

2024 Men's College World Series

Thursday, June 13, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Tony Vitello

Drew Beam

Hunter Ensley

Press Conference



Q. I'm going to obviously want Tony to weigh in on this as well later, but obviously you're aware of the history. It's incredibly hard to get here. It's incredibly even harder to win it. How aware are you of the history? 1999 is a long time for someone to not be a No. 1 seed and not have won since then. Does that just kind of illustrate how difficult it is and how aware are you of that history?

DREW BEAM: I think it's just all numbers, to be honest. The game will play itself.

HUNTER ENSLEY: I think it's definitely something you see floating around, you know, the internet and stuff like that, Instagram, Twitter. It's almost impossible to not see it. But at the end of the day, the better team that goes out on the field wins, and any day it can be whoever it is.

The 1 seed could beat the No. 8 seed or a team that isn't ranked at all could beat the 1 seed. We've seen it happen many times. The only thing we can control is going out there and playing our game. If we play our game, hopefully we come out with a win.

Q. This question is for Drew, and Hunter, please chime in because you've played in games at this stage as well. How difficult is it to block out all the extra noise? There's a lot of fans. There's the fanfare. This is the greatest show on dirt. Keep the main thing the main thing, which is go out there and play baseball.

DREW BEAM: I think it's almost cool how many fans are here. There's not many times in your life you get to play in front of 26,000 people. So it's almost -- to me it almost doesn't make me more nervous or more amped up. It's a cool atmosphere.

So you kind of embrace it and just really enjoy being in it, to me personally.

HUNTER ENSLEY: I would say the same thing. This is pretty much why everyone wants to come play here. You're kind of the main event. You get in front of all the people, but come game time, you know, adrenaline gets going. You're pretty much just locked in on the game and

THE MODERATOR: Coach, if you could give us a quick opening statement.

TONY VITELLO: Seeing some of the local media, we did have a few fans. I'm not sure how they let people in the stadium, what the requirement is during BP, but we did have some ball fans out there, or kids too. Just happy that people get to experience this.

The competition, juices get flowing. You kind of forget about that. At some point you have to make sure that you enjoy it if you are a participant, but more than anything, I'm thankful and happy that all the folks that rally around our program get to be here.

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

Q. Drew and Hunter, you got through the first big practice. How were the conditions out there? And how do you keep that sense of normalcy and just keep it baseball this week?

HUNTER ENSLEY: Yeah, I think conditions-wise for the field, I think it rained a little bit last night. So I think the grass was a little longer and dirt is a little mushy, but I think tomorrow will be fine. Probably cut the grass down a little bit, so it's not going to be as long.

Hopefully it's not mud, but if it is, we'll figure a way out to deal with it.

DREW BEAM: The bullpen today was pretty sweet. Bullpens are always pristine here. Just excited to get out there and get to play.



everything else is just outside noise.

Q. Drew and Hunter, you all were both here before. Is there anything y'all are going to do differently this time that you didn't do last time?

HUNTER ENSLEY: Yeah, I think a good message to relay on the guys is trying to slow everything down. I know sometimes you get out on the field and get under the lights, you want to go a little too fast or do too much.

So, I don't know, I think my message to everyone would be just to slow everything down and focus on what's actually going on in the game rather than, you know, trying to have a huge moment.

DREW BEAM: Yeah, just piggyback off of that, especially for the pitching staff. There's a lot of guys on this team that have been here before, so relaying to the guys who haven't been here that it's still 60 feet, 6 inches. It's still throwing it over the plate. It's still doing the same thing we've been doing all year long, just a different venue.

Q. Can you guys just speak to how the SEC prepares you for the big stages like this, I mean, the grind of the season and all that.

HUNTER ENSLEY: Yeah, well I think the teams in our league are pretty similar to the ones we'll see here. Obviously there's four on both sides, but I also think just going on the road and getting to play in those big environments, especially Hoover kind of reminds me of this place a little bit. So just being able to go on the road and getting in environments like this, which are pretty similar to this one, helps this group.

