

# 2023 Men's College World Series

Thursday, June 15, 2023

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

**Florida Gators**

**Coach Kevin O'Sullivan**

**BT Riopelle**

**Josh Rivera**

Press Conference



returning players that came back with a goal of getting here in mind? What does this opportunity mean?

THE MODERATOR: Josh, you start.

JOSH RIVERA: It means the world, like you said. We're both returning players. We're fortunate enough to have a very talented team this year. That's not taking away from any of the talent we've had in the past, but to really come together as a team and a brotherhood, it's just a special opportunity to be here in Omaha playing against the best of the best.

It's a blessing, and we're just excited to get this thing going.

BT RIOPELLE: This is a pretty remarkable group of guys. It's just one more year that we have with each other, with the core guys that came back last year and the additions we've had this year, including coaches and support staff.

It's been a very memorable season for me and our group. We're very excited to compete this week.

**Q. BT, you are kind of the catcher behind the plate. What does it feel like to have such a great staff to be able to catch them?**

BT RIOPELLE: It's unbelievable. It's a testament to those guys that work their tails off every day to be able to put themselves in a good position to have success every day.

It's a testament to our coaching staff doing scouting reports and getting the guys on the mound ready to compete every day and perform at their best.

Recruiting, getting the best players in the country to come here and be willing to do anything necessary to win for the F on their chest.

Yeah, it's pretty awesome to see.

**Q. For either player. Being out there on the field, any early impressions taking batting practice, the outfield, what it's like and your impressions of playing in it for the first time on Friday?**

THE MODERATOR: Welcome, Florida. Sully, give us an overview, please.

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: We're excited to be here, just like everybody else. It's been an interesting season for us, interesting last couple of weeks.

Had a really tough regional with UConn and Texas Tech and FAMU, and obviously played a really familiar opponent in South Carolina this past weekend, and they played great as well.

We've earned our way here. It's been a very interesting ride throughout the year. Going through the SEC slate has been difficult at times, but we're just excited to be here. It's been a while since we've been here. It's been since 2018. I've been reminded over and over about that.

It's good to see a lot of familiar faces that I haven't seen in a while.

Really happy for our team, our staff, and everybody involved in our whole group to have this opportunity, so we're looking forward to playing tomorrow night against a very, very good Virginia team. I'm very familiar with them and their coaching staff and how well of a job they do.

From a coaching standpoint, they're very talented and fundamentally sound. It should be very entertaining game tomorrow night. We're looking forward to this journey here the next hopefully 10, 12 days or so.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions now for student-athletes.

**Q. What does this opportunity mean to you as**



THE MODERATOR: Josh.

JOSH RIVERA: It's a beautiful stadium. Nothing but positive thoughts towards that. The infield plays really well. The outfield is pretty nice. Balls were flying today. We had Jac Caglianone hitting balls out of the stadium. It was really cool. All of us from a BP standpoint, we were seeing the balls fly, and it just felt good to be out there for the first time to take it all in because once the World Series really gets started and we start playing these games, we have to focus and lock it in.

So, yeah, the field is beautiful. It plays well. We're just, once again, very excited.

BT RIOPELLE: It looks a lot different than you see on TV. It's a lot -- you know, more kind of on top of you. I thought it was more of a bowl shape, but people are on top of you. Like Josh said, the ball was flying today.

Luckily enough for us, we play in a big park, so it's not really a huge change for us in that standpoint. But, yeah, just getting familiar with the grounds and the way balls come off the bat. And for me, seeing -- catching pitches or hitting or whatnot with the background and everything.

Yeah, it's a beautiful stadium. It's everything I've dreamt it to be and even more.

**Q. Both of you guys talked about the importance of returning, especially last year losing in the regional by a run in the final game of the year. How have you guys sort of used that as motivation this year to bring you guys back to Omaha?**

JOSH RIVERA: I'd say the first thing that we kind of did was just talk about how we need to come together as a team and stay together even in the hardest moments of the game. That's the point of emphasis we've made coming into this season and coming back in August.

