

# 2024 Men's College World Series

Thursday, June 13, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

**NC State Wolfpack**

**Coach Elliott Avent**

**Sam Highfill**

**Alec Makarewicz**

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Coach, please give us an opening statement.

ELLIOTT AVENT: It's the third time I've been here, but every time is equally special. It's not like the first time I came here in '21. They're all the same.

Herb Sendek was a friend of mine that coached basketball at NC State, and he always said, Elliott, you're overselling things. You tell people it's the greatest movie you've ever seen, the best restaurant I've ever been to; and then they go there, and the expectations aren't there. That's good advice, but I told our players, and I've told them all year, it's a carrot I hang out there, that Omaha is the greatest thing you'll ever do in your life. Even if you go to the -- even if you go to the World Series. I think Trea Turner told me one time this might have been just as fun as the World Series he played in with the Nationals.

I've sold this place like you wouldn't believe, but I think Omaha, Nebraska, is the one place you can oversell and you still undersell it. I've asked our players, What do you think? They said, Coach, it's better than you said.

It's just a tribute to this city, this organization that runs this place, how nice everybody that you run into are everywhere you go. It's just -- I can't tell you how special it is. To see these guys here means the absolute world to me.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Hey, Sam, just take me through your memories of that last game that you played here in Omaha in 2021 as far as the Iron 13 players for NC State and how you played Vanderbilt real close and you played a key role**

in that.

SAM HIGHFILL: Yeah, it was a roller coaster of a day. So many good and bad memories from that 24-hour period.

Obviously it means a lot to be a part of something that was that special and etched in Wolfpack history, but every time I think about that 13, I think about the 14 guys that couldn't be out there that day, so...

Yeah, it was great, but I just am excited to be back.

**Q. You get to this big stage, and everybody talks about all of the distractions that are out there. What has been the most difficult challenge for you in limiting those off-the-field distractions, and how have you managed to do that?**

SAM HIGHFILL: Yeah, it's a good point. I mean, when you get here, it's just, like -- it's kind of overwhelming. Similar to how I felt a couple of years ago. You are just so overwhelmed, so excited to be here.

We've got a couple of days before we play, but there's all sorts of things going on every single day. Just have to do your best to focus for that 50-minute period we have out there, really focus, get your throwing in, get your swings in, and just keep your mind on baseball.

ALEC MAKAREWICZ: I would say, going off what Sam said, you know, you have to soak it in and enjoy it. We've earned it. There's a lot of fans out there that want our attention, so we give them our time, but when it's time to go, I think we're going to spread the word around. Especially to the younger guys. Like, let's go do business.

**Q. Sam, I just wanted to follow up. Did you ever think you would get back here after what happened in '21? Is it surreal to be back here?**

SAM HIGHFILL: Yeah, it's so incredibly hard to get here. We found that out the past couple of years. It's so incredibly hard. Everybody you have to beat to get here is such a good team.



The goal is always to be back. I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but I definitely thought every year, you know, we had a shot. That's all you need is find a way to the postseason and then you're five or six wins away.

**Q. Alec, to that point, you've come from a very tough conference, fought it out, and especially playing some really good ball, really good complementary ball the last couple of weeks. What has it been in the lineup when you have a guy like Sam on that bump or just a talented bullpen, what's it like batting and still giving your team a chance to pull out wins?**

ALEC MAKAREWICZ: I think the biggest thing that gives us is just the confidence, especially as an offense. I think one through nine, too, we just -- everyone can do damage, especially when there's two outs. I feel like we just are so confident. Even with two outs in the inning, it's not over.

**Q. (Indiscernible) aggressive style of basketball. Their whole goal is to try to put pressure on you and make you make mistakes. Is there any way that you are specifically preparing for that? How do you kind of program your mindset to be able to deal with that pressure?**

SAM HIGHFILL: Yeah, they're a very talented team, very athletic, a ton of good players, a ton of good pitchers. You just have to play fundamental baseball.

