

2024 Men's College World Series

Sunday, June 23, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Coach Tony Vitello

Dylan Dreiling

Aaron Combs

Cal Stark

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee - 4, Texas A&M - 1

TONY VITELLO: It was an SEC war, or just a postseason war. And in that situation, if you had your druthers, you'd like to have the last at-bat because you know the ninth inning is going to be full of drama.

But I think our kids kept their composure in that ninth inning including Ariel in a real tough play. You don't want to see anyone get hurt there. But it was a do-or-die deal where you couldn't shy away. You had to make a decision what you were going to do.

That to me was the theme of the day. I know it was an exciting win, maybe not the -- you know the sexiest or whatever you want to call it. But there was a lot of teammates taking care of teammates. A lot of coaches picking up players, players picking up coaches with decisions and things like that.

Obviously it's easy because the score is what it is. But I felt we were more true to who we were today in pregame, in the dugout, during the game. And, again, it's easy to say that because we end up doing okay on the scoreboard. But I'd rather go into battle with that group the way they showed up today and hope they do the same tomorrow.

Q. Cal, I guess just looking at the job that Aaron did against that lineup, just kept them from getting in any kind of groove at all, what did you see from him stuff-wise?

CAL STARK: He's very competitive. Mixed pitches well and he threw a lot of strikes. Uses defense really well.



And really just kept us in that ball game. Kept the momentum on our side for the most part. And he's done that all year. So it was really good to see.

Q. Cal, throughout the frustration, offensively, the first handful of innings, what gave you all confidence you would get the big hit and be able to do some stuff?

CAL STARK: We always know we're one inning away. We kept stacking QABs together and good things will end up happening. The kid to my right put a good swing on the ball and gave us a lot of momentum going late into the game.

So we really just knew that just keep doing what we've been doing all year, just trying to get quality at-bats, pass it to the next guy. The guy behind us has his back, and not try and do too much.

Q. Dylan, you guys left six runners in scoring position before you hit the two-run home run that gave you guys the lead in the seventh. What's the mentality for you guys to be such dogs when you're behind in a game like that?

DYLAN DREILING: I thought as an offense we were trying to keep leaning on Cortez. He did a good job today, and we were just trying to get his pitch count up and get deeper into the pen.

Q. Why do you think Dylan is so good in those clutch moments?

CAL STARK: He's already a quiet kid, but I think his heart just kind of stays calm, his mind stays calm. And I feel like he's kind of built for those moments. He's done it all year. So let's hope he can continue doing that.

Q. Aaron, what was able to make you so effective today? Looked like they were having trouble with that spin a little bit.

AARON COMBS: I would say that I had some struggles throughout the game just with command a little bit. So I had to adapt with my mechanics. I mean, I was missing



some fastballs up, so I had to fix my mechanics and make sure I could get the ball down.

The curveball was definitely there. The same thing with the curveball. I had some times where it was more vertical than horizontal and opposite. Just dealing with what I had in that particular at-bat or inning or whatever.

Q. Cal, your first hit was that two-run home run. How good does it feel leaving the park and having back-to-back frames with home runs?

CAL STARK: Felt pretty good, finally getting that first hit out of the way, whatever. But it felt good. Every kid dreams about playing at this stage. And being able to do that late in the game like that, it was pretty cool and something I'll never forget.

And then I feel like it just kind of kept us rolling momentum-wise. And I think that was in the eighth inning, so it just kind of set the tone for the ninth.

Q. Aaron, could you just talk about your pitching coach, in Frank Anderson, and what he means to you and what he's done for you?

AARON COMBS: Yeah, he's been a huge help. He's really made sure I've locked in, and he kind of preaches that just gotta do your job.

And it kind of makes me focus on the game instead of everything that comes around it. I mean, there's a lot of A&M fans that are trying to ball-5 me, so (laughter).

It helps me lock back into the game when stuff like that happens, just knowing the mentality that he's given me.

TONY VITELLO: He also wants to be coached. And I mean, he says he's available tomorrow. So maybe it's premature, but one of my favorite guys to coach.

Q. Could you elaborate on that with Aaron? And also the performance by Drew today in his last game?

TONY VITELLO: He's just awesome, man. He's got that stupid chuckle, and obviously he's got some talent. But he's so receptive to anything that you bring to him, and he's so easy to have a conversation.

