

2023 Men's College World Series

Thursday, June 15, 2023
Omaha, Nebraska, USA

LSU Tigers

Coach Jay Johnson

Dylan Crews

Thatcher Hurd

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the LSU portion of our news conference. We'll start with a comment from Jay and have questions for the players. Jay, congratulations coming back. Give us an overview.

JAY JOHNSON: Very proud of our team this year. Obviously a great collection of talent, but they became a team. We were very deliberate in how we did that. We've had great player leadership.

To have the expectations on them to be the No. 1 team in the country preseason, hold that for 11 or 12 weeks and not have a losing week the entire season speaks to their consistency and their talent.

I believe we're playing the best baseball that we have all year right now, and very proud of being here. With that being said, we're highly motivated to continue our streak of our best baseball right now. Can't wait to get on the field. Very proud and very honored to bring this group of players to Omaha.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to start with questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For Dylan and for Thatcher. You just heard your coach say it, and we've all seen it. Why do you think you're playing your best baseball right now?

DYLAN CREWS: We had a little team meeting right after the SEC tournament and got together and we just said five games. Just give us five games to get here and play your best baseball that you possibly can, forget about all the stuff that happened in the season. Just focus on the present right now. Give us five games to get here, and I think everything will take care of itself as soon as we get

here.

We have to keep this momentum forward. Like I said, I think it's just going to take care of itself as soon as we start playing.

THATCHER HURD: Just what Dylan said. I think that meeting was huge for us. A lot of momentum from that. Just something Coach said all year is just surrendering yourself to the result. It's all about the process and doing whatever we need to do to win.

Q. This question is going to be for Thatcher. How does it feel to be with a new program this year and just all the alignments with your mechanics that you adjusted with UCLA last year?

THATCHER HURD: I love being an LSU Tiger. I love our coaches. Love the teammates to death. Some of my closest friends. It's been a great season we've had. I've loved it. I feel like I've grown a lot from it.

In terms of the adjustments, just sticking to my process every day and staying true to that. Some results following, and then we're in a good spot now.

Q. How rewarding has it been for you, Thatcher, to deal with some of the ups and downs you had earlier in the season to fight your way back into having a prominent role again and to be a part of getting this team to this stage?

THATCHER HURD: Yeah, I think it's been rewarding. With failure, success, I stayed true to my process every day with my work, and it feels good to contribute to the team.

Obviously when you're going out there and you don't feel like you're contributing and letting some of your guys down, it's the worst feeling in the world. So it feels really good to kind of contribute, and I just want to help us win.

Q. You guys mentioned that you guys held a team meeting after the SEC tournament, and the result has been a five-game winning streak. However, all of those



games were in Baton Rouge. This is obviously not Baton Rouge. How are you guys planning on keeping that alive maybe with a little bit less of the familiarity that you have from playing at home?

THE MODERATOR: Dylan, you start.

DYLAN CREWS: Just sticking to our game really. I think we're in a very good spot right now. Like I said, the momentum is tremendous in this team right now. I think everything is just kind of clicking for us right now.

Bullpen is doing really well. Starting pitching has just been dominant. Our approaches have been great in the batter's box.

Really just sticking to our plan, no matter change of the field, change of the atmosphere. Just sticking to our plan, that's it.

THATCHER HURD: I think now more than ever it's all about just staying true to ourselves, and what's got us here. I think that Dylan said it perfectly.

Q. You're familiar with the team you're playing right off the bat. What is it like to play a team, yet again, that you are very familiar with that also has a really good pitching staff?

THE MODERATOR: Thatcher, you start.

THATCHER HURD: A lot of the SEC teams, we see them in conference and the SEC tournament, saw them in the postseason. It's just about playing our baseball and staying true to what we know.

DYLAN CREWS: A very good team. I have total respect for them. Great program. Definitely know how to win. We have to play our best baseball for this game. Great pitching staff.

We saw them early in the year, so kind of have an idea going into this game.

But, yeah, like I said, we have to play our best baseball right now.

Q. If we can start with Dylan, obviously Skenes won the Dick Howser today. I wonder what do you appreciate most about him? I imagine it's probably different being in different parts in your career?