Even with a whole group of new guys and different faces that we're not used to seeing compared to last year, we just reiterated the fact that we need to stay together as a team and not give up on one another.

Like you said, we lost by one run. This year we've been down quite a couple of times, and we've willed our way back to winning those games. So we've been in a lot of big-time situations where thing could have gone either way, and we just stayed together and pulled it through.

Yeah, just the ability for us to stay together as a team and not really dwell on our own individual performance, but kind

of just rely on the guy that's behind you and the guy that's playing with you, so...

BT RIOPELLE: Sully and Chuck and Taylor and Kopp do an unbelievable job creating a culture that we have here to really focus and prioritize and wrapping yourself around the team, not individuals.

We have a bunch of really good individual players and talented players on this team and a lot of different types of personalities and characters and whatnot, but we're all bought into the same exact thing, and that's why we're here today.

I think that's a testament to everything that they say and preach to us every day. I thoroughly, thoroughly believe that's why we're here today versus the team that we had last year.

**Q. Josh, this kind of goes back to really BT just answered a little bit, but you have been here enough to see the internal changes in the program. Obviously the goal is to get back to this stage. Just from your view as a guy who has been in the program for four years, what's different? What really allowed this to happen over beyond just last year?**

JOSH RIVERA: Yeah, like BT said, the coaches do a tremendous job of creating that culture, that winning culture, and having that mentality to really wrap yourself in the team. That's kind of just been the biggest thing.

No matter what the internal changes have been, we've always just reiterated that point of emphasis, and that's just to wrap yourself around the team and play for each other because, you know, it's funny they say this. You can take a horse to the water, but you can't make them drink it.

They give us all the tools that they need to be successful, but it's really up to us to play for each other and really mold that mindset of winning and playing together on a daily basis in order to make it back to here.

Yeah, the coaches do a tremendous job of making that culture. Like BT said earlier again, recruiting. Recruiting guys that are good team guys and good guys to be around and really buy into that mindset is a big-team key for us.

**Q. BT, if they throw Nick Parker, what's your familiarity with him back from Coastal? As you look at Virginia, just your thoughts on the lineup?**

BT RIOPELLE: Well, Nick Parker, I was roommates with him my freshman year. Fantastic guy. A really good motor and drive and really wants to be successful.

He is a tremendous competitor. He throws four good pitches for strikes. He doesn't have the most lights-out stuff in the world, but you know what you are going to get every single day. He is going to throw strikes. He is going to go long, long in games or pitch a long time in a game.

He is going to hold runners. He has a really good pick-off move. He is going to field his position very well.

He is a guy that's going to control the game when he is out there. That's something that we know. I know and have seen firsthand. We've seen on film as well.

They have a fantastic lineup. They're leading the country or -- what was it? Top five in batting average and doubles and whatnot. They're very good contact hitting team. They can run the ball out of the yard, play clean defense, and pitch the ball very well.

Any team that you are going to have in Omaha is going to be like that, so you have to be on your best A-game and play your best baseball at the right time, and we're going to try to do that tomorrow.

**Q. You are one of the best defensive catchers in the nation, BT. You had a total of 25 put-outs in the super regional against South Carolina. Obviously, with your experience from last year, now you know what it's really going to take to step up in the big moments. Is there any routine in particular that you have in those big moments, or is it more just doing what you always do?**

BT RIOPELLE: Yeah, just doing what you always do. Something I have learned not only in baseball, but life in general is you're going to be as successful as you're going to be depending on what -- if you rely on all of your training.

I come from a military family. That's something they always preach in the military. I was luckily enough that Coastal Carolina had Kevin Schnall as a catching coach as well. He trained me very well for three years when I was there.

Sully and Kopp and everybody really kind of pushes that mindset as well. Having Mike Rivera now being on the 2017 team really be able to help me mentally in certain situations and in key moments and in big games like this, he has helped tremendously for me and a lot for me.

