

# 2024 Men's College World Series

Friday, June 21, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Tony Vitello

Kirby Connell

Kavares Tears

Pregame Press Conference



**Just the camaraderie of your ballclub from fall ball to this point, maybe you could comment on that. And then just as student-athletes and fans of the game, what do you like about A&M and their style of play as far as competing for the championship?**

TONY VITELLO: We're fortunate. Obviously gotta get some breaks along the way. The old cliché, you've got to make your own breaks, too. So whatever combination it's been, we'll take it. I know one ingredient, combination, whatever you want to call it, has been our fan base has been phenomenal. So looking forward to seeing those folks here.

I know some of them we can help with tickets and others are paying grossly high prices, but I guess that's kind of the deal here. Again, fortunate to even have the opportunity to be here.

And as far as where we're at, I think we talked as a group before the season, and there were a few things we wanted to accomplish. But one thing in the back of my mind was I like this group enough, I'd like to be around them as long as possible.

Maybe there's a cut-off point somewhere. But we've kind of reached that as it relates to getting as much hang-out time as possible with this group.

**Q. Kirby, I'm curious, what was it like facing Tennessee in y'all's lineup back in the fall?**

KIRBY CONNELL: It was definitely hard. You've got a lot of guys, 1 through 9, and you've got all the guys that helped them get to where they're at right now.

But, no, it was tricky. You can't throw them anything because you know they can leave the yard whenever they want. You're trying to help yourself out in the fall because you want to be able to throw in the spring.

**Q. Kirby and Kavares, it's kind of a two-part thing.**

KAVARES TEARS: As far as it goes with our team camaraderie, I think that started in the summer, which is something that was really big for us, players returning. We all talked to each other whenever we first came back from summer ball, just small break. We decided that we wanted to start hanging out with each other a lot earlier, kind of get that process going. So whenever the season comes around, we're all moving together in one direction.

KIRBY CONNELL: I think alongside with that, from K.T., is this group wanted to be together. We wanted to hang out off the field, on the field, no matter what it was. We just always wanted to be together.

It's shown all the way up until now. We've got guys going out to eat, doing everything they can to be with each other.

TONY VITELLO: As far as your one question, I think this is a series, SEC series that did not happen during the regular season, obviously. But I don't mean to speak for anybody else. Both sides are probably pretty happy it's at a neutral site. Their place has their own unique brand, how they do things. And you'd be remiss if you didn't say it gets rowdy in that ballpark.

And then, I guess, you're only as good as your last game, so to speak. That Evansville game that Zander pitched in was absolutely bananas with our fans. Maybe it's best that it's on a neutral site.

**Q. Kavares, being part of this lineup with five 20 home run hitters, how does that make your job easier? How does that help having that much depth in the lineup for you?**

KAVARES TEARS: I don't know if I would say it makes it easier, because I think we're all competitive. If Dylan Dreiling, for example, hits a home run I'm kind of looking at him like, you know what, I think I want to hit one too.



TONY VITELLO: Why don't you just have a good at-bat.

KAVARES TEARS: I was getting there. (Laughter).

Whenever I actually get up to the plate, I'm just thinking about having a quality at-bat. (Laughter).

TONY VITELLO: His answers are a little more reserved than his little brother's. And he doesn't -- I probably shouldn't tell this until his time is done with us -- but one of the main reasons we stayed on hot on the trail of K.T. was how likable his little brother was. He was much younger then, but great family.

He did a good job in that interview. I don't watch much of that stuff but I did watch that one.

**Q. K.T., you talked about it being a point of emphasis in the summer to build that camaraderie. Why was that important to this team? Why did you feel y'all needed to do that?**

KAVARES TEARS: Because I think in my personal opinion I think team chemistry is something, outside of just natural abilities, I think that plays a huge role in how a team plays on the field.

And I think the closer we got throughout the fall and throughout the season, I think it made it a lot easier for the freshman to kind of make their adjustment a little quicker and get a feel for what goes on and how we approach every day at the field.