If they're going to try and give you outs, then you have to be able to take them and not compound mistakes because that's what those offenses live on. We just have to do our best to make the fundamental plays.

ALEC MAKAREWICZ: I would say going off that, I mean, we can't really try to do too much. Make the routine plays, and just go out there and play the game.

**Q. I'm working on a story about there's so much that you can control, and uniforms being one of them, and there's always some good superstitions and things that go into it. At a place that, Sam, you have history on, Alec, you are here for the first time, what goes into picking out what you wear? Any special thoughts that go into it?**

SAM HIGHFILL: I don't know. We have a lineup of uniforms. Sometimes Coach asks me. Sometimes he asks other guys. Sometimes if he has something he wants to wear, then he might say, Let's wear this.

I don't know what we're wearing Game 1.

ELLIOTT AVENT: Whatever you want.

SAM HIGHFILL: Last time I think we wore black and pinstripes. I don't know if we brought the pinstripes this year. Yeah, we won in the black last weekend, so who knows? Maybe.

ALEC MAKAREWICZ: I would say it doesn't really matter to me. I'm just here to play some ball (laughing).

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, you can be excused.

Questions for Coach Avent.

**Q. You talk about your own journey, but how about the journey here? How far back does the dream go for you? You talked about how great this place is. How far back does the dream go, and what discoveries along the way would you attribute to leading a team here?**

ELLIOTT AVENT: That's a good question. I think I got a decent answer for it because it's a little long-winded, but this is exactly what you asked. When I was at New Mexico State, I had no money personally. I think my first salary was \$6,000. The next year I made \$11,000. The next \$15,000. My boss kept telling me what a big increase he was giving me, and I was still below the poverty line.

So the YES Clinic back -- I don't know if it's still here, but they had a YES Clinic back then, and they paid me money to come out and work it. But I couldn't afford to rent a car. So Joe Arnold from Florida, Eddie Cardieri from South Florida, they drove me everywhere they went. They said, now, we know you're just a baseball rat. We're not going to every game. We're going to go to some horse races too. We'll take you wherever you go. But I did that.

So I did that Yes Clinic out here, and I fell in love with this place, but I swore I would never come back ever unless I brought a team with me. I've stuck to that promise.

Every team is so different. Like I said, it's never changed. The first time I got here, I remember special moments. Like I remember they have a Little League team, like a World Series going on too. I remember outside my window I saw two of our players playing wiffle ball with one of the Little League teams. I thought it was one of the coolest moments I've ever seen.

There's just so much here to embrace and enjoy, but coming here every time is the same. It's just magical. If you wake up for Christmas when you are 8 years old and you wake up for Christmas 10 years old or 12 years old and the presents are under the tree and the anxiousness of Santa Claus coming, that's what this is to me. No matter

your age, no matter how many times you've been here, this is the most magical place for a baseball player I think that can ever be.

**Q. A question was asked earlier about Kentucky's aggressive style. How quick do you feel like you are to handle it in terms of holding runners on because they're probably going to run a lot?**

ELLIOTT AVENT: You can't prepare. As I was listening to Sam and Alec answer those questions, if you have to prepare for what a team does right now, you're not going to be ready. You prepare for that in the fall and January, February, and all year long.

If you're not prepared for the style of baseball that Kentucky plays now, you're not going to get prepared this week. So I think we catch the baseball. I think we're pretty good defensively. I think we hold runners pretty good. I think we've got some experience.

We may not be ready, but we'll find out.

**Q. Kind of like how I was asking Sam, you know, as far as here you guys are back three years later, how long did it take for the sting of 2021 to wear off for you, if it has?**

ELLIOTT AVENT: The sting of '21 wore off immediately for me. I remember being in that room at 1:30 in the morning telling the players we were going home. I didn't see a dry eye or smile the entire bus ride to the airport, entire flight home.

