

2024 Men's College World Series

Sunday, June 16, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Tony Vitello

Kavares Tears

Drew Beam

Postgame Press Conference



Tennessee - 6, North Carolina - 1

TONY VITELLO: Two good lineups that are very dangerous, but runs were at a premium tonight for a few different reasons. One was the defense was outstanding on both sides. And there were also some balls that were stung that defenders were in a position to make a play on.

Glad we were to get it done for a lot of reasons. The last time we were in that dugout Drew pitched really well for us but he pitched even better tonight. We just followed his lead. And he helped put us out front which is what you want your starter to do.

And fortunate to win. Every team in that league is good, but North Carolina had as much success as anybody in it. They had kind of been a force of nature, and still are capable of being that with all that had gone on.

So I think it says a lot for our guys to come out and have the focus they did after a pretty emotional win. There is a separator day in there. So kudos to our players for that.

Q. Reaction to Ensley's catch there in the second inning?

DREW BEAM: I was very hyped because it saved me from (indiscernible) and probably would have been a triple or inside-the-parker. He hit that wall hard. I was just making sure he was okay. But I was dumbfounded. That was a crazy catch.

Q. What is it like to be the first program to go 2-0 in Omaha in school history, and to have a community like Knoxville and other alumni just to have your support through this?

KAVARES TEARS: I would say our fans have been great all season long. And as far as it goes with being 2-0, I think it's just great that both games we came out and we were ready to win the game right in front of us.

DREW BEAM: I'm just happy we put ourselves in this spot position, I guess. It's been awesome seeing the amount of fans that have shown up from Knoxville, all over the country, just wearing orange. This place is a pretty special place to us so it's awesome that the fans get to come and enjoy it and watch us play our game.

Q. Drew, you got in the groove early. Could you talk about your performance today and just dealing with that delay and just having to manage that?

DREW BEAM: Yeah, felt really good early on. Cal called a great game behind the plate. We had pretty much everything going. I was just trusting with what he had game planned and we had game planned with and we were going with it.

They put some good swings on balls, especially that ball to center field. Ensley made a really good catch. The defense played well behind me. That helped me out in some situations.

And the, I guess, the time break was unfortunate. But it is just what happens. It's baseball. There's always something that's going to happen.

I went down to the pen. I got loose. And just Vance made a really good swing on that pitch. Backed up a cutter and he made a good swing. Then coach made the call and Kirby got me out of it. I was happy that the guys behind me had my back.

Q. Drew, what's it like knowing Kirby is coming in? What's that level of comfort and what did you see from him getting out of that jam and also the next inning?

DREW BEAM: It's awesome, and it's easing whenever I see Kirby coming out of the bullpen whenever I'm on the mound just because he's been there and done it so many



times. I don't know how many appearances he has in his career at Tennessee. I think it's more than anybody else has ever had. He's been there seeing anything and everything. I'm very comfortable handing the ball off to him.

Q. Kavares, what's going so well with you at the plate so far in this tournament?

KAVARES TEARS: Just trusting our game plan. Whenever we get the information about the pitcher. And then whenever just getting in the box making sure I don't get too big.

Q. KT, the different ways you have won these first two games in Omaha, what's that say about y'all?

KAVARES TEARS: I think it just shows how versatile we are, and it also shows our will to win. We don't ever think we're out of a game until the end of the game. And even then I think it's just that we ran out of opportunities.

Q. Drew, you talked about Kirby seeing anything and everything, and you've been around the program a while too. How much do you think your experiences in Omaha have helped the last couple of games, knowing how to go through this?

DREW BEAM: Last year we got a taste of what it's like to be here. And we got a taste to be in the losers' bracket. And it's hard to come out of that side of the bracket.

We've really ground out those two last games to put us in the position where we're ahead 2-0. And there's a bunch of guys on this team that have done it and been here. And the experience has really helped us through it all.

Q. Kavares, what was your reaction to Hunter's catch? And as a fellow outfielder what goes through a play like that just trying to make a play and catch like that?

KAVARES TEARS: I was running over there to back him up. I was screaming he was about to hit the wall, which I doubt he heard me. Once he hit it my initial reaction was ooh. Then I saw the ball still in his glove and I was like let's go. A lot of different emotions going on right there.

Q. Coach, you look for players that will run through the wall for you. And you quite literally have that. What's it mean to have players like that?

TONY VITELLO: It means a lot. It means when you come to work you better bring obviously the same energy and positive attitude and also work ethic. Ensley came in and was a guy who had to redshirt. I don't know if he certainly

had the athletic ability and mentality. I don't know if he was ready to do it right away without the repetitions.

And he's a guy that's all over the facility at all times working on things, especially when he was younger. Now he's able to kind of go about it like a pro now that he's got his own system. That's why he was in there. That's why he was in there last year.

He's pretty much reached Drew Gilbert stage where in practice we don't want him anywhere near the wall because we know we'll get our money's worth in the game. It's usually the opposite with an outfielder at high school or college level; they'll shy away from it. He's not scared. He's a fighter.

