

# 2024 Men's College World Series

Thursday, June 13, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

**Virginia Cavaliers**

**Coach Brian O'Connor**

**Evan Blanco**

**Henry Ford**

**Griff O'Ferrall**

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes, please.

**Q. Evan, do you approach a start in the College World Series differently than you would a regular season start or ACC tournament or regional or super regional, or do you try to do everything the same?**

EVAN BLANCO: I wouldn't say that I would approach it any differently. I've kind of followed the same routine and pattern throughout the whole year. The only thing that's different is the team that we're playing.

**Q. Guys, you have the first practice out of the way in the big ballpark. Tell me a little bit about the ballpark, how it's playing right now. Then how do you keep a sense of normalcy when you show up to play on this big stage? Starting with Evan.**

EVAN BLANCO: This ballpark is amazing. I'm super thankful to be back. It's such a cool atmosphere, cool environment. The practice was amazing. The ball was flying today a little bit. A few home runs in BP. I'll let them take it over.

HENRY FORD: Yeah, obviously beautiful ballpark. Soaking it in, enjoying it. Very similar dimensions to the Dish. So I felt really comfortable out there. Like you said, ball was flying a little bit. It was a lot of fun.

GRIFF O'FERRALL: It was just pretty awesome to be back here, back on the field. You know, looking around and seeing how awesome this stadium is, just anticipating it being filled again. We're just glad to be back.

**Q. Henry, I know you have spoken about how you grew up watching Virginia teams get to the College World Series. What's it like for you to be here for the first time and get to experience it yourself, the run to the postseason?**

HENRY FORD: It's definitely a dream come true. I was here in '11 and experienced it from the stands, and it was a great event and one of the best experiences of my life.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, an opening statement.

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Thank you all for being here. Certainly when these three players and all of our players, you know, they grow up and then enter college baseball, this is a dream of theirs to have the opportunity that they have in front of them tomorrow and then through the rest of the College World Series.

We're extremely excited to be back here in Omaha. As I was saying out there to a couple of the reporters, that you just don't get tired of hearing people say, when you bring a team back here, Welcome back. Right? The fact that it's not "Welcome," the fact that it's "back" after it is a very -- we have a lot of pride in that. Two of these guys wore this uniform in this stadium and competed in this event last year that are up here.

That said, it's about this year's team's journey. They have earned the right all year long because of their professionalism, the way they went about their business all year long. And when it matters the most over the last two weeks, they played excellent baseball.

So I can tell you as the coach, I have a ton of confidence in this group that they're going to continue to compete and rise up in this World Series because I've seen it so many times this year that this team does whatever it takes to give themselves the best chance to win.

Certainly as a program and as a university, we're honored to be back here in Omaha representing our great institution, and these guys are excited about the opportunity they have starting tomorrow afternoon.



To be here and experience it on the field and have a chance to compete for a title is a blessing, and I don't take it for granted. I'm truly grateful for it.

**Q. Griff, there are about six guys in the lineup last year that are back this year. Just curious if you could discuss the advantage or all that experience, having been on this stage before?**

GRIFF O'FERRALL: Yeah, absolutely. I think it definitely gives us an edge just kind of knowing what to expect from a standpoint of atmosphere itself. I remember last year the first game -- the first couple of innings, you are a little bit in awe and just a little bit in shock just with the atmosphere itself and how many people are in the stands.

So, you know, just kind of that edge, and we've been trying to talk to the young guys and the guys who haven't been here, just giving them a heads-up on what it's like. Our main message has just been to not try and do too much. We're here for a reason. As long as we do the small things and do what we're capable of, the moment doesn't get too big.

Like you says, having six guys be able to describe that in different ways to guys that haven't been here is definitely an advantage.

**Q. Griff, how much can you take away from that series against UNC? I know it feels like a long time ago, but just kind of here now, how much can you take away from that previous matchup?**

GRIFF O'FERRALL: Yeah, to be honest with you, not a lot I don't think. I think this is a totally different -- that was a couple of months ago, and this is also -- everyone is playing their best ball right now.

So, to be honest with you, I don't think we can take much from it. Obviously we're going to maybe go back and watch some of it or just kind of see how we played against them, see how they played against us, some things they did maybe, but as far as taking things from that series into now, I think it's like a totally different season now.

So at this point probably not too much.