**Q. When you look at Texas A&M, how they take their at-bats -- obviously they draw a lot of walks and get into a lot of deep counts -- what makes it difficult from a pitching standpoint, from what you've been able to see, for pitchers to put guys away and for them to be able to extend it and cause some trouble for people?**

KIRBY CONNELL: You know, they have a lot of competitive at-bats. You mentioned a lot of walks, a lot of long at-bats. But I think our main thing is we're going to do what we do. We're going to throw strikes and pound the zone, like Coach A taught us. And we're going to go out there and let our defense play behind us.

**Q. 1951 baseball team, the last time the Vols were in the finals of the College World Series. They had Robert "General" Leland (phonetic) throw the first pitch. If you all had the choice or the ability to choose, who would you have throw the first pitch out?**

TONY VITELLO: That's a tough one. I don't like

committing to stuff. But right off the bat it would be pretty cool to have Rod Delmonico back in the mix. He's been a big help to us. But really the players who played for them -- including one who is here now, in Chris Burke -- have just guided us because each place is unique.

Texas A&M is different than Tennessee. There's different ways to do it, different ingredients. And a lot of players from those eras have been great to us as far as letting us know what works and what doesn't. They've been supporting us through thick and thin. I'm glad they get to watch our guys compete in the situation they're in this weekend.

KAVARES TEARS: I'll just say Chris Burke.

KIRBY CONNELL: Todd Helton.

**Q. Kirby, it seems like every time there's a jam, Tony seems to pick you out and choose you to go and you go in almost every game. How do you mentally prepare yourself to pitch in every single game especially when there's three straight coming up?**

KIRBY CONNELL: Just take a lot of time in recovery. Our nutritionist, Beth, and our strength and conditioning coach, Q, have done a great job for us, helping us recover, making sure our arms are good and we're hydrated. And I think that's a big thing. And having the trust from Coach V.

**Q. Kavares, how would you describe the mindset of the team these last two days going into the weekend? And what is the mindset as you all play for a national championship?**

KAVARES TEARS: I mean, I don't think our mindset's changed throughout the whole season. That's just to take it one game at a time. And something that I know that we talk about a lot was in the fall, Coach V mentioned -- I might get it wrong -- but there was this player who thought their whole goal for the whole season was to be locked in for every single pitch.

And I think that's something that for me personally I have tried to do and I've definitely talked to some of our other guys out there about that. And I think collectively as a group, I think we do that pretty well.

**Q. So guys we're talking about 1951. We're talking about Burke. And you guys were my age. They were at Tennessee 30 years ago. What would it mean to finally be able to bring a baseball school a baseball national championship?**

KIRBY CONNELL: It would be awesome. This is



something that we've talked about for my five years is trying to win a national championship. And I think this group -- we've spent a lot of time together. We talk about that's our main goal is to try to win a national championship.

We get to a three-round fight this weekend. And try to be the first team to win two games.

KAVARES TEARS: I think it would definitely be special, especially for the guys that have done so much to help us to get us to where we're at now, the players that came before us.

And also for the fans and family that have sacrificed so much, so much of their time to come watch us and give us their support, I think it definitely would be something special for everybody.

TONY VITELLO: I appreciate, if I could chime in, I appreciate you calling us a baseball school, is what I wanted to say. But over the years it's been a lot of everything school. It's been a school that people are very loyal to.

I think regardless of how these guys have done -- especially him, because he's been with us so long -- it's been pretty incredible how positive people are and how loyal they are, for being in the SEC, because most people are only as loyal as the wins go by.

It's been an everything school. I think if I was to answer the question on the whole, not selfishly, throwing out the first pitch, if you get one pick, it's Pat Summitt. And I think as I've gotten to -- me and Frank went to lunch one time with a former who helped out the women's basketball team. The only topic we're allowed to talk about is Pat stories.

As you go on, the banners are cool, but that's not what everybody talks about. It's how she went about her business and what type of character she instilled in the players. Pretty awesome.