Q. There have been a number of great outfield plays in this series, including yours. Just as a baseball guy, not just the coach of Tennessee, how much do you appreciate what you've seen, if you've seen any of these? And how much as a baseball guy can you just appreciate what he did tonight on that catch?

TONY VITELLO: You can in general of the others. I mentioned it after our Super Regional against Evansville. Sometimes it's not the right occasion to shake hands, but, man, when I was a little kid in St. Louis, it's a hockey city. My dad's from Chicago, it's a hockey city. I love that deal where with two teams are trying to beat each other's brains in, but they have the respect for the effort and the ability to be at that level. That's why that handshake is so special in the hockey playoffs.

Took me a while at a young age to figure out, why are they shaking hands. They just fought. One guy knocked another guy's teeth out, whatever it might be. Shout-out to Bob Probert.

It's kind of the same admiration. You want to be the best team here, but you have to take a step back and realize that you're amongst the best athletes at the college level.

A lot of these guys you scouted or see in Cape Cod doing well or Team USA and things like that. So you've got to pinch yourself and make sure you're not being a fan too much. But you're crazy to not be just the spectacle this thing has become.

Q. We've asked the players about the experience of having been here before and how it's helped them. I want to ask you, has this felt different for you with some of the lessons learned previous times here?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, but I think more so, too, you guys asked Drew about Kirby coming in. When you go out

there, that's Frank's deal with the pitchers. I stay out of his way. I think that's maybe the smartest thing I do.

But when I'm out there, I'm on the field. And there's certain feedback and body language and words that are said you get from the players.

You look in the outfield and see what those guys are doing, the pitcher you're taking the ball from and the guy coming out of the bullpen. And that's just one example of how this team's a little bit different.

Drew wants to be out there, but he was almost excited to give Kirby the ball and said some things to me and the other guys that just made you feel good. Made you feel like we're in a good position to play our brand of baseball.

That's not always the case when you're in a high-pressure situation, if you want to call it that or a spot where a lot of emotions could be running wild.

This group seems to stick together. I feel we're getting closer as the year goes on. They have an interesting level of maturity about them.

I'm sure anti-Tennessee people will argue, but there's a certain maturity there over the course of nine innings with all the things that can happen in a game.

Q. You've had a few incredible teams the last few seasons. But why is it this team that's been able to go 2-0 in the World Series so far?

TONY VITELLO: I think that's tough. I think when you get here, it's chaos. And just from at least my advantage point -- I'm not experienced enough or wise enough to say why this or that -- because look at the first three games. Out of the six teams that played, it could have been any six of them won their first game. It was madness and it will probably continue to be that.

So I think you just want to be a little better than the other team on that given day and that can come in a variety of ways, as you all pointed out earlier.

But if I was to answer on the team's success this year, I have to go broken record and just say the team chemistry and camaraderie that's there. Sum greater than the parts applies to a lot of different things. And it certainly applies to teams.

It would be nice to have Michael Jordan and say you've got the best guy to take over, or Peyton Manning to lead the way.

But this is deal where you got nine guys and baseballs flying around and arms moving and things like that and energy in the dugout. There's just a lot of things that happen in our sport, with all due respect to the others. What carries the heavy weight for us is the camaraderie.

Q. Any type of update on Hunter and his health after being taken out of the game? Second, what's different about tonight with Drew than the last couple of starts?

TONY VITELLO: The Drew one is easy. There was conviction to it. I was asked by Chris Burke and the ESPN staff to compare year by year with Drew. And the one thing you all and John Wilkerson and me talk about with Drew is consistency.

I think he's really worked hard. Body's improved a little bit. Leadership has definitely gone up. Stuff, there's added on there. But if you're going to say how different is he as a freshman from junior year, it's not that different. His hard work has paid off. But consistency is a word that sticks out.

One thing that can happen is, as you get older, or especially when you experience his junior year, when you're going to go on to pro ball, and also supposed to be a team leader, and maybe you move off that day that you've been used to, you can add stuff in, into the basket, or whatever analogy would be good to use. And sometimes cutting out the fat or not adding things will help you stay true to your roots.

And tonight I think there was a real simple approach. I've got good stuff. I'm a good athlete. I'm a good leader, I'm going to go do it.

There didn't seem to be any extra thoughts or trying to accomplish any bonus extra things.

Snead was awesome out there. He wanted to throw better. I think anytime you get North Carolina guys out, you threw good.

But he admittedly tried to strike a guy out that he eventually walked. When you try to add things into the basket or whatever the heck is the right way to say it, you'll probably detract from your performance a little bit. And Drew wasn't going to let that happen tonight.

I said in the mid-game interview there -- a little pressure mid-game when you have to do that stuff -- I said he was woozy or wobbly. I think I said he was woozy. I didn't mean his head. I meant wobbly.

He crashed into the wall, and I think hip -- I just kept relying

on Woody and Doc Clinks (phonetic) in our dugout. So I kept saying, what do you think.