**Q. Henry, obviously a strong freshman season for you. Who has been the biggest mentor in the clubhouse for you? With that, how do you keep your cool on a team full of guys that have been here before?**

HENRY FORD: I would say Griff has been my biggest mentor for sure. Just coming to him with advice, and he's

given me a lot of great advice and definitely helped me through this year.

I think just our preparation. Everything we do in practice and the little details that we pay attention to gives you a lot of confidence. I know everybody in the lineup is going to compete as hard as they can. That makes you feel a lot better. You know the guy behind you and in front of you has your back.

**Q. Henry, what was the circumstance for you being here in 2011?**

HENRY FORD: I came with my dad and my uncle just as a fan. I grew up a Virginia baseball fan growing up in Charlottesville. So we took the trip out in 2011 just to watch and enjoy it.

BRIAN O'CONNOR: That was an easy commitment.

**Q. Henry, what have some of the older players told you about playing in Omaha and how to kind of take it all in?**

HENRY FORD: They just said it's once-in-a-lifetime experience and just to enjoy it. Really to get it out of the way now and enjoy it; and then when it's game time, to play your ball and do what you do and just focus on the game and try and block everything else out.

**Q. Question for any of the players here: Coach O'Connor is from the area, went to St. Albert High School. Is there any sort of tradition that you guys have been able to take part of, maybe a restaurant that you go to or any activity that you have done in preparation with his familiarity with the area?**

GRIFF O'FERRALL: I guess I'll make it a tradition this year because it will be my second time, but I went to the restaurant that he worked in when he was younger with my family. I guess I'll make that a tradition this year.

THE MODERATOR: Players, thank you very much.

Questions for Coach O'Connor.

**Q. Your first trip here as head coach played at Rosenblatt, which was a legendary venue. In '11 you helped open this stadium. You've been back several times. Is there a breaking-in period for a stadium, a new venue like this? Has the atmosphere kind of evolved over the years since you've been back?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: I think so. Being fortunate to grow up in this area and go to so many College World Series

games as a youngster in old Rosenblatt Stadium, the atmosphere there was special, and fortunately in my career I got to pitch in the event in that stadium.

Then 2009, our first trip here -- actually, I also got a chance to coach in it when I was an assistant at Notre Dame one year in 2002.

'09 was special, right? First time, having grown up in that stadium, to coach a team in it. I wasn't really crazy about who the manager was of the ball club in the other dugout. It happened to be one of my best friends, Paul Mainieri when he was coaching LSU. Wouldn't you know it, the first game you're coaching in the College World Series is against your mentor.

But certainly special, Rosenblatt was. The people in the community in Omaha that have been around a long time know how special that stadium and how instrumental it was in growing the College World Series.

That said, a great decision was made to move the ballpark and build a brand-new ballpark for sustainability for a long period of time. And I think this ballpark, being built in downtown Omaha, has helped develop downtown Omaha. The amount of hotels down here now. All the teams can stay down here. The restaurants. Geez, my friend that owns the bar that has the Jell-O shots, you know, in a two-week period he can live the west of the year in Mexico after what he sells off Jell-O shots. Kevin Culjast, who also went to my high school, he owns those bars there.

Listen, this is different. This is better. I loved Rosenblatt. This is better. It's more people. The fact that a fan can walk all the way around, 360 around the stadium and take in great college baseball and everything that goes on with this ballpark.

So it's at the right place. It's here to stay for a long, long time. I said this yesterday. Somebody asked me part of what makes this championship great, and certainly it's the community of Omaha and everything that goes on with it.

But, you know, in college athletics, this is the only championship where there's a destination of a city. In the football championship, they don't call it up after practice and say, you know, Phoenix one year and New Orleans the next or whatever it is. The fact that our championship is in the same location year after year and has been for over 50 years is really awesome because it's part of all these college baseball programs in the country building all their year and their program about getting the opportunity to come to this great city.

**Q. Evan starting at North Carolina early in the year, it**

**seemed like he turned a corner after that. What do you remember about that start, and why is he a good matchup against North Carolina?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Well, first of all, North Carolina has a great club. We have a ton of respect for them. They're incredibly well-coached and very talented.

Evan did have a nice start. I believe he went six innings and gave up a couple of runs and pitched very, very well. It's not about necessarily whether he's the right matchup for them. Evan Blanco has earned the right to start tomorrow in this opening game for what he's done all year long. As of late, the back part of the season, he's been incredibly consistent and went out there and given us six or seven innings every time and given us a chance to win the ball game.