DREW BEAM: Yeah, the caliber of teams we play all year long are similar, and some of the same teams that are here right now.

You go into every weekend knowing it's going to be a dogfight, so it's the same thing when you get here.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, good luck.

Questions for Coach, please.

Q. Does your sense of familiarity and the staff's sense of familiarity with this place help you guys in any way when you show up here and have a little bit of a game plan when you show up to Omaha?

TONY VITELLO: I think so. You know, all of us want to look at the itinerary and make it as productive for our guys as possible and try and put the guys in a position to

succeed. But at some point the umpire is going to yell out, "Play ball," and then it's going to turn into warfare, whatever cliché you want to throw out there, and you're going to see nothing but good players.

It helps. There are teams that have come here their first time and done well, and there are teams that maybe had a less talented roster but done better because, you know, that experience.

I think it helps in a lot of different ways that are away from the field, but again, once the game starts, you just have to play ball. And how much of a factor all those items have, I don't know which time you enjoy it more, your first or second. Now you know downtime, how it works out, how you're going to mix in family time and things like that. I don't know how much it benefits when the game or competition starts, but it certainly all comes a little smoother I think as you experience it.

Q. Six top 100 prospects alone, a lot more talent on your team beyond that. With that much talent, it's not a given that you can make it work in one room, but you guys seem to have done that. No. 1 seed here at CWS. How have you been able to make that work so effectively this season with so many high-profile guys?

TONY VITELLO: Well, I think some of those guys have put themselves into that position, whereas maybe they weren't there a year ago or earlier in the year.

So it kind of starts with that, when your best or most talented players are pushing themselves to get more physical or to get better mentality-wise or mature and elevate their status as an individual, the team gets better. With this group in particular, I can't take any credit for, like, making the personalities work.

I'm from St. Louis. Joe Torre goes from there to the Yankees, and it's a little better roster, and it really becomes about managing egos and when to tell Marino Rivera to go in the game.

With this, I can't even say I've done any of that. These guys took ownership of that locker room in August, the most or quickest I've ever seen a freshman class merge with the older guys, and then the older guys have been about as willing as any group I've been around for leadership: Tell me where you want me to play, when you want me to pitch, how you want me to do this, and I'll go do it.

It's been a unique group, and it's made work fun.

Q. Could you just kind of weigh in on what I was talking about earlier about how difficult it obviously is to get here and then obviously the 1999 thing is kind of ridiculous.

TONY VITELLO: Sure, it's a number. First of all, it's difficult to get here, and once you are here, it's even more difficult to win. Part of that is the talent that's here.

So the seeding to me kind of evaporates. It's valuable in the first round because if you line up those four teams, the 1 seed is normally going to get the team that maybe is not as potent as the others. But once you get here, there aren't really any underdogs or anything like that.

I talk with Sully throughout the year, and they have a team like we had last year. There's plenty of talent, but they kind of had to go through figure out what combination works and overcome some things, and kudos to them for making it here.

All you have to do is stand next to Cags for two seconds, and there's no more underdogs. They had to go on the road again like we did last year. Anybody can beat anybody. Everybody knows that. Then you mentioned the numbers, whether it's 1999 or just numbers game in general, it really is a numbers game.

Now there's a championship series. There wasn't one when I was younger. Really the only four teams that matter are us and the three that we're in that group with. Out of four teams, one of them has to come out.

Just like those other three teams, right now our guys are saying, well, why not us? One out of four. Regardless of who is ranked or slotted where. Then Hunter brought it up. He listed off I think a social media thing I've never even heard of. And I'm not on Twitter. I mess around with Instagram a little bit. You said 1999. If you jump on the Google machine, you'll see that's right about when social media started and then it picked up steam.

I don't think those two things are coincidence. We've dealt with it this year. We knew some things were coming when the NCAA committee -- not that there's any conspiracies or anything out there, but there was a couple of things that were going to happen with that bracket. Everybody predicted that in January.