When we got back to the stadium, there was, like, 2,000 people waiting for us, unbeknownst to us. Total surprise. As the players walked on the field and we saw 2,000 people in the stands, they had a microphone, and I spoke, and some players spoke. It's the first time I saw the healing process begin and the smiles come back on their faces.

They knew how admired they were. I think that was America's team that year. Everybody talked about this is America's team.

But if you are going to do a job and -- like I'll pick our sport, baseball. If you are going to be the baseball coach here, if you try to coach beyond that with that on your mind, you're never going to prepare another team. I put that -- there are certain things I can't put behind me, and one is the death of my mother and father and good friends along the way that eat at me every day.

I was talking to Aaron Fitt. I would love to have Bruce

Winkworth here with me here today. He was with me forever. And George Tarantini was always sitting in the crowd no matter what big game I won. He always found a way to be sitting out there in the press conference like that.

I never thought about the sting of '21 since then. It doesn't mean I have forgotten, and it doesn't mean I forget because neither one exists, but I don't ever think about it.

**Q. (Off microphone.)**

ELLIOTT AVENT: Sir? I said I don't forget.

**Q. (Off microphone.)**

ELLIOTT AVENT: They know who they are. They know who they are.

**Q. Your guys' team has the fewest transfers of the eight teams here. You have the fewest transfers, the most guys you recruited. What does that say about your program to be able to get to this stage without having to plug so many holes, but when you do, you can find a guy like Alec or Brandon or someone like that?**

ELLIOTT AVENT: The transfer portal now, we're all adapting to it. It's a thing that Ron Polk -- I remember when we didn't -- when we had transfers, whatever it was, 30 years ago, and Ron Polk and I, who is one of the most legendary baseball coaches, the smartest minds in all of baseball, we had a cab ride back from New York to LaGuardia to catch a flight, and we discussed it because they were going to stop the transfer. You had to sit out a year. There were only four sports sitting out a year, so it didn't make sense how you treat so many sports differently. I understood Ron's point on that.

I didn't like people going all over the place and coaches going to Cape Cod trying to get somebody else's player. That's where we're at again.

Basically what the transfer portal is right now for me is I've always believed in recruiting high school players and developing them. That's always been the heart and soul of our program at NC State because we're all about development, and you can't develop people in the year like -- you take Alec Makarewicz and Garrett Pennington and Brandon Butterworth, are we really a part of their success? Their success was born long before they got to NC State.

When you try to develop freshmen and young men to get better, it takes a while, right? What the transfer portal is for us right now is what the junior college market used to be for us. You have your players. You develop. You lose



somebody to the draft that you didn't expect or something happens with an injury, and you try to plug holes with junior college players. Now we're doing that through the transfer portal.

But I don't believe in building a whole team through the transfer portal every year. That's not what we're all about, and that's not what I believe in.

**Q. Coach Mingione was up there before you. He was so excited. You can tell it in his voice. It's his first time here as a head coach. For those of us who are a little bit older, can you tell the world why it's so important, age and experience, what difference that can make in this situation?**

ELLIOTT AVENT: I don't know. I think it's all about players personally. I think coaches -- I think we get in the way way more than we help deliver results. I think our job is along the path of all fall and all preseason and all season long. I think that's when age and experience may matter with some things you do.

I know that third game at Georgia was tough to play, and we sat there all day long in that hotel waiting for that game. I could just feel the nerves ramping up in me. So if it's ramping up in me at my age, I can imagine what it was doing to some of the players.

I think that's where age and experience might come in a little bit. The players win games. Coaches, sometimes we get in the way.

Coach Esposito was the greatest sports mind that I probably ever -- I've been around so many great people. It's unbelievable. The list is so long, but Jimmy V, who everybody -- he is nationally known. He taught me so much from being around him for a while.