With all the experiences that I've had both outside of baseball and in baseball, it's something that will definitely help me this week.

**Q. BT, would you mind giving us an update with your employer, how they feel about you being in Omaha?**

BT RIOPELLE: They're excited. It gives them a reason to watch college baseball and see somebody that's going to be in there a month. They're not huge baseball guys. I know one guy played Division II baseball on the team that I'm joining.

They're super excited, and I'm very happy to be joining them in a month. Not too soon, though (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse you, guys. Thank you.

Now we'll open it up for questions to the Coach.

**Q. Sully, now that you've had some time to digest with getting back to Omaha, I know we asked you immediately once you guys won the super regional, but what does this opportunity mean to you?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: I think there's a great deal of satisfaction to see the players and the hard work they put in to get us back to this point.

I think there's been a lot of chatter about your team has not been out here since 2018, and I think the thing that I take out of it is what people sometimes fail to realize is how hard it is to get here. It is not just a group of good players that are talented, but it's the players that have to come together, stay healthy, play right at the right time.

You have to have the right culture to do this thing over and over. It's not easy. I think from my perspective, it's good to have the program back and have this opportunity, but it's -- you kind of get spoiled.

My kids thought that this was vacation every year. And there's a three- or four-year layoff, and you start realizing how difficult it is.

I think it's human nature. Even I can admit it myself. I took it for granted that this was expected every year, and all of a sudden that's taken away from you for three or four years or whatever, and then you kind of appreciate it a little bit more.

**Q. First of all, what is your pitching plan for tomorrow?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: We'll start Sproat. Then obviously we have Neely that we have stretched out in the SEC tournament, so he won't be a one-inning guy. We'll go to him when we need to.

Cade Fisher has threw are the big game against Texas Tech in the night game, so he is available. Everybody is available.

The whole key is you have to do everything you possibly can to win Game 1. Then if you are fortunate enough to win Game 1, you have to do everything you possibly can to win Game 2.

What happens is your third starter sometimes gets put in a different role with Cags because he didn't throw last weekend, obviously. But if you are fortunate enough to win the first one and you have an opportunity to win the second one, then somebody has to beat you twice.

That third starter, sometime his role changes a little bit, which, from a coaching standpoint, makes you a little nervous because you don't want to put your players in position that they might not be used to, but at the same time you have to -- you have to win with your best, and sometimes you have to roll the dice and take some chances.

We did that in '17 with Jackson Kowar, brought him out of the pen in the second game against LSU. It worked out for us. There probably would have been a lot of questions that I would have had to answer if it didn't work out, right?

Right now the plan is to do whatever we can to win tomorrow, and Sproat will obviously start.

**Q. Then my other question was, with home runs kind of up this year, this park has played a little different than maybe it did early on when it just first opened, but what's kind of the key to winning in Omaha given the park? Is it about home runs, or is it about finding gaps?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: It really depends on the wind. You get to this point -- I don't know how many games we played, 65 games or something, 66 games, whatever, you are built how you are built, right? You can't change your game.

If we're more of a home run/doubles-type team, that's who we are. If we weren't that way and we tried to be something we weren't or aren't, then that's where the real mistakes are made.

Everybody has gotten here because they pitch and play defense. Everybody is a little bit different offensively, but who you are is who you are at this point.

**Q. You are one of the few coaches here that have**

**actually gone all the way. Do you see any similarities in this team as you saw back in 2017?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: Yeah, I think any time you get to this point you see some similarities. I think having Alex Faedo be the No. 1 for us in '17 and him being able to pitch twice against TCU, which was a very difficult team to pitch against, I think they led the nation or close to it in stolen bases that year.

Then you have a guy like Brady Singer, who is sitting in the 2-hole, who is obviously having a great career at the Major League level.

You have Jackson Kowar who was a first round pick going into Game 3. You had Michael Byrne, An All-American closer.