But you could see he wasn't moving around his best. In the back of my mind, I thought, as soon as we got a lead we can't afford with the way Drew was throwing the ball to not get to a fly ball, which ironically is what got us into that spot.

You've got to just sit in the stands and watch each pitch, because you don't know which one will affect the game the most.

The same thing as a player. You've just got to hook it up each pitch because who knows what's going to happen if the ball gets over his head. Tremendous play.

Q. You had mentioned that runs were at a premium tonight. K.T. hits the three-run shot in the fourth, and I think you guys got another the inning after. What is it about this team's home run ability that's allowed you guys to flip games in a moment's notice?

TONY VITELLO: I think the one thing you'd be remiss if you didn't point out is Sprague is so good. He's kind of their Drew Beam. I don't mean to speak for them, but just kind of watching and looking at the numbers, he's incredibly consistent. He's a strike-thrower.

But some of those outs did not come very easily for him. Even Burke strikes out in the first inning, but it might have been a 10-pitch at-bat. And it allows our guys to see what was going on.

Our guys were kind of leaning on them. And the one thing we've kind of mentioned with our guys is anybody on that list -- and Reese Chapman was in the lineup. Bargo did what he did against Evansville. Anyone one of them might be able to get you or do something for us.

But when everybody's involved and trying to contribute, you kind of end up with that deal, like I said, where we're leaning on Sprague a little bit and someone was just able to get to him. That would be my explanation of that deal.

And I think when you do have the best athletes playing defense behind some of the best arms in the country, runs are always going to be difficult to get.

Q. You talked earlier about how great the defense was tonight. We all know what Christian Moore can do swinging the bat, but that play he made later in the game moving to the backhand side and flipping the ball underneath and, of course, Blake picking it over there at first, one of the best plays you'll see in college

baseball. Talk about how valuable an asset he is in your infield. We all know what he can do swinging it, but one of the best defensive second basemen in the country as well?

TONY VITELLO: It's nuts. If you look at the play, the replay, we were able to watch it more than one time, it was a pretty dang, good play. But it's nuts to see what happens after that. He might have saved us from going to a guy in the bullpen. Like I said, I thought Snead was throwing the ball well. North Carolina has been able to mount some comebacks, too, so you're trying to prevent any chaos from starting.

He's taken a lot of pride. It wasn't good over there at second freshman year, to be honest with you. We used Ensley as an example.

It became a pride point for him, and he got really good at it last year. Now he's gotten to the point he played shortstop for us at some point this year.

He was begging to go to center as soon as Ensley came out of the game. He has been there this year. Good conversation for scouts to have. Clearly this guy is physical enough and smart enough to be a hitter at that level.

Where are we going to play him? I think they have a lot of options. At the very least, it won't be a Dan Uggla, with all due respect. I think he played at Memphis, Tennessee. You're not just putting a bat at second base, as you mentioned he's pretty dang good over there for us.

Q. You mentioned during the pitching change that, saying you feel like you guys were in a good spot to play your brand of baseball, what would you say your brand of baseball is?

TONY VITELLO: I don't think you want to get too caught up in what's going on with they get a guy on base or what are we doing here or -- you're not going to be relaxed. Everyone says be loose. Well, come on. We know where we're at.

But you can't be tense. And you've got to still be able to breathe and carry on a conversation and have a realistic understanding of what the situation is. Call it self-awareness is big in that situation.

I think that vibe, they want that from us. They don't want us yelling at them like absolute maniacs, if that's a good example. We also want them to just be present whatever the situation is.

In that deal, we're having a meeting, can't play ball, just have to prepare for the next situation. The next thing is hand the ball off to Kirby.

Everyone in that moment talked about how much they trust Kirby, which he's obviously earned. And we go out there and play ball, see what happens.

Like I said, here, with these teams and the moments, anything could swing one way or the other. But we would prefer it be our team showing up and doing what we do, what you've seen, and go to battle with that and see where it gets us.

Q. Kirby, what has allowed him to succeed in his role being that it's so different from what he was doing for you guys last year?

TONY VITELLO: He's been asked to do a lot more, and maybe it's a fitting parallel there because he's done a lot more in the community and in our locker room.

It's been every year just a growing presentation of a guy who was a special, special individual. And even though you don't see a guy creeping up, -- Frank's had these guys, Crochet is a lefty that goes from 87, 88 to 100. That's not the progression that Kirby has made, but he worked at a lot of different things to progress as a pitcher, not just as a person.

And I think he's continued to improve as he is, but the one thing about throwing him out there is, like today, everybody feels good, whatever happens with him on the mound, so be it. We'll go back to the hotel. Maybe you're frustrated. Maybe you're happy. But you'll put your head on that pillow and be good with whatever he does because he's one of those guys you go to battle with.

This whole thing I threw out there about our locker room is great. It's not me. There's a lot of special things that have to go in place. And Drew being unselfish and congratulating a guy getting a ball on open day instead of him when it's kind of his pitching staff, that's something. And Kirby just being Kirby; he gets the ovations he does for a reason. That's something.

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