up and see all that red and blue -- and you can see how passionate they are. So excited.

I get a kick out of some of the pictures that I've seen afterwards, the fans and just the emotions and some of the short videos after a big pitch or big play. Man, they're invested, and it's really cool.

It helps. It's helped us at sways I field, and certainly it's



helped us here.

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