DYLAN CREWS: Yeah. He has had a tremendous impact on my career. Just the way he goes about himself every single day, his preparation. From the first day he walked

into the locker room, he has been the same ever since up to this point. That's what I respect about him.

He goes about himself like a Big Leaguer does, and if not probably way better. So I have definitely taken notes of that. Just try to almost imitate him in every way possible because he has had a lot of success this year.

THATCHER HURD: I think with Paul, he has helped me out I think probably more than he knows. I live with him, and we talk all the time about baseball mindset. I just try to learn from him every day. It's really special to be around him.

Same with Dylan. Right next to him in the locker and I live with Paul. I'm just super thankful I've got to share the field with those guys all year, and it's special. Just trying to soak it in, you know.

Q. Dylan, how does it feel to just not just be in Omaha, you are one of the three finalists right now for the Golden Spikes Award. Even what lies ahead towards the middle of July, what are you just looking forward to taking the field on Friday night?

DYLAN CREWS: Man, it's something that I've wanted since I was a freshman walking into the locker room. It's just something that I have thought about every single day leading up to this point.

I want to go here and experience all this, being able to play baseball -- or playoff baseball at the Box was something, but being able to play here is something else.

The crowds are going to double, triple. The atmosphere is going to be electric. You know, being able to play here is pretty awesome.

The Old Spice thing, it's awesome, but we have a job here to do. And, yeah, that's the only thing on my mind right now.

Q. This would be for Coach and for Dylan.

THE MODERATOR: We're going with the players first.

Q. Dylan, can you talk about, I guess, the -- it seems like a common theme this year has been guys accepting their roles and thriving in those environments. Thatcher is a great example. Josh Pearson. Just can you talk about the willingness of this team and just guys being able to adapt to their roles pretty consistently?

DYLAN CREWS: I think it all starts with the older guys

really. Some of our older guys didn't start early in the year, so having them being able to come in and produce the way they did really just kind of moved on to the younger guys.

They've done a tremendous job. Like Pearson and Paxton sometimes. And then just other guys really at any point. I have faith in all the guys. Everybody else does.

It doesn't matter who you are, at any moment, any spot in the lineup, I think they're going to do a good job of staying present, staying locked in, and producing.

Q. This one is for both the players. LSU all year has been very good at a whole ton of things. The team is borderline top 10 in walks and hits per inning. They're a fantastic hitting team. I believe you lead the nation in hits. Dylan as a hitter and then Thatcher as a pitcher, what does it mean to you guys that the other side of the ball is always constantly able to produce and give you some support?

DYLAN CREWS: Yeah, it's awesome. It's a good feeling when the pitchers are doing their job and getting the lineup over -- or flipping to the other side to have the lineup do what it does best. Just going up there and hitting.

We have a great offensive approach each and every day, sticking to our plan. Just commanding the line of scrimmage in baseball is what we call it. I think we do that, good things will happen for both sides of the playing field.

THATCHER HURD: I think just like both sides of the ball, picking each other up. I think that's a huge component of our team.

I know when I get the ball or anyone else gets the ball that we're going to score. As a staff we're just looking to pick up the offense, maybe to put up a zero that inning. That's a huge component of our team.

Q. Dylan, I know that hitting in this ballpark, it's a little different here. The foul territory is bigger. I'm just wondering how that adjusts your game plan as a hitter.

A. As a hitter, yeah. Really it stays the same. Sticking to the approach. Foul territory gets a little bigger, but the field stays the same really.

So we just stick to our approach really. I think everything will kind of just take care of itself. (Indiscernible) approach, commanding the strike zone. Good things will happen on both sides of the ball.

Q. Your answer to my Skenes question triggered something. Did you feel like you had a partner in

crime when he showed up on campus, someone else that could shoulder the burden along with you as the face of this program?

DYLAN CREWS: Yeah. I mean, didn't really view myself as the face of the program. Just doing my thing every day. But, yeah, just having somebody to kind of just lead the team. Not just on the hitter side, but on the pitching side too. Having somebody.

Last year we had older guys being able to kind of be the role model, the leaders of the team. Paul has really stepped up in being able to be the leader for the younger guys.

It's been tremendous. Guys have been looking up to him and kind of following him and seeing how the way he goes about himself. So it's been good.

