

# 2023 Men's College World Series

Thursday, June 15, 2023

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

**Wake Forest Demon Deacons**

**Coach Tom Walter**

**Brock Wilken**

**Rhett Lowder**

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll start here. Coach, give us an overview.

TOM WALTER: We're thrilled to be here, obviously. I was telling these guys the other day. I've been a head coach for 27 years, and this has always been a dream.

I'm truly glad that I haven't been here before because I wouldn't want to be here with any other team. This group of guys and the way they've come together and how much they care about each other and how hard they work has truly been special to be part of.

It all started with a conversation we had in my office with these two guys to my left and the other leverage freshmen in the spring of 2021 when we were struggling as a team, and our team culture was fractured. We made a plan.

These guys could have left for greener pastures, but they decided they wanted to build something special at Wake Forest, and they got to work doing that. That meeting starting forward from there.

This is the culmination of that work. It's a player-led organization. These two guys are at the front of that. Our team motto is "Make them feel you." They live that every day. They're dedicated Deacs. I want to thank the people of Omaha for how they've welcomed us here. I want to thank the ABCA and the folks at the College World Series, the way they've treated us since we've been here.

You hear all those stories about what a great event this is, but until you're here you really don't realize the impact and the scope of it. We've been here a couple days, a little over 24 hours, but it's been a whirlwind, and we can't wait to get on the field and play.

THE MODERATOR: Let's open it up for questions for our student-athletes.

**Q. Brock, what did it mean to break the home run record at home for you?**

BROCK WILKEN: It was pretty special. Being able to do that at home, such a career milestone. That was pretty special.

Especially getting to do it in front of our fans and with my brothers right next to me, it was a moment that I've long awaited.

**Q. This goes for both of you guys. What does it mean to finally be here now that you've been in Omaha for a few days, you just practiced on the field? What did it feel like doing that for the first time?**

THE MODERATOR: Rhett.

RHETT LOWDER: I mean, it was awesome. We didn't really get to see the field. I didn't see it until we just got here. I was up top and looked down, and it took the breath away from me.

These are the moments you take in today and tomorrow, really enjoy it. Then Saturday it's ready to go. Once we step in between those lines, like we talked about earlier in the week, we only have one goal, and that's to bring it home, so...

BROCK WILKEN: Yeah, like he said, it's really eye-opening. You don't really grasp the scope of how special this moment really is until you get to step on that field.

I took a little gaze around and took a glance at all the fans and people screaming your name. It's pretty cool. Not too many people get to do this, so it's a very special moment.

**Q. For Rhett or Brock, just having this year, historic year for both of you, and then being able to document it with those Polaroids in the dugout, what has it been**



-- what has it meant to be able to look back at that and have that documentation of this year?

THE MODERATOR: Brock.

BROCK WILKEN: Polaroids are really special. It captures an in-the-moment feeling. Not too many people get to see that from the outside perspective.

So for the world to get to see that, it's just a little glimpse of how much fun we have together in the dugout. We have some more Polaroids to put up.

RHETT LOWDER: They're awesome. Every win we collect, we hang it on the board, and it's one of the coolest things that I think we've ever done.

Every personal achievement, like Brock's a million homers, he gets one for every one of those. And then the few that I've gotten this year, I get to keep a little memory, and probably give them to my mom or something at the end of the year. It's pretty cool. Pretty cool little gift.

**Q. This is for both Rhett and Brock. Both you guys have really turned it up another level. Rhett, you're 2-0 this month. Both times you've gone over six innings pitched. Brock, I believe you got out safely in eight of your last nine, including four hits in the closing game of the super regional. As you guys have mentioned, there's something a little more special about being in Omaha. How are you guys planning to keep up that hot streak, knowing that the pressure is a little bit different on this stage?**

THE MODERATOR: Brock.

BROCK WILKEN: Yeah, being able to go out there and play with my best friends in the biggest moment, it lets me relax a little bit more. I can go be myself. I don't have to put too much pressure on myself about, oh, I have to do this in this situation. It's a little bit easier to go out there.