And he's got a real good balance of believing in himself, which these kids all see swagger and they listen to rap songs and stuff like that. So they have their chest out. But there's got to be a decent combination there. You should think you're the best when you're between the lines, but you also need to realize you wouldn't be between the lines

without all the people that helped you, whether it's -- his family is awesome. And we're excited about his brother coming here next year.

But there's a lot of coaches besides Frank that have helped put him in a position, and it applies to other players too.

And in this day and age, you see it fading a little bit. And I've kind of had convos with a couple of their guys just because we've been passing them the stadium. There's a lot of kids that are really talented for both teams, but also a lot of kids that just do it the right way. And it's helped both teams maximize what they have on their roster.

Combsy is fun as hell. He'd be a fun hang, but I guess I'm too old.

And your other question was about Beam?

And he was what he did the other day. We weren't able to win his first game that he threw in Omaha for us. But our record when he pitches is pretty damn good. You guys can look it up and tally it up, whatever it is.

But his record for three years was incredible, just in general. But then if you look at the outcome of the game just when he was personally on the mound, it was phenomenal. Again, it speaks to what type of person he is.

Totally different than Aaron, but those same positive traits you enjoy as a coach. You never got out of your car going into our parking lot wondering whether Drew was going to show up to work with the right mentality, whether he would be receptive to coaching, whether he would have an unselfish approach. And you always knew he would hook it up on the field for you.

Q. You go to Kirby late. Kind of the most used guy out of the bullpen just to try to close it out. Gets in a little bit of a jam and you go to Nate Sned. Is that a match-up thing with Sned, or what was that like?

TONY VITELLO: The Combs decision was tough. Again, we wouldn't be in this position without him. If you took a vote in the dugout, which sometimes you do or sometimes you just have to take responsibility for decisions like the bunt. You can feel free to ask me about. And it was split. It was split in the dugout.

And then he comes down and says, I'm fine. What are you going to do? I think if you're a Vol fan, you probably boo the coaching staff if you don't see that guy come out of the dugout. But I'm not so sure that he wasn't on fumes there.

So just to peel back the curtain, what we talked about to

the bullpen was this is going to be a three-man effort no matter what to finish the inning. In the ideal world, Combs gets a guy, and we might have went to Kirby anyway for the match-up. And Snead was hot to come in. And we've been telling him that he was going to finish the game.

I don't know that it's exactly like that, but kind of shades of Vanderbilt. We typically had been using Snead on Sundays. And I think that's a game where Snead came in and got the two outs. And today he had to get three.

Q. What if anything do you think has changed with Zander as he's gone from the, quote/unquote, mid-week guy to the role he's in now? And does he have the kind of mentality you think is suited for something like this?

TONY VITELLO: I don't know. I don't care, to be honest with you. It's a baseball game. It's kind of like the bunt thing. I wanted to throw myself off a ledge there because it looks like, hey, let's get C-Mo in a position where he can drive in two runs potentially and then you take it off because Cal is in an advantage count. I could explain the numbers and all that stuff.

But the bottom line is you have to make tough decisions over the course of a game. And fans can tweet about him and say this or that. But the one thing, with all due respect, we wouldn't be here without our fans, they get to do that on Twitter and voice their opinion, and then they get to go to the bars because I can hear, it goes all night long, I can hear from my level.

And I wish I could do that, to be honest with you, too. But I grew up in this damn household with crazy Greg Vitello and kind of got into this deal right here.

With your decisions, you have to live with it. And when the game's over, we go back to the hotel and I've worked with the guy across the dugout, too. No one's more invested than him. And we live with it. And you think about it. And then you start preparing for the next day. It's all you do.

So trust me, it means a lot to us, you know what I mean?

So but having said that, I would like to come to the park and say, Aaron Combs, you're in the game. And that's the best feeling in the world. It's like having Redmond Walsh out there. We win, we won because he's good. We lose, I'll go ride or die with that guy any day of the week.

And we've got a ball game tomorrow, and Zander gets to pitch again. I'm more excited by the fact he gets another opportunity to run out there and do whatever the stuff is that he does.

And I think his progression has been just getting more comfortable. You've got to kind of navigate through certain situations, whether it's pitching on the road, pitching in the postseason. You build up reps and if you're smart, you've got some aptitude, you probably get a little bit better at it.

Q. Super Regionals, Cal's your guy. You rode through struggles this week. Why is he your guy and why do you have confidence going with him?

TONY VITELLO: Similar, same answer, without getting too dramatic