From a pitching standpoint, yeah, I can see some similarities with that. I think this team is different than the '17 team offensively. We had some guys like India and JJ Schwartz. We've had some really good players that can hit home runs and that type of thing. But I think that team was more of a contact team. Very fundamentally sound.

We had a tremendous catcher in Mike Rivera, who is now on our staff, who was one of our best leaders we've ever had. BT kind of falls in that line.

Dalton Guthrie was our shortstop who was just absolutely nails defensively, and Josh has turned into that.

Yeah, there's some similarities, but there's some differences too. It always goes back to the pitching and playing defense up the middle for sure.

**Q. You just alluded to Mike. Obviously -- and yourself, your experience being here. I'm curious with a group that's so young or the group that hasn't been here before, excuse me, what kind of extra leadership mantle do you feel like you and your staff kind of have to take with regards to that?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: Well, I mean, you know, bottom line is they were good today at practice. I didn't see anything or feel anything that wasn't out of the normal. I don't think they got caught up in the moment.

Now, tomorrow night might be different, but it is a mature group. I think you guys that have followed us the entire year, and if you haven't, you can see the maturity level by the answers that they're giving tonight.

It's a little different feel. I was joking with Mike Rivera. This is his fourth time out here. Three as a player, and one



as a student coach.

There's a lot of other people in our group that have been here before, and there's some others that have been huge reasons why we're here that this is their first time.

No one has all the answers. It's a business-like approach, and you let your players -- that's one thing I've learned over the years. The players have to go play, and I think maybe early in my career, you ratchet things down maybe too much and maybe that doesn't allow them to play as well as they can.

Now it's a matter of letting them have as much fun as they can, especially on off days.

We regroup at 9:00 or 10:00 at night. They go to bed. They spend time with their families or girlfriends or whomever.

But you learn that over time. But I think we just do what we've been doing. We are battle-tested. There's no rah-rah speech that will be given tomorrow. They just have to go play. If we play like we're capable, then we have a real good chance to be successful. We don't, then obviously the opposite will occur.

**Q. You mentioned a little bit taking it for granted, and Payton and Finn kind of grew up on these fields because they were so young when you were coming. Having them here, what has that meant for you to be here with your family? Then, how have you grown? You just touched on it a little bit, kind of letting the guys have fun and enjoy this because, while you're still playing for a national championship, you have earned the right to be here and to have fun here.**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: The first thing is -- when I got hired by Jeremy in '07, no one gives you a handbook that says here's how do you this thing. I was never a head coach before. I was an assistant for nine years at Clemson.

Obviously there's some growing pains there. You learn. How do you learn? You learn by making mistakes, and that's one thing we preach to our players all the time.

But the thing is you hopefully learn from your mistakes. I have a folder that I still kept and started in 2010 of mistakes that I thought I made personally, and I still have it. It's in the hotel room, and I have added to it and subtracted each year that we've gone out here.

Once again, when you get to Omaha for the first time in 2010 or '11 and '12 and when we went on that run in '15, '16, '17, '18, there's no one that sits you down and says,

okay, expect this or expect X, Y, and Z. This is how you need to handle your trip out to Omaha.

You have to learn on the fly. I think our experiences by coming out a few times did help us in '17. Then it's hard to come back in '18, and we put ourselves in a position again with a different team to get back out here.

Yeah, I mean, it's like anything else in life. Everybody makes mistakes, right, but you have to learn from them.

I think I was smart enough to recognize some of the mistakes that maybe I have made from my leadership role by coming out here early on, and you just learn from them.

But as far as my kids are concerned, yeah, it's a lot of fun. Obviously I enjoyed it because they were so much younger, but now that they're older, they kind of understand how cool it is. They've got friends coming in from Gainesville that will be out here as well.

They were very, very excited about coming out here. I think before they were so young, they didn't know. They just thought, yeah, we're going to Omaha, no big deal. Now I think they think it's kind of cool now.