Coach Esposito who built NC State's program, I learned probably more from him. I think we all did at NC State. He's a legendary figure there. We call him the Godfather. He always told me, Let the players win games when you get to this stage. Don't try to get in the way. Don't try to do too much. You've done your job, and now let the players. That's kind of what I live by.

**Q. I just want to talk about the split of the SEC and ACC, and maybe there's a little bit more of a rivalry there, but also, on the other hand, just talk about the strength of which the ACC was this season.**

ELLIOTT AVENT: Yeah, I think -- I've been in this league for 28 years now, and I think this league has changed so much through the years. Obviously it's expanded. We

added teams. I was here when there was eight teams. I was here when there were nine teams. It's expanded so much.

With that comes some teams that had to adapt to how tough the league was, but we always remember recent memory, and I think the league is as strong as it's ever been from top to bottom.

I don't know if there's so much -- for me it's not -- a rivalry with the SEC as a respect with the SEC. That's what it is for me. Two great leagues, but there are a lot of great leagues in this country that don't get talked about.

When it gets to 4-4, that's -- I know it's a good story because we are probably -- a lot of people talk about us being the two best leagues in the country, but it's not a rivalry with me. It's just simple respect.

**Q. Can you just talk about what it means to you to have a guy like Sam get back here and have another chance in playing in the College World Series?**

ELLIOTT AVENT: It means absolutely everything. I thought his answer was unreal. I thought his answer was who he is.

Taking any team back here is special, but we have four guys, I believe -- Tyler can help me out -- four guys. Seven that were on that '21 team that were a part of this year's team, but four that are here with us now. For those guys to get back here, because nobody will ever understand how difficult -- and I've had some difficult conversations in my career with players over many things. The hardest thing I've ever done is having to sit 27 players who gave their heart and soul and blood and sweat to achieve a goal of a lifetime and tell them we're going home.

So to have those four guys back on this trip, it means a lot to me.

**Q. With that, Coach, you talked about your long journey getting here. You see a guy like Sam and those guys who have been here before. What have you seen from them to take on kind of that mentorship role with other -- you know, their teammates who just haven't been here before? How have you kind of seen them kind of usher those guys who haven't been here since you have been in Omaha already?**

ELLIOTT AVENT: I'm learning more. You learn more from players than you ever teach them probably. I probably talk to players more this time of the year about things that I try to stay away from. I talked to Logan Whitaker, who epitomizes Jimmy V's legendary statement that we all live

by at NC State, and hopefully across the world: Don't give up, don't ever give up. Logan Whitaker went through so many injuries, everyone gave up on him, and he didn't give up on himself.

To see every time he toes the rubber, it's just amazing to me. It epitomizes what Coach V said.

Like I said, sitting around that hotel room all day playing that great Georgia team in front of that great crowd, we all started to get some butterflies, right? They just kept growing and growing and growing. I talked to Logan I think it was the night before last. He just showed up at the field. I was at the field. He showed up at the field. We got to talking about that Game 3 at Georgia.

He said he called Matt Willadsen, and Matt Willadsen is not with us. He was the guy that pitched that third game against Arkansas to get us here in '21. He called Matt Willadsen to ask him for any advice he had on what it's like controlling your nerves on a Game 3 to get your team to the World Series who you love so much.

Matt talked to him for 30 minutes, and then he wrote him back a text, which Logan read to me, and I thought, doggone it, I said, this is what it's all about. Logan looked at me and said, Coach, I know you know how close this team is, but I don't think you really, really can conceptualize how really close this team is. This is unbelievable.

Logan has been on, like, six of our teams. When you hear something like that from a player, it's what you try to do as a coach. You try to build those relationships to where they play for each other. That's when it becomes very special, and that's when you feel like maybe you've done your job.

Thank you all. Everything here is special, but so is the media. I know y'all probably love this event. I would love to cover it myself. It's kind of cool, and you get to talk to eight teams. Anyway, y'all have been so nice. Thank you all very much.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports