

2023 Men's College World Series

Tuesday, June 20, 2023

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

LSU Tigers

Coach Jay Johnson

Nate Ackenhausen

Riley Cooper

Dylan Crews

Postgame Press Conference



LSU - 5, Tennessee - 0

COACH JOHNSON: Great game. Great night for our program. It starts and ends on the mound, winning baseball. And the two big left-handers here executed at a really, really high level.

Proud of Nate. Maybe a surprise, from a name, from a starter but not a surprise performance. Every game he's pitched in this year I think we've only lost one time when he's pitched the entire year. I look for those things. He did a great job executing.

And Riley at this point is probably one of the most experienced pitchers in pitching in this ballpark and having success. Did his deal.

Great performance by Dylan at the top of the lineup. We did just enough in my opinion one of the two best pitching staffs in college baseball. To beat them four times this year is a great accomplishment for us because the respect that I have for Tony and how well they recruit and the Tennessee program. So wrap that one up and on to tomorrow.

Q. Dylan, you were 0-for-3 yesterday, just barely missed out had on a homer earlier in this game. How did it feel to finally get that home run in the eighth inning?

DYLAN CREWS: Felt good. The wind was pushing some balls back into play today. But it was good to kind of just get one out at the right moment and put us up a couple more runs in the be ninth. Just extend the lead.

It felt good. Just a new day and went out there and do what I do.

Q. Nate, you told me the other day that you were here watching your friend David pitch for Oklahoma last year. So what was kind of your reaction today when you got the start on the mound at the College World Series?

NATE ACKENHAUSEN: It was cool. That's about it. Simple, simple.

I can't remember what he did but he dominated his. So I had to at least dominate today or he would have the upper hand, brag about it. I think he punched out about 15.

Q. Nate, I know you and Riley are roommates. What do you guys do when you have time off from baseball?

NATE ACKENHAUSEN: Nothing. Simple. Literally nothing.

RILEY COOPER: Maybe watch a movie. That's about it.

Q. Talk us through, obviously you guys go nine innings and shut them out. It's a very good offense you faced tonight. Just, I guess, start with Nate. And, Riley, just what was working for you guys on the mound tonight?

NATE ACKENHAUSEN: The changeup was really working for me. I know with the wind blowing in and how hard it is to hit a ball out of here. On a normal day I was just, like, I get a 2-0 changeup call and I'd just throw it down the middle and say, let them put it in play, because you've seen some balls hit today that were about 108 off the bat and they were kind of at the warning track. I just pitched with confidence. I had confidence in my defense among me.

RILEY COOPER: The big park played in my confidence just to be able to fill up the zone, trust my pitches with weak contact. Even if they got into it it's really hard to hit it out of the park. I was throwing all four pitches and just

trust my defense.

Q. Riley, you faced a tough situation there with the bases loaded and you got that weak ground-out to first. What was going through your mind and what was your game plan in that moment?

RILEY COOPER: Never a doubt, really. I knew I could get out of it. Been in that situation before. And I just know to fill up the zone and trust my defense behind me. That's what happened and I got out of it.

Q. Walked into a little bit of a jam in the fifth and seventh inning. Could you speak to Alex Milazzo, to me the play of the game, blocked a ball in the dirt for both of you that saved a run. Talk about trust, maybe the trust in him and Travinski behind the plate, but how huge is it to have those guys as your backstop?

NATE ACKENHAUSEN: It feels good to have somebody back there you can trust. Throw an 0-2, pitch you don't want to leave it too over the plate so sometimes you have to bounce it. With both of them back there I have trust in them.

RILEY COOPER: It's just a confidence thing. When I need to get the ball down in the zone, I just trust that if I spike it, he's a wall back there, or both of them is a wall. So I can execute pitches better.

Q. Nate, when did you exactly find out you were starting today and what was your reaction?

NATE ACKENHAUSEN: Coach texted me at 8:56. I didn't respond until 11:10. I was sleeping in a little bit. I think I just texted him, "I'll give it all I got."

COACH JOHNSON: I can confirm the time lapse. (Laughter).

Q. Dylan, what was the composure you had at the plate? 2-for-4 day, let alone leading off the game with a walk that sparked Beloso's RBI single for the first run of the game?

DYLAN CREWS: I was seeing the ball pretty good today. It was a great pitcher on the mound today. He's going to be a big leaguer for a long time, I believe, in the future.

But I mean I had confidence in myself and I was going up there and giving it my best shot. And just to draw the walk, I have confidence in all the guys behind me. So I feel like if I get on base those guys are going to score me at any point.

So just my mental mindset thing is just going up there and give it my best shot and it's a new at-bat every single time.

Q. Nate, I'm aware you were a starter at Eugene College back in Oklahoma. How much does that prepare you for this moment right now?

NATE ACKENHAUSEN: It prepared me a lot. My first year I came out of the pen which was the first time in my career. High school I started all four years. Got to junior college and we had three pitchers topping out at a hundred and they all started, so there's me.

So I learned how to pitch out of the stretch. The second year I took over because they all left, got picked up or drafted. And that really helped me figure out how to throw even a changeup. I didn't throw a changeup in high school. So really the last year helped me with the changeup and I'd say today the changeup is probably what helped me the most.

Q. Dylan, towards the end of this game you feel like you found a little bit of something offensively. Looked like you guys were able to kind of get a little bit more consistency at the plate, I guess.

DYLAN CREWS: Yeah, I think all around we had good at-bats really. Sticking to our plan. We weren't really chasing as much, but I think towards the end we were definitely stringing some good ABs together and were able to scratch a few more runs. So that was definitely good. And helped these guys out a lot.