You're going to go with your guy. He's our guy. He's earned it. That said, I know North Carolina will be prepared for him.

**Q. Same question I asked Griff just about the experience. I did talk to Casey, and he said last year maybe you were a little happy to be here and this year might be different. I guess how do you feel about your club and that experience that you have this year versus last?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Well, I feel great about this club. I felt great about the team last year, but the team last year, you know, we had come here in '21, so three of the last four years, but the '23 team didn't have many members at all that played for us in '21.

So it was new. A lot of wide-eyed type guys. This year is different. Six of our players in our lineup were here last year and played in this event, and a number of pitchers.

I just felt like the mood amongst the team after we won the super regional, between that and our departure to Omaha, was different.

I did something on Monday every year the day after we qualified for Omaha. I take the team through a process of what to expect. I changed something this year as the first time out of seven times that I've done it this way. I asked the players that played in the event last year, some of them, to stand up and speak to their teammates about their experience in Omaha because there's a lot that goes on.

The families expect time out of them. The media, everything. It was awesome to see O'Ferrall and other guys step up and say, This is what I learned from last year, and this is what we need to do.

Now, we'll see what the outcome is. We know the margins in Omaha for winning are very, very tight. So you can be prepared. You can be ready to go. You can have a great game and (audio interruption).

It's very, very small what separates teams on the field here.

**Q. I noticed Jay walking around with a sleeve on his right knee. Is that related to the incident last week where he seemingly slipped off the mound or something like that? What's his status for the weekend?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: He's great. He's ready to roll. I talked to him today after he threw. He felt great.

It was a result of that, and it's just a little precautionary. But he is ready to go in the World Series and will be pitching for us. There's no issue from that standpoint.

**Q. Just for the general fan, it's hard to miss the ribbons on y'all's hats honoring Matthew Buchanan's dad. Just how cool is it to be able to have something to resemble him, and I guess maybe talk a little bit about that journey through this season and that impacting the team.**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Yeah, so that's what the ribbon on our hat reflects. One of our players, Matt Buchanan, his father was diagnosed with cancer in mid-December. He was treated at the UVA Hospital in Charlottesville even though they weren't from there.

Sadly, he passed away on opening day this year. So we put these ribbons on our hat to stand in solidarity with Matt and his family. Certainly as a head coach for 21 years and a coach overall for over 30, I've dealt with this before where you've had a young man in your program that a parent passes away while they're under your care.

So shortly after he passed and the funeral service, I actually called a coach from another school that we were scheduled to play a game and asked him if we can move it to the next day at a midweek game so we could bus our entire team down there to southwest Virginia to support Matt and his family. The team just made a decision that they were going to keep it on their hats all year.

Matt is an incredibly unselfish team-first guy and will do anything he can to help the time. So it's the right thing to do to support him and his family.

**Q. You talked earlier in the week about how much the pitching has grown as the season has gone on. What**

**have you seen as the biggest difference as the year has gone on? And also you mentioned Rocco's. Do you stop in while you're here?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: The second question first. I do not stop into Rocco's while I'm here. It's not really -- great restaurant, great atmosphere and everything like that. Not my style while I'm coaching here at Omaha.

I have been in there to eat some food on a handful of times in my time that it's existed.

You know, the pitching staff. Listen, you all know that we lost an incredible amount of innings from last year, the 2023 Omaha team. I think something like 75% of it. (Audio interruption) they just haven't done it and had the experience.

I knew that there were going to be some struggling moments, and I just kept telling everybody that you got to learn, adapt, get better, and it will get better and was hoping that by the end of the year we could be pitching our best baseball.

I think you measure a pitching staff and a pitching coach for what do they end up becoming? This pitching staff has peaked, right, and is peaking at the most important time of the year. Coach Dickinson has done a terrific job with this staff and got us to the point we're at right now.

**Q. First question, just in reference to the answer, what is that restaurant that you took him to that you used to work at? And are there any other traditions that you take these teams to or that you do while you're here in Omaha?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: We didn't take the team. I'm sure what Griff is referring to is for two years, the last year that I was in college and the year that I coached at Creighton, I bartended at Barry O's. I think that's what he is referencing, that some of the players, some of the families -- Barry O's, since our first trip in 2009, has wrapped their arms around our baseball program. They do special T-shirts and things like that.

Myself and my two brothers, all three of us, bartended at different times at Barry O's. I'm sure that's what he is speaking to.