So our guys had to battle not only the teams that we were playing against, but some of those underlying storylines that were available in our regional and other spots like that and how you confront those storylines and those labels that people give, whether it's your seed or this can happen or can't happen.

That now is part of competition for young kids. Where they're ranked by perfect game in high school, it's part of competition, so our guys need to compete against the right things and they need to choose what those right things are. Again, when we play Florida State, they're one of four teams, but they're the only one that matters on Friday, and they are very, very good.

Q. Tony, last year you kind of talked about the building blocks of your program and what that's looked like. What did you learn here last year? What are the biggest take-aways there? What's kind of been the story of this team?

TONY VITELLO: Sure. Last year was we faced Skenes right out of the gate, and he is obviously outstanding.

We competed the whole game, and fortunately, just get him out of the game. It was pretty late, though.

Then the bounceback feeling was what I really liked. We play Stanford. Incredibly talented. Yet, you had a little extra determination in there from the loss.

I don't think we were true to ourselves in that last game. Maybe we just got beat, but it was reminiscent of '21 when we got here. Our guys -- if you interview any of them and there's very competitive guys in that '21 group, we just were not true to ourselves.

Again, when we show up on Friday, we could either win or we could lose, but I would prefer when we get back on the bus to go back to the hotel, we won or lost as the 2024 Vols. By now it's deep enough into the season you guys can look from afar or our fans can make comments, but we know what that looks like and feels like.

I was looking for a Christmas present. I'm not a father. If I was looking for a Father's Day present, it would be just to be ourselves. That ties into your other question of what's this team look like or been. It's, again -- I just have to fall on the team chemistry thing.

Not up here with a bunch of Rudy's or guys that played like I did skill-wise. There's plenty of skill in that locker room, but again, just the vibe has been a good party during stretch. And then in pregame, you know, guys are trying to get stuff done and they're communicating, but they're also having fun.

Then during our games, there's been a good understanding of what a nine-inning game is. You don't want your guys getting too high or too low or dog-cussing somebody in the third inning and you have six innings left

or you're down or you're up. It's been a mature group.

Q. Coach, it's the first time that Tennessee has made back-to-back trips and three in the last four years. I'm curious, for the guys that were a part of the journey but didn't play in '21 or last year, what is it like to see so many of them have ownership in that Tennessee wouldn't have been here this year without them and big-time contributions as they progress?

TONY VITELLO: It's huge. If you have seen "The Last Dance," you take motivation any way you can get it. A lot of those guys were motivated just to get here and experience it, if they hadn't, to get here and maybe play a little bit more of a role, to get here and get action, or to get here and play better than they did in the past if they are in the other category.

It's really fun to see this lineage. You know, at Missouri if you count the years I was on the team trying to play and getting out there every now and then and coaching, it's longer than Tennessee, but now I've been here longer than the other two spots combined.

I'm not a big -- my dad was at the same school for 48 years, so it's kind of nice to see that lineage that he had while he was there, and now we're kind of getting that with our deal. It's paying dividends that some of the older players can coach the younger players, and there's a little bit of handing down the torch.

Q. What does it mean to just see four and four now, four SEC teams, four ACC teams, that are last standing at the Schwab. How do you feel about the team you have now built out, No. 1 team in the nation, and just to see guys like Billy and Christian throughout the season and that could possibly play at the next level down the road?

TONY VITELLO: Those guys have fed off each other. It's been a unique environment. With guys like Billy and Blake and C. Mo at the very top of the order, not only do they feed off each other competitively, because they all want to kind of carry the same weight, but they cheer for each other, especially on the day that's not going well for them.

Because if you look at our box scores, there's been a lot of days where maybe this guy didn't really contribute that much, if you look at his at-bats statistically, but the others did. Then it might flip. Or it might be the bottom of the order versus the top of the order, and it's different the other day.