So I think that's what her championship was, despite all the banners. And a byproduct was a whole hell of a lot of wins because she was a winner.

**Q. Kavares, when you look at purely ERA numbers, I think Texas A&M was number one nationally during the season and number one during the time in Omaha. When you look at that stat and study them, is it stuff? Is it the way they're competing? What have you seen from those guys?**

KAVARES TEARS: I would just say they're competitors. I

mean, they're playing in the national championship. And they're also playing in the SEC. I don't think they just got there by luck. I think they're really good competitors.

**Q. What do you guys feel you learned about playing Texas A&M in the SEC Tournament?**

TONY VITELLO: I was asked -- I'll lead because I was just asked that question on the radio and how much value does that game have. And unfortunately, not a whole lot because we're, for whatever reason, able to edge them out on that particular day, but we don't get any runs for that on the scoreboard.

And I think everyone who has ever competed in that tournament loves it. It's hard to put into words quickly how awesome that event is and how well they do running it.

But, again, every SEC coach and player knows there's a different vibe to each day and how you approach that tournament is unique for each team. So to recall on that game, maybe you look at some match-ups that occurred or something like that. I don't think it carries a lot of weight.

**Q. Kavares, in these games where there's not a shortage of pressure, how much do you look to guys like Kirby and Zander to maybe keep the dugout loose?**

KAVARES TEARS: I think at this point, I think it's just something that is just a given, that's going to happen. I think all season every game that I can remember, at least, our dugout has been how they always are, just acting a little bit crazy. And I think Kirby plays a good part in that. So does Zander.

**Q. Kirby, you being the gray beard of the group (laughter)?**

TONY VITELLO: Out of us three, I like that.

**Q. When you look back at the journey you've been on to get to this point, could you comment on the range of emotions? You guys lose the Super Regional to Notre Dame a couple years ago. You've been here, I think 1-4 in the last two appearances. The range of emotions, did you think you'd get to this point after all of that frustration?**

KIRBY CONNELL: No, it's been a lot of ups and downs. Really good seasons. Some rough seasons. Finally pulling one out last year getting to where we were.

But it's definitely been a lot. The past five years have just been truly amazing. And for the last ride, I guess you



could say, trying to get to where we are right now and trying to win.

**Q. K.T., I know your family is here. Everybody knows your family is here after yesterday. Kirby, I apologize, I don't know if your family is here. But with the struggle it is to get here for them with the ticket prices and all that, just what does it mean to be able to play in front of them this week?**

KAVARES TEARS: I think it means the world to me because last year we were here, they weren't able to make it because my little brother was playing baseball. So yeah, I think it definitely means the world to me to know that after every game, win or lose, they'll be there to support me and have my back.

KIRBY CONNELL: My family was here for the first two games. I actually banned my middle brother from coming to any games because we always lose when he showed up.

But, no, he's finally making the trip up from Missouri -- or Mississippi; I don't know why I said Missouri -- Mississippi. So everybody will be here. They're actually going to try to come to practice today if they'll let him in.

**Q. What's your message to your team going into the weekend? How do you keep it the same message that Kirby and K.T. were talking about, about treating it like another game when it's not another game?**

TONY VITELLO: My first response would be, hopefully I wasn't chiming in too much. I thought we were all going together-style today.

And the other thing we were talking about families. I'm way out of my lane with this, but I think one thing would be cool with an extended trip like this, I'm not in the conversations. There's benefits and negatives to NIL, but I think it would be cool if there was some sort of system where families, in March Madness there's three weekends in a row, the you team is advancing, (indiscernible) family, or whoever example, there would be a system where it's fair and across the board, because there's a lot of money based off of, I'll have to buy some tickets for folks.

As far as the weekend goes, it's kind of cool that we worked out to where we played a mid-week game. A&M has the same situation. You played a mid-week game Wednesday instead of Tuesday. And then we play Saturday instead of Friday.