Q. Thatcher, I know when you first came here, you wanted the No. 25, and then you saw that Hayden Travinski had it. Can you talk to me, saying how did your relationship with him start, and what is it like now?

THATCHER HURD: Yeah, I love Hayden. He was one of the first guys I met. When I came here, I didn't know anyone. He was one of the first guys I met. We would go out and get food together and hang out.

It just felt really cool to be welcomed by him. He is such a great clubhouse guy. He is a leader. To see what he does on the field every day, I couldn't be happier for him, and no one deserves it more considering the adversity he has gone through and just persistence and doing what he does. I love that guy.

Q. (Indiscernible) Outback, then I saw a bunch of pictures. It's bunch of you guys that go or different groups of guys that go. What does that do as far as team bonding? Are there other places that everybody kind of goes and groups up and kind of shares a meal together?

THATCHER HURD: Yeah, for sure. That's one of the most fun parts of college and being on a team I think is going out to eat and hanging out.

Yeah, we love each other. We love to hang out. We go out to eat and it's the pitchers, and it's a lot of fun.

Q. (Off microphone.)

DYLAN CREWS: Not really. We're always around each other every day at the field, so I don't know. We used to do



that a lot in the fall really. We used to go out to the nutrition center, all of us, the whole team, and just have team dinners, team lunches, whatever it was.

I think that helps a lot. I think that's why we're so close and why we gel so good. It's been great.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. You're excused, and we'll open it up here for questions for the coach.

Q. It's been a few years since this program has been back here. How much does it speak to the expectations in Baton Rouge for this program, that though it's been a few years, it's talked about like it's been ages since you have been back here?

JAY JOHNSON: I never really thought of it in terms of how long it's been for LSU. This is my favorite place in the world, and this program has had as good a history as any program in college baseball of being here.

I think in accepting the job I really wanted this group of players to play here. The guy sitting to my left, he was part of me deciding to come here, to get an opportunity to coach him at LSU for two years.

They've done everything that we've asked them to do for 700-plus days. When we took the field last weekend, there was a really solid peace of mind that these guys were going to do it. To see the fans get behind them, they're going to get behind LSU no matter what, but this is a really easy group to get behind, how hard they play, how much they care, how invested they are in the program.

That's kind of more where my thoughts were.

Q. I think last week you said you can't control your performance unless you control yourself. I wonder how much that applies to you because your players say that you are not a shouter and a screamer when you coach them. You are pretty much level with them.

JAY JOHNSON: I think in leadership you can talk about it the way you want them to do it or you can talk about it and try to show them. Certainly not perfect in that regard. Like I'll use Thatcher as an example. His competitiveness is his best quality. A lot of our conversations are never turning your best quality against you.

And that's one I can relate to. As a younger coach maybe getting a little more overly intense, for lack of a better word. As I've grown in this role and leadership, I've always believed it's better to show them the way than to tell them the way, and you get more buy-in when you tell them if you show it to them.

Q. When you were growing up, when did baseball really hook you, and when did you become just so in love with the sport? And do you have any humorous thoughts, your family, friends: Hey, Jay, let's go do this. Oh, he is watching baseball.

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, relative to Omaha and the College World Series, I grew up in a small town, and playing Major League Baseball might as well have been going to the moon. You know what I mean?

When you watch the College World Series, whether it was LSU, Texas, Stanford, that kind of seemed like a realistic goal. And so that was probably the first thought. Football was my first love. No question about that. But I realized really quickly very good high school player; there wasn't many 5'7", 165-pound running backs running around the SEC or the Pac-12 or that sort of thing.

This was the way it was going to be. I got to play college baseball. Then becoming a coach was really the only option. I'm addicted to winning. I'm addicted to developing programs and helping players achieve their goals. It was just the route that it was going to be.

It's really awesome to be able to do it at LSU. I view our university, our program, as the pinnacle of the sport.

Q. When you're recruiting Paul -- or he is in the transfer portal and coming from Air Force, his fastball is 93, 94 miles an hour when he was there against Mountain West competition. How did his fastball jump the way that it did, 5 miles an hour upward, and how has he been able to be even better against better competition this year?

JAY JOHNSON: That's a great question. I think there's a lot of value in simplicity, I think, and he's a great two-way player. This dude was launching home runs in fall baseball. I mean, as impressive as it gets.