We're playing the same game in Omaha. It just means a little bit more. Got to go out there and continue what we've been doing all year.

RHETT LOWDER: Yeah, I was actually talking about it with some of the guys the other day. It's pretty interesting the postseason and the stats don't really matter. It's kind of just wins.

I don't think you're going to remember what each guy -- maybe a big home run or something like that, but it doesn't really matter unless you win the game. That's kind of like the cool part about the postseason. Especially here.

As long as we get the job done, it doesn't matter.

**Q. Rhett, what has the addition for Bennett Lee behind the plate done for you personally as well as the rest of your staff?**

RHETT LOWDER: Bennett is awesome. You can't ask for a better catcher back there and a guy that handles one of the better pitching staffs in the country. He came in and then wasted no time getting to know everyone. I feel like that's a big part of the catcher is getting comfortable with all the guys. He knows the differences between each pitcher and what each guy needs.

Just having him back there is one of the better gloves that I've ever seen. It's huge and gives every guy like the most confidence in the world.

**Q. For being the No. 1 team in the country for quite some time with 52 wins, it seems like Wake Forest has flown under the radar for the majority of the season, but now in Omaha there is certainly a target on your guys' backs as the overall No. 1 seed. How do you all handle that, especially being your first time here?**

RHETT LOWDER: Yeah, they said that there's the No. 1 seed curse to get here, but then we got here.

It kind of doesn't really matter the seeding anymore. Everyone is going to be good, so if we play a good, clean game, that's all we can really do.

If we don't play great, then it's going to be a tough road ahead. Everyone is pretty good here.

BROCK WILKEN: That ranking means something until you get here. Once you get here, those rankings mean nothing anymore.

It's just about who goes out, plays the loosest and has the most fun. That team is more than likely going to win.

We just have to keep playing our brand of baseball, and we'll be all right.

**Q. As you guys have said, the ranking doesn't really mean that much, but the manner in which you got it. You guys didn't lose consecutive games all year long. Talk a little bit about the importance of that consistency, especially now that you are here and now that it's all about just keeping that winning alive.**

THE MODERATOR: Both players?

**Q. Yes.**

THE MODERATOR: Rhett will start.

RHETT LOWDER: I think that's a testament of the work that we go and put into it. Our motto is playing the game and then we don't try and get too big and don't try to get too low.

If we show up every day and just play our game and do what we do well, then usually it works in our favor. You're not going to win every game, but as long as we do what we do, we have a pretty good shot of going in there and winning.

BROCK WILKEN: You're not going to win every game. So going out there and bouncing back. It's all about how you respond.

We responded really well to any adversity that's ever hit us all year. So when that adversity hits, we know how to bounce back.

That's just with the love and fun that we have with one another. So being able to do that and, like you said, not losing consecutive games, it's huge. Being able to go into this weekend, it's pretty special.

**Q. Brock, you guys hit nine home runs the other day. You had three of them. The ball seems to be flying a lot in college baseball this year for you guys. After going through batting practice, how was the ball carrying today? How do you think this ballpark is going to play for you?**

BROCK WILKEN: Yeah, it actually looks a lot bigger on TV than it is in person. It carries a good bit here.

So going out there and trying to stay within our plan and in our approach, if we do that, we'll be all right.

Hopefully we can do that this weekend week, and we'll be good.

**Q. Rhett, can you tell us a little bit about the pitching lab you guys have there at Wake Forest and how that's helped you develop as a pitcher?**

RHETT LOWDER: Yeah, the lab has been a tremendous help. Coming in I didn't really know much about anything that went on in there, and there's still -- trust me, I'm not an expert. There's a lot of stuff that's over my head.

I kind of took my time and tried to learn a lot early on when I needed to just be comfortable in there. Then each year in

the offseason more so than during the season, but the offseason I live in there.

Then just little tweaks here and there that we always find something to get better at, and I think it's a huge advantage. I don't utilize it as much in the season just because I don't want to tweak with a lot when you only have six days to get back out there.

I think it's a big part, and we have a lot of information that a lot of people don't have, so we have to utilize it.

**Q. How would you define the team motto -- I want to get it right -- "Make them feel you"?**

BROCK WILKEN: It's a motto we came up with on our fall retreat as a team, and that motto means every person that we interact with, we have to make them feel us in whatever way.

It's always in a positive and energetic way. The more we can do that, the more people we impact and leave a legacy, that means the world to us.

RHETT LOWDER: Yeah, he covered it pretty much in full. It's pretty much every person you run into, like you said, it could be your own teammate. If they're slacking in any way, you have to make them feel you. I don't know. Pretty cool.

**Q. Rhett, have you generated a ton of draft buzz this year. How do you ignore that and focus on the game itself when there is so much more surrounding you?**

RHETT LOWDER: Yeah, it's something you don't really worry about in the moment. It's a little bit easier when you have a pretty good team. All have you to do is focus on trying to go out there and win. It might be a little bit different if we weren't in the situation we're in.

It hasn't really been too hard up until this point.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, you're excused, and we'll let you all clear the room. We'll have questions for Tom. Open it up for questions for Coach Walter.

**Q. Walt, how do you handle the next 48 hours before first pitch on Saturday?**

TOM WALTER: I think it's going to be business as usual really. It's just game prep from here on in. It's making sure our guys are rested and hydrated and well-fed, of course, and making sure we get a little something out of our lift this afternoon and our team practice tomorrow.

I think it's no different than heading into a regional or a weekend series really. So it's just getting ready for Stanford at this point.

**Q. At this point you're the second longest tenured coach in Demon Deacons history, behind only George Greer. What does it mean to you that finally after so many close years, 2016, 2017, last year, what does it mean to you to finally be here and give the school the first CWS appearance since 1955?**

TOM WALTER: It means the world to me personally and our staff and our Wake community. We have such great fans and such passionate fans and loyal baseball fans. The way they turned out for us in the regional and the super regional was truly amazing.

This has been building. The community support we've had has really been building since the Miami series in March as we continued our ranking, continued to climb, and our guys continued to respond and get better as the season went on and continued to win and be so consistent.

Our crowds improved. We started out 1,800 or so against Miami, and then it was 2,400 against NC State and then 2,600 against Coastal Carolina. It just kept growing from there. It's been fun to watch how the Winston-Salem community has rallied around this team.

**Q. Is the plan for Rhett Lowder to be on Saturday, and what's the pitching plan starting-wise for the rest of the opening bracket?**

TOM WALTER: Rhett will start on Saturday. Josh Hartle will start on Sunday. Those things are for sure. Keener and Sullivan will be available out of the bullpen on Saturday, and we won't hesitate to go to one or both. Then obviously the normal bullpen pieces where Massey, Minacci, Roland, et cetera.

Hoping to get as much length as we can out of Rhett and then turn it over to our good bullpen.

**Q. Obviously Wake has had a storybook season. Did they have your expectations met at this point, or are they exceeding them at this point?**

TOM WALTER: I think they've exceeded them. Again, for us to be sitting here 52-10, I wouldn't have thought that. I thought we had a good chance to win the regular season championship. I thought we would be in the mix for that, but to do it the way we did, so convincingly, to not have lost a series all year, to not have lost back-to-back games all year is a really big testament to not only their consistency, but their toughness.

They've certainly exceeded expectations in every way, shape, or form, but the good news is I'm not even sure we've played our best baseball yet. I feel like we can play better than we've been playing.

**Q. This team has been almost historically good. The plus 59 run differential, I believe it is, is the best of all time for any College World Series team. I think ever. How do you make sure that the players are able to continue that level of performance without maybe getting too much in their own heads about the moment or about protecting that run differential or that No. 1 seed?**

TOM WALTER: We haven't -- there have been a couple of times this year where I felt like we've played not to lose. I felt like that opening game at Pittsburgh we played a little tight. We had some balls hit right at people.

We got tested along the way, and we had some good teachable moments so that we could avoid this later in the season. I told them that Pittsburgh after we lost that first game that I was glad that happened because it might happen in the super regional. You might be at a super regional and lose the first game and need to win the next two and how you respond is everything.

Whether it's a tough loss that you have to respond for or if you have given up a four spot, how you respond is everything. Our team has handled those situations really well.

I just don't see how this week is going to be any different for those guys.

**Q. Coach, you played with Coach O'Connor and Coach O'Sullivan for a summer in Harrisonburg. What do you remember from that summer, and what is it like to kind of be on the same stage with them as you chase your first national title?**

TOM WALTER: Well, it's just awesome. Until now I was the only coach of the three who hadn't gotten to Omaha and the only coach of the three that still doesn't have a national championship under their belt. So I still have some work to do to catch those two guys, but it's really special to be here with them.

I remember that summer of 1990 very fondly at the L&S Diner in Harrisonburg, Virginia. We had a good summer.

**Q. Tom, you had a chance to watch batting practice, and Brock gave his answer on how the ball was playing and carrying. Your thoughts on that? Also,**



**your thoughts on your team on grass and dirt instead of on turf.**

TOM WALTER: So I thought it carried a little better than I expected it to today, but we still have to, in general, live lower than we've been living. We certainly can't expect some of the home runs we've hit at our ballpark or other ballparks in the ACC.

If you look across our league, there's probably only one or two pitchers parks in the whole league. It's mostly hitters parks in our league. It's not just our ballpark that plays a little smaller in our league.

We definitely have to lower our ball flight in general and change our pitch plan a little bit too, but as far as grass and dirt, we handled that well in the conference tournament. Our defense was good.

We struggled early with it early in the year at Coastal Carolina and then at Duke our defense wasn't great, but really since then, our defense on the natural surface has been really good.

**Q. In terms of field conditions, especially with the longer alleys than what you have at the Couch, does that affect at all how you utilize Lucas Costello or Adam Cecere in left?**

TOM WALTER: That certainly complicates that decision. Normally we would make a totally offensive decision there, who was the better pitching matchup between those two guys.

With this ballpark, to your point, if it's close, we'll probably go with defense. Yeah, definitely impacts the decision between those two for sure.

**Q. Both super regional games were blow-outs. How did you kind of not let your guys get too high knowing it gets a lot harder once you get to Omaha?**

TOM WALTER: Again, the first game against Alabama was certainly no blow-out. They gave us all we could handle, and it was a good game that could have went either way. It came down to the last pitch of the game.

Again, that second game for the first three, four innings of that game, it certainly didn't feel like a blow-out. We were able to extend the lead, but at our ballpark when the wind is blowing out like that, even when it's 10-3, you don't feel super comfortable.

We're battle-tested. We've been through our league. We've been through the conference tournament, the

regional, and now. For our guys, again, they -- and they said it both really well. They do a good job of kind of staying on us.

We know, we feel like if we do our thing, we're going to be in really good shape and be who we are. As we like to say, just play normal. Just go out there and do what we've done all year.

**Q. You have been surrounded recently by the tradition and the history of baseball. How does that impact you in terms of carrying a banner for Wake Forest with the people like Gene Hooks around? What impact is that?**

TOM WALTER: Thanks for asking that question, Skip, because I'm glad I have a chance to talk about Dr. Hooks and this program. It dates back to that '55 National Championship team.

Billy Ray Barnes and Jack McGinley and those guys that are still with us, they're loyal supporters. They come out to our games. We see those guys all the time. Nobody is more fired for us and our success than they are.

Then Gene Hooks, he was out there with us on Sunday -- or Saturday, sorry -- no, Sunday when we clinched against Alabama. Dr. Hooks was there. He was down on the field. He had the Omaha sign in his lap, and nobody was happier than he was for our accomplishments.

We're just really proud to be able to represent the legacy that is Wake Forest baseball. It runs deep, and it runs wide. We're just proud to be here on their behalf.

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