You're kind of in the rhythm there that you were all season long. It's been a while since we've been there. But you

have a practice yesterday that's similar to what we would have done on a Wednesday. And we'll have a practice today that would have been similar if we were on the road, which we are, to prepare for the weekend. Then you've got a weekend series, like I said, against an SEC opponent.

**Q. Same question I asked Kirby. You talked about the slow build the other day after the game. Just what was your range of emotions? Were you just trying to get over the hump after the being here and also the Super Regional a couple of years ago? What did you go through?**

TONY VITELLO: On the whole, as far as being here from the start? Is that what you mean?

**Q. Just kind of the obstacles that maybe you didn't clear and now you have.**

TONY VITELLO: No, that makes sense. I think, again, my tangent about Coach Summit, I think, applies certainly to what she had going on. By no means would I ever compare myself to that at all. But what it is for me is, like, after last year and the year prior and then the buildup of the program, kind of the one things we did talk about in that meeting where we had a dry erase board behind us and wrote down things we'd like to accomplish, one of my personal things was use to get excited about coming to work every day.

And in tough situations like we were in Florida State feel really good about the group you're with that you can overcome anything. And if you happen to not overcome it or the game ends and the scoreboard doesn't work out in your favor, you can kind of look around the group and feel good.

Everybody had each other's back. Everybody showed up and played for the group before themselves. And I kind of alluded to that in here.

Going into that first game we had a little more time than we thought we would in one of the smaller locker rooms. It's tight. I took a moment to look around the room. It's, like, we're going up against arguably the best pitcher, in Arnold, in this deal. And, again, I know others would argue.

I don't like the fact he's throwing against us, but I like this group I'm looking at now. I'll do battle with this group and have fun with this group with a loose dugout any day of the week. So that's kind of to me where the achievements have come this year.

**Q. How has Hunter progressed? And do you expect him to be back in the lineup or TBD?**

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TONY VITELLO: Today will have a lot to do with it. Maybe a quick blurb for you afterwards on how he looks.

I think he could go out there. It's just a matter of match-ups and we feel good about our depth, too. There's other guys who can play the outfield and play in different spots.

We don't want to push it, but at the same time he's our guy. We want him in the lineup in some capacity. But I think there's a lot of time between now and first pitch tomorrow. So hopefully that will benefit him.

**Q. Going off your point earlier, talking about Pat Summitt and rebuilding a program, there's a picture from maybe one of your first summers here, that picnic table, the lemonade stand to where you are now. The team obviously calling this journey surreal, has this journey, though, sunk in from where you came in to where you guys are now?**

TONY VITELLO: A little bit because of last night. So the timing of that question is interesting. Normally I would say no, it kind of goes by fast and you're caught up in the moment so much, and here it's such a unique combination of downtime and obligations. But last night, I checked my phone before I go to bed. And on the iPhone, they send you five or six pictures, which are kind of scary, some of the ones you get.

But I got one of me and my dad on the field. It's natural grass. There's nothing but a bunch of trees in left field. You can't even tell there's any porches.

And so I sent it to our video coordinator, Coach McCann, and we had a back and forth about all the things in year one that were there that are not there now.

So, again, the timing is pretty interesting. Took a moment to do that.

It's been fun. And, like our stadium, I wouldn't want it any other way. We've had this kind of steady progress. There hasn't been one big upshoot in anything in particular, but it's been this steady progress -- maybe maturing a little bit to where you don't do lemonade stands.

We have more fans to where you don't have to do lemonade stands. It's fun to make progress. And as they say, the journey is kind of what it's about. It's been a fun journey, in particular, this year.

**Q. You said you liked your lineup and your group against anybody. What have you seen from A&M's pitching staff and the way they've been playing,**

**especially this men's College World Series? And how do you like that match-up?**

TONY VITELLO: In that particular instance, looking around the locker room, you're looking at all kinds of guys. I'm reflecting back there -- just talking about our group being good about competing against anybody. But obviously you get into match-ups with our lineup.

It's like, man, Florida State and then Florida's younger guys are getting more experience, which A&M shut them down. And you've got the most dangerous guy, him and Charlie, you know, I don't include our players in any of that, and Cags. So they're capable of shutting down anybody.