He definitely could make an impact. Had I just made him a position player, he would have 20 home runs right now and potentially be hitting fifth or sixth for our team.

Well, we had a really deliberate plan on the pitching side of it. We got him started right when he got to campus with Coach Wes Johnson to develop his slider. There were some things that we needed to do.

So we started to do that early. We shut him down earlier in the fall to give him more ramp-up time for the season. Then it wasn't intentional, but I think kind of removing the two-way player thing, I started to see his ability to recover

physically better. You're minimizing the rotations because the rotation of a pitching delivery, rotation of a hitting swing, he is right-handed in both, it's very similar.

I feel like last year he was catching. He was swinging a bat. He was running the bases. He was potentially playing first base at times. Then, also, you know, going six or seven innings in a league that's not very easy to pitch in. I know that firsthand.

I think kind of the simplicity of it, and then you take someone that is so driven, that says so disciplined, and get them on track with one thing. What does Friday to Friday look like? Then he has absolutely mastered that.

When you are talking about recovery, when you are talking about development, velocity improvement, improving his secondary pitches, he has been able to go all-in on those things. I think that's probably the reasoning.

Q. This is kind of more an off-the-field question, but this team has a lot of goofiness to it, like the Hayden Travinski shirt, the Jobu statue. As a coach, what's it like to see these fun things that kind of bring your team together? I was talking to Hayden. He said he thinks more successful teams have goofy clubhouses.

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, I won't take any credit for the goofiness. That's for sure.

No, I really want players to be themselves, but to become a team. I think that's been a big part of why I think this has worked, is there was talented players here that were going to be coming into their own; that we tried to give them a development template, but for them to develop, they have to be at the field. For them to develop as a team, they have to be together.

So part of that they have to take ownership in. So if you let them be themselves, obviously within reason, with class and character and all those types of things, I've always just found the buy-in goes up tremendously.

Yeah, as far as Travinski T-shirt and all that, we're good. They can -- as long as it's appropriate, I'm good with it.

Q. I'm wondering if you can expand on, when I asked Dylan earlier, just about your team being able to kind of adapt different roles. Gavin Guidry was probably looking at infield and then certainly was a pitcher. Tre' was in left field a good part of the year. Can you just speak on that mentality as a whole from the players, and then is there a particular player that maybe at the beginning of the year you thought had a role and then he has kind of evolved into a different one for you

guys that you are really proud of?

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, I'm very proud of all of that. I mean, we have a saying that I will always place the needs of the team above my own.

Going into August when they were all going to show up, a lot was made of the returning players, and rightfully so. Dylan is coming back. Tre' Morgan is coming back. Jordan Thompson is coming back.

So we had a nice core to start out with that had some successful playing experience. They won 40 games and finished in the top four in the SEC last year.

Then you had this high school recruiting class, number one class in the country: Paxton Kling, Chase Shores, Jared Jones, Brady Neal, Gavin Guidry. All these guys that are going to carry the torch of this thing after this year is over.

Well, then you go in the transfer portal, and it's Paul Skenes, Tommy White, Christian Little, Thatcher Hurd, Ben Nippolt.

So that's an amazing collection of talent, but in the first meeting I said that doesn't make us a team. Developing them as people, developing them as teammates, not just accepting their role, but embracing it, and communicating it might look different in game 1 than game 10, it might look different in game 20, game 50, and then in Omaha.

That's been the case. There are so many good examples of that. Cade Beloso was probably in line to get a bunch more at-bats early, but Tommy hurt his shoulder, so he couldn't play defense for a number of games. That really pinched him into the DH role. Cade got pushed out a little bit.

Hayden Travinski didn't have a lot of at-bats the first 25, 30 games of the year. There's not a better hitter in college baseball right now than him.

Josh Pearson was a starter all year last year. Kind of got beat out at the beginning of the year. Yet, when it's been winning time, that's the guy I want in the box.

So they've all been ready to make their contribution because they made it about the team rather than themselves. I can't speak higher than that because I think it's incredibly uncommon nowadays.

Q. You talked before, of course, about Paul Skenes' impact on this team. The way that younger players have been able to now watch him over the last year, do you think, even though he was only here for 11 months



or so, that there is going to be a lasting effect on this program because he was in it at some point?