**Q. So you mentioned the importance of keeping a routine and saying at this point you are who you are. Now that you're back in Omaha where, like you said, you're learning on the fly, there's no playbook. What's the importance, not just for you as a coach and your coaching staff, but also for the team of consistency and staying true to yourselves?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: I don't think there's any key. I think the biggest thing, there's going to be a moment or two tomorrow night that is going to have a direct, you know, reflection on the outcome of the game.

I think that's going to be my message is when the game comes calling, that's when you're going to have to be at your best, whether we have to make a pitch, a few pitches in sequences with runners in scoring position, having your best at-bat of the night with a runner at third with less than two outs. But when those moments come, we have to be ready.

That's why we've been good recently or really the whole year. We've been pretty fundamentally sound.

When you get to this point of the year, sometimes your mistakes throughout a year, because you're just -- you have a better roster than the other team, and you can get away with mistakes, and sometimes wins kind of get overlooked and the mistakes you make because you won,

they don't get addressed as much.

This time of the year your mistakes get exposed, and we just have to limit our mistakes. It's really that simple.

**Q. With the sheer size of the outfield here, how are you thinking about your defensive alignment in the outfield, and do you anticipate giving a little bit of a different look to prioritize defense over offense in any way?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: No, I think with us, which helps us now, our field in Gainesville plays pretty big. It's 380 in the gaps and 400 to center, so the dimensions are not much different than they are here.

We feel very capable with a couple of different options. We played Wyatt in center recently. Shelnut has gotten better. We played Richie Schiekofer in left a little bit on matchups.

Still have obviously Michael Robertson that we've used late in games defensively and moved Wyatt back to left. And Ty Evans, I still think Ty has a chance to do something in this tournament that will help us. We'll probably still play some matchups.

Like I said, the dimensions of the field are not much different than what we're used to. We played in Hoover as well, so we've played in some big parks.

Like I said, I think with the dimensions at home, it's not going to make that much of a difference while we're out here.

**Q. You played summer baseball with Coach O'Connor and Coach Walter. What do you remember from that year, that summer, and what is it like to kind of be on this stage and have the two of them kind of in the field with you?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: I don't know much about that. I can't remember that long back, but from afar, they have built those two programs into perennial top programs in the country.

What Brian and his staff have done is nothing short of incredible. Obviously it's my alma mater, so I have kept very close in following them over the years.

Then what Tom has done at Wake, they've got an incredible -- not just a team but an incredible program and what they've built. It's a private school setting. That's not the easiest thing to do, what he has been able to do.

So I have the utmost respect for both of them. They're here for a reason. But I would expect that as long as Brian wants to coach, he'll have Virginia in the hunt every year.

I'm really happy for Tom because Tom is one of the really nicest guys in our business. He certainly has put together a heck of a team and a heck of a program.

**Q. I spoke with Mike Rivera, and one of the things he said was that in '15 and '16 he felt like those teams might have gotten a little bit ahead of themselves, and in '17 you kind of took it an inning at a time. How important is that in a tournament of this magnitude?**

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN: Yeah, I already got a text from one of your tweets already. You're giving me some work to do already about some chatter around the cage there during BP about how people think we're so good.

Well, my job is to get them in line, and that's something we did address the other day too. If we start getting ahead of ourselves, we'll be up here and be disappointed.

You're not going to try to tear your team down by no means or nothing like that, but we can't get ahead of ourselves and think we're this and think we're that because once that creeps in, it's not going to end the way you want to.

I appreciate the positive things that are being said about our team, especially on social media because that's all they're on 24/7, but at the same time it's my job to make them understand that we are good, but there's seven other teams here that are very, very capable of winning the last game of the year.

If we do get ahead of ourselves, then the results that we want as a collective group is not going to happen.

Yeah, we'll talk about it a little bit more, but I'm not -- we do have star power on our team. They're garnering a lot of attention, and rightfully so, so you don't want to take that away from them.

But at the same time the group needs to stay connected here and not let ourselves get ahead of ourselves and stay in the moment. There will be time to celebrate on days off if you are successful and that type of thing, but then you have to regroup again.

That will kind of be my message to them.

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