One of the tradition that is we do do is last night we took the team to 801 steakhouse. You land, and then the second night here take them to a beautiful steak dinner. 801 knocked it out of the ballpark. So that's kind of a tradition.



Outside of that, you know, I got to tell you, for all the years that we've been here, a lot is made, more early on in our first few trips, but a lot is made of the fact that I'm from here and played here at Creighton and all that. That's great, and I'm incredibly proud of it, and every year it's a special opportunity for me and my family.

That said, it's about these guys, right? It's their experience. It's not mine. I'm just a little bit a part of it. So outside of that, there's not really many traditions we do, but we do talk about things. From experience, what can we do and they do and what are things that I highly advise them not to do, like, hey, let's not go check out the zoo with our family on Saturday in between your first two games. Let's hold off on that until we win a couple and catch our breath.

Those are the things and the wisdom that I impart on them.

**Q. You kind of actually started to answer that maybe. I was going to follow up with what you had said, Griff had stood up and said some things about here's what you do and you don't do and so forth in Omaha. What were some of those things that he said or that any of the other veterans had said?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: A big one was that all the families come to town, right, and to make sure that they communicate with their families that we are here to win a national championship.

You as a player do not need to worry about your families. They'll be fine. And that you have to find time to get centered and get in your routine. When they're playing at home or we're playing on the road, it's nothing like this during the season. You know, there are times every day that they get to lay in their bed and look at YouTube or whatever it is they do. (Audio interruption) because all their families are here, and you have Fan Fest and everything. It's great, but it's about winning. It's about being prepared.

So that was the big message from Griff and a couple of the other guys. You know, little things like get your tickets in on time, try to stay away from as much noise as possible because it's about playing great winning baseball on the field.

So, you know, a lot of little things like that, hey, sign all the autographs. Say hello to the little kid because I was that little kid. Henry Ford was that little kid in this stadium. That's great. That's awesome. You are never too big for anybody, but that said, every day find time that you can just sit there and get yourself ready to play.

**Q. 21 years in this job is a long time to be doing it.**

**Longevity in college athletics is hard, and getting to Omaha seven times is really hard. What keeps you going? What enables you to keep pushing forward so that each group, each class has a shot at getting to Omaha?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Well, what gets me going is every year giving the players an opportunity to be in a position to have this experience. I don't want to let them down because when they make a decision to come to our program, our history has shown that they have a really high percentage of chance to have this opportunity to be on a team to go to Omaha, and I'm proud as heck of that.

First and foremost, I don't want to let them down, right? You know, a lot has been made over the last couple of years in college athletics with regards to the transfer portal and NIL and all that kind of stuff. I love it. Okay? I do.

It has rejuvenated me. Rather than it being stale and the same thing in college athletics all the time, I've embraced it. I think it's fantastic.

There are some downsides to it. I get it, right? As an elite-level college baseball coach, if you don't embrace it and figure out within your program what do we need to do in this kind of landscape to continue to compete at the highest level, guess what, you'll get passed by. I don't spend any time complaining about it. I say, Bring it on, and let's figure out in today's landscape what do we need to do to continue to provide these young men the opportunity that they signed up for.

**Q. You mentioned Henry was a local kid. What do you remember about him as a recruit? How have you seen him grow? What was the pitch to get him on campus?**

BRIAN O'CONNOR: I started recruiting him when he was 9 years old. You all chuckle. My son, Dillon, played Little League baseball against Henry.

So when I would go to McIntire Little League, and they have two fields, everybody would talk about Henry Ford. Greatest Little League player of all time in Charlottesville.

This kid was a right-handed hitter. I'm telling you, you think I'm nuts? It was the buzz every summer, Look at this kid. Playing in a Little League game, he would hit three home runs right-handed and get bored and step up there and hit left-handed. He actually caught.

So I heard the buzz about Henry Ford when he was 9, 10, 11 years old, right? So continued to follow him. We offered him an opportunity to commit to Virginia at a very, very young age. Great local family in Charlottesville. He

jumped on it right away.

I think it was in eighth grade. He went away. He left Charlottesville. He went away to Tennessee to go to a boarding school his last three years to play in an elite high school baseball program, which is kind of cool for him to then be able to come back knowing he was playing his college baseball here.

Great player, fantastic person, and his approach to things as a freshman is absolutely one of the best I've seen. He's hitting the four hole for us all year and has delivered. Just incredibly proud of him, and I'm glad he's in our uniform.

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