Then, again, you get to this point, every lineup, I feel like ours and theirs, can get you at any one spot. There's a lot of uniqueness to each lineup, too, where there's a variety of ways they can get you. I feel we're included in that group.

But we'll have to go up against Prager. It will be the second time. And he's given a lot of people fits, either a lot of strikes out of him, but also gets guys to chase out of the zone a little bit.

At this point in our league or the ACC, too, you've got about as much experience as you are going to have. He's already thrown on the mound out there.

It's up to us to put our best foot forward or put ourselves forward and stay true to who we are. And he'll be trying to do the same thing.

Then you look at the guys who will be available afterwards -- or better yet look at the way they've gone to the bullpen in the postseason -- he's not afraid to go to the bullpen early because he knows he's got weapons down there.

**Q. Could you just explain a little bit of your philosophy on how you bring Causey in, after your starter just goes a little bit? How has that worked out for the uninitiated?**

TONY VITELLO: I think it depends on the particular situation. There's no script before the game. But we kind of vibe things out. And sometimes that makes sense. Sometimes it doesn't.

There's been occasions, including recently, where Stom is throwing the ball really well but you go to the bullpen earlier.

There's been times where we could have left Causey in but we take him out because we're confident with the guy to



the left of me and others.

I forget who said it -- I believe it was an MLB game, it wasn't a college game; it might have been Sully -- you make a decision and you look smart if it goes well, and you don't if it doesn't.

But I reflect on some of the ways we've used guys. Sometimes you look back and you go that was not the right move but it worked out. There's other times where I'm second-guessing myself or go over things with Frank and he's, like, that's 100 percent the right move; it just didn't go the right way.

We'll go with our gut and we'll go with a group of guys, like I said, in the locker room that we feel good about regardless of how the result is, as long as we stay true to who we are.

**Q. I think you as a coach and this program has been known for its emotion over the years, sometimes good, sometimes bad. How do you manage that? How have you evolved about managing that in that dugout, particularly in the biggest game you'll ever play in?**

TONY VITELLO: Sure. I think it's all good emotion, if you ask me, because we talked about K.T.'s family. And K.T. alluded to the support staff, Meghan Anderson, our academic coordinator; Q; all the people helping these guys. They give them get massages now, cryo. They get every resource in the world.

What a disservice you're doing if you go out there and someone questions whether you had passion for what you were doing, or had any energy or enthusiasm for what you're doing. Even if you're just like the guy that I was in the dugout that's warming up the outfielder. Frickin, do it as good as you can. Otherwise it's a complete disservice.

I like "thank you's" from kids. But you all know it, too, either that are parents or a friend, you know what appreciation looks like. And it's not saying thank you. So I think that's the best way to show appreciation. I've tried to practice what I preach.

In that dugout, sometimes we've executed that passion better than not, kind of what you're alluding to. But I think in this particular year, our guys have had a good little sense of what nine innings is all about and how to navigate those waters. And you can throw pregame in that and even postgame in the middle of these series that we've had to play.

So for now I keep kind of saying our guys need to stay true to who they are or be who they are. That's all we want.

We talked about it because last time, couple times we've been here, you know, you look around the stadium and next thing you know the game's started and you're not the group that you were that got here.

**Q. You plan on using the same pitching plan y'all have used most of the year? And how much confidence is there in the way that's worked out?**

TONY VITELLO: Are you a spy for Texas A&M? No, we don't have anything different. I guess Wednesday, Zander would make the joke that he pitched the mid-week game like he did the other day.

But we'll kind of take it one game at a time, literally, with our guys, withstanding Beam.

We're right back where we started the year. We wanted to play against Texas Tech, a great program, and throw everything and the kitchen sink at them. But we also knew Drew Beam was a guy that's provided some consistency and experience. We wanted him to throw Game 2 and do his thing, and we would work around that.

In a way we're back to where we started and don't see a need to do anything uniquely different, other than just go with what our gut is for that present inning to put ourselves in a decent position.

**Q. Could you talk about your time at TCU working under Coach Schloss and what stuck with you that got you to this point today?**

TONY VITELLO: Another thing that timing is good, this morning I talking at breakfast, Randy Mazey, whose West Virginia team went on a phenomenal run this year, retires. Baseball got worse without him around. But he'll still be around and he's way over-opinionated. He'll always have opinions.

In Fort Worth, we shared an office. Coach Schlossnagle was down the hall. And me and Maze shared an office. And the back of his chair was right here. And the different projects and ideas and things he had were very -- they helped me along the way. It was a good education.

And then also some of the stuff he did was incredibly dumb. He tried to teach himself to be a stockbroker and things like that. It was interesting.

And then the other thing I can speak to is this common theme I've been throwing out about stay true to your roots. Went from Missouri, which there was a lot of success, thanks to guys like Max, and Coach J was very good to

me. But it was time to -- first of all, it was nice to get south of the Mason-Dixon line.

But the first month there I was honestly miserable because in my head I thought TCU had just played in Omaha and Missouri has never done that.

So I've got to do something different, and it ended up kind of, it was like "Talladega Nights," had a pretzel in my head. Come to find out, if I started that month and started that year and been who I was -- which is certainly not perfect -- I think things would have started off better.

But all in all, I felt like things went well, and it was nice to go into the SEC, no doubt about it, but I knew there was some talent being left behind and would miss out on some success, and I'll be dang if Boomer White didn't get a bunch of hits and prove that theory right. Now he's an Aggie, too.

**Q. When you saw that it was going to be Schlossnagle and the Aggies in the finals, what thoughts and emotions came with that with a guy you had a relationship with?**

TONY VITELLO: It's kind of funny. We finished that game on Wednesday -- and again there's so many obligations. And you thought here is finally a moment to catch your breath. So got back to the shower quicker than -- back to the hotel shower quicker than I had before after any games and went and had a big Italian meal with friends and family that came into town; were able to get a big enough table.

When the meal is done, you look at the score, and you know it's not over until the umpire is going to the locker room. Florida had a young team, overcame a lot of things. So you're kind of just putting things together there. And it's right in front of you probably what is going to happen.

You got here. You got four SEC teams, four ACC teams. Us SEC folks are way too cocky. So you figured you'd be playing one of those opponents. And all three of them are certainly unique in how they do it. They do it differently, but they all do it really, really well. We'll see what we can do.

**Q. What is it about Christian Moore that allows him to make a mark on a program the way that he has? And when were the first times that you saw some of those traits in him that he would make an impact here like he has?**

TONY VITELLO: I think that attitude that we talked about. I guess that's the theme and that's understandable. Everybody's entitled to their opinion.

But, again, I said I wish people would have kept track of our first year, maybe you all did, you guys covered us with a lot of hustle. There was a lot of -- we took a lot of abuse on our field and other fields, too, either on the scoreboard or across the way. We were bullied is the easiest way to say it. And no one wanted that feeling again, not just in SEC but in nonconference play.

I guess you have to bow up in that situation. And that's what a lot of players did, and it worked for us. It wasn't certainly something on a PowerPoint or a dry erase board, but we wanted to play with some attitude and a chip on our shoulder, because look at who we're going up against. The in-state players of Florida, the fans in the stadium and tradition and in-state players of Texas A&M, so on and so forth.

That recipe has been there and our best players have had it. Some people do it differently. Gilbert wears it on his sleeve. Rucker, it's more internal. But he got it.

I think C-Mo has a ton of that. And the older players his freshman year had to coach him how to rein it in. And Trey Lipscomb was a tremendous big brother figure for him. And when he started taking that coaching and making those adjustments to make his strengths strengths, rather than a weakness, is when you saw that something could really come along.

And the last thing I'd say is he goes through his freshman fall and guys start comparing him to Andre Lipcius in the way how he thinks through situations and is kind of a puzzle solver, that goes pretty well with that physique he's gifted with.

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