It's been pretty good to see guys not only compete internally and then also feed off each other's success but

also just cheer for each other.

I think overall it's good to be here as the program who we are. There's been a lot that's kind of gone on through the season. I accidentally went on a little bit of a rant, but we had to work to be in the spot that we're in, whether it's opinions by people or once you get to the point where someone is actually hoisting a trophy, opinions start to lose a lot of value because it was just done on the field.

I think there's still work to be done for all eight teams that are here. I'm glad we're one of them. We get to do work on the field.

The thing I really like is that a few more bus trips, a few more plane rides or a few more days hanging out in the hotel, it's a fun group to do that with.

Q. You've had a few guys that have had tremendous years: Christian Moore, Blake Burke. How you have seen them grow throughout the season, and what kind of leadership roles have they taken on?

TONY VITELLO: I think they've become more professional in their three years of how they've done things. Then, also, the theme I would say first year was learn from the older guys. Big brother approach. Hey, we saw what you did in high school, but this is different, okay, so you have to get on board with what's going on here. At times it was, you know, stern influence from the older guys. Other times it was arm around them. But they really helped.

Those guys watched those older kids, like Trey Lipscomb, and that's kind of the way you're supposed to do it, and they tried to copy it. The next year was kind of like drinking from a firehose. All those guys are gone, so you asked for it, you got it.

I think it was a lot at once to handle being out there every day, being the middle of the order, being the guy that others looked to, you have to produce. Like the example I talked about earlier, we kind of had to work through that a little bit. Because they had to work through that, I think they came out on the other side a lot better people, teammates, and players this year, and I think this year is a byproduct of everything they've worked for in high school and a couple of years in our program.

That's kind of what you want. In recruiting I try to limit it a little bit, but we tell all these guys how great they are and how bad we want them, and every day is sunny on our campus and all that. But it's very, very challenging especially in our day and age now to be a freshman, and it's not always going to be easy.

What you want are players you can envision being your best players as juniors and leaders and a big draft pick maybe, if that's in the cards, when they're juniors, when you are recruiting them. There is some time in between there that everybody needs to support them and help them. If it goes well, they'll grow into what some of those guys have grown into, which is nice.

We'll be patient and see who we're facing, and then we'll prepare as best as we see fit.

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Q. With the scheduled off days, how does that change, if any, your approach to pitching in this regional type setup to begin?

TONY VITELLO: I think it definitely can for certain teams. It's weird not being able to see you right now, but I think it definitely can if are you a different team. With our team kind of what my mind is thinking, because I'm thinking of different scenarios, is we've kind of played Tetris all year long and tried to make it work with who is available that given day, what maybe we think a matchup is, how a guy is throwing.

I think we're just going to kind of roll and stay true to our roots, roll with what we got, I should say. We'll start with Stam on Friday, and then we'll go from there with what we see fit, and we'll just treat the game that we're playing that particular day as if it's almost kind of the only game we got.

Q. Curious about Jamie Arnold. You'll probably be facing him on Friday night, although he hasn't been announced. How have you scouted him, and what have you seen from him?

TONY VITELLO: I don't know. You're kind of helping us out. We don't know who they're throwing. They've thrown out a few names at us. We'll kind of sit back and relax and wait and kind of picking up where we left off with our last game here.

We went over to Creighton and just hit. So I guess that's part of the deal. When we do know who we're starting, we'll prepare as best we see hit. The DH spot is one spot we've altered some guys. Otherwise, we've almost kind of cement and found our lineup, which is what you want to do towards the end of the year, but it could be a couple of lefties with really good stuff.

The one thing about Arnold from having seen him up in the Cape Cod, I watched a video because he played with one of our guys, he's very similar to a kid I coached name Rick Segoni (phonetic). A real low slot and a really whippy arm.

I think when Florida State started their year the way they did, he had a lot to do with it. When you have a great pitcher like a Skenes, it helps you on that game day and then it helps on all the other days too for obvious reasons.