Q. I know you said that Nate pitches in a lot of games that you guys win in. But what else went into giving him the start today; were there ever any thoughts about taking him out earlier?

COACH JOHNSON: Trust in the competitor. This is a big deal, if you haven't been here before. I think our team's handled it great, honestly. And I knew he would handle it well. I knew he would throw strikes.

Saw some things in the matchup that I liked. Saw some things in previous games here just throughout the tournament that I liked that I thought he could be effective.

The thought really was three innings, 60 pitches, my initial target was 12 hitters. And he obviously accomplished a lot more than that.

Q. You said three innings, 60 pitches. Obviously you're in the fifth he's still going and you have a leverage situation. You went out to the mound and decided to keep him in the game. What went into the

call there and what did you tell him in that moment?

COACH JOHNSON: I wanted to check on him in terms of the fatigue level and heartbeat level. As you can see he doesn't get too wound up or rattled over anything. And just felt like he could make a pitch to, I believe, Ensley was up at that time.

And he got him off of the barrel with a fly ball to right field. And just trust, trust level. Felt like he had enough in the tank. He was throwing well.

And another big thing, he went out and got another full inning after that. And that really shortened the game which when you're in this side of the bracket you need that. And if you're going to have a chance to do something, you need a performance like Nate gave us tonight. Really proud of him.

Q. In February, you said the guys that were playing in March need to be different than the guys playing in June. You just alluded to it. How big is it to have somebody step up into a role that maybe they hadn't previously shown they could do something?

COACH JOHNSON: It's really big. And this tournament, you always find one or two of those. I just don't see it as like a Cinderella thing because he's one of the most important parts of our pitching staff.

He was down with a sore shoulder the beginning of conference, and that was right through Arkansas, Tennessee. I did not feel very comfortable about that because he was a huge part of it. Then there was a little bit of working his way back.

The pitchability lended you to believe he could start. I think it was -- a key outing was when we extended him at the SEC Tournament against South Carolina, and we got him to 63 or 64 pitches. Had a good outing in a Regional against Oregon State.

And then fortunately in the Super Regional we won in two games, but he was kind of that piece that was going to be a part of a game three if we needed it.

So super job tonight. And maybe that time off allowed him to do what he did tonight.

Q. Do you feel like the offense started to find itself a little bit here at the end of this game I guess after a couple of rough innings?

COACH JOHNSON: Yeah, you know, it's tough. These guys have played so good for so many games this season

and set a standard of scoring runs and hits and on-base percentage and slugging, that when you run into this park, with the wind blowing in, shadows, and then Drew Beam -- you heard the best hitter in baseball call him a Major Leaguer -- and that staff we saw last night that we'll see next -- it's not going to be easy; you'll have to win 5-0. And the game changes a little bit in that regard.

I thought they kept with it. I didn't feel like we got discouraged or stopped competing. It was just enough. The second run was big where we got the lead-off double by Tre'. Gavin laid a nice drag to move him over, they threw it away, gave us a little bit of breathing room. Strung together some good at-bats.

Again, that's off Seth Halvorsen, who's throwing 100 miles an hour. You're not going to score 10 in this environment.

I'm proud of the way we kind of grinded it out. And the two pitchers did a great job to make that just enough.

Q. At first you had Pearson and Money in the pen. What made you change your mind and go with Cooper?

COACH JOHNSON: I didn't have Pearson in the pen because he was playing left field. That's okay.

Blake was throwing the ball really well. He was definitely part of the plan tonight. I think I didn't feel like they were seeing Nate well. And I think Riley is about as comparable and close to Nate as possible.

And I wanted to stay with that look because they were in between. And when you're pressing a little bit, when you're in an elimination game and you're trying to chase runs late, he's the type of a pitcher if you give him an inch he'll take a mile. And he did what he did tonight.

Q. Does Tre' Morgan, what's he been to this team over the last few weeks?

COACH JOHNSON: Phenomenal, playing his best ball. I know he's had a great career, so I don't want to minimize the impact. But he's playing his best baseball right now.

He's just one of those guys when you need him the most you get the most. He's one of those guys you could throw on a big league diamond right now, full stadium, and he'll go out there and give you three or four quality at-bats.

That's what he's doing for us, obviously playing exceptional first base. But the NCAA Tournament he's been spectacular.

Q. You alluded to this, of course, the losers' bracket, the number of games you have to have guys go deep. Now that Nate has done that and ate up so many innings, how do you feel about what you have left with the pitching staff the next few days when you go up against Wake Forest?

COACH JOHNSON: I feel great about it. The reason I feel great about it is because of the offense that I just alluded to, because Paul has been Paul and so astronomically out of this world good -- we've had a pretty good year on the mound, but because of some injuries and because of two speed bumps in the best conference in the country, there's this thought that we don't have a great pitching staff.

I think we have a great pitching staff. We have plenty of guys to execute in a way that can give us a chance to be successful. I feel great about it.

Q. What do you take away from that first game against Wake that you might be able to capitalize on tomorrow?

COACH JOHNSON: They're legit. Going to have to go back and look at it again. When I saw this side of the bracket, like -- and all eight teams here are amazing; I said that before the tournament.

The three times I've been here, this is the best field. There's the most good players and good pitchers of the times I've been in the College World Series.

They're certainly part of that. I thought Hartle threw an outstanding game. I thought their pen was good. They have more guys that they can go to. Offense, they have their way. And they do their thing really, really well.

So wouldn't want to be playing anybody else. I'd feel like the four best teams in the country are the four best teams still playing in Omaha right now.

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