JAY JOHNSON: Yes, and I would say the exact same thing for Dylan. This happened within a week's time.

I had both of them in my office about different things. The comment came up from both of them, hey, what can we help you do to keep pushing this forward? Like, what's happening right now.

It was right around the middle, beginning of the SEC. We just won at Texas A&M, just beaten Arkansas, just beaten Tennessee. Going through that meat grinder of a schedule.

I'm thinking about these guys have their entire life in front of them. They're going to make a lot of money and play in the Major Leagues, be All-Stars, win batting titles, Cy Young, potential Hall of Famers. That's what's in front of them. Yet, their mind is wrapped up around this when they're not going to be here. They are the best examples of that.

The fact that they even have the awareness to bring it up, there's no question about it. I don't think there's another Paul Skenes in our locker room, and I don't want anybody to try to be Paul Skenes, but I want them to take the things that he has shown and then emulate them the best way that they can to pay forward that contribution that they got from him.

I think that's totally going to happen.

Q. Now with a whole year with the strength coach almost, Derek Groomer, how is his style of training different from maybe what this team had before, and what have you seen specifically out of him that has impacted the players this year?

JAY JOHNSON: He is very knowledgeable, and that created buy-in immediately. He is very detailed in the individual planning per player I think is the hook. It's applicability to what we need them to do on the field. Whether it's an infielder being able to play lower, is that a lower half strength issue or hip mobility issue? Hey, Derek, this is what we need this guy to be able to do. And then to write the program of what they're doing in the weight room to get it and to get the player there, he is exceptional at that.

So I think his ability to get buy-in from the player and then execute a plan that's going to translate on the field to baseball is where he has made the biggest impact.

Q. You had some bullpen issues in the middle of the season. Who has kind of stepped up for that role as tournament play has gone on?

JAY JOHNSON: Yeah, I think following the SEC tournament, the regional, the super regional, the last regular season weekend at Georgia, those guys have been outstanding. I think there's a number of guys that have made a positive contribution to the point where I really don't want to leave anybody out.

We had a lightning delay in Game 2 or the winner's bracket game of the regional, and Thatcher came in and gave us five innings from the fourth to the eighth. You don't necessarily look at him as a bullpen guy, but he closed out a couple of really big SEC wins and that five innings, 13 strike-out performance against Oregon State is as good as you can do.

Right behind him is Gavin Guidry, and for me he is the star of the show with that. He is a freshman. He was a two-way player, but his poise, his confidence, his ability to block out what's going on around him and execute is second to none.

Then we've really, really leaned on Riley Cooper. Though he started Game 3 of the regional, he came in in a high-leverage situation in the super regional and got us three really good innings. I would guess in the last three years there's not too many people with multiple super regional wins under their belt. Riley has done that.

Then Gavin came in to close it out again. There's guys kind of just waiting in the wings that I think are in a really good spot too. Whether it be Javen Coleman, Blake Money got us an inning and a third in the super regional last week. Nate Ackenhausen, huge piece of our team. When he pitches, we win typically.

I think you could call it struggle. I would just call it, like, life in the SEC. Nobody played a schedule like we did, and it wasn't going to be perfect no matter how good these guys are. I'm just proud of them for adjusting their preparation, getting through that difficulty, and just getting back to executing.

Q. The guys mentioned that post-SEC tournament meeting. Thematically, what would you say was the nugget that everybody got out of it pushing forward?

JAY JOHNSON: We just needed a little bit of a reset. I intentionally did not come down on them or crush them when we lost back-to-back series because I trusted the talent enough, I trusted the work enough, I trusted the approach enough.

I looked at it as Auburn is a national seed, and we're on the road, and we were ahead in one of those games. If one inning goes a little bit different, we win that series too.

Then, you know, we had that tough loss against Mississippi State. Well, in Saturday of that game we were ahead in the eighth inning also. Obviously had the big bullpen lead.

It was a good time to reset, address, and it was a very simplistic message. Right head, right heart; we're five wins away from the College World Series. Right head, right heart; we are five wins from there from a National Championship. We absolutely can do this. Let's get back in the preparation. Let's get back in character, and we're going for it. It was just as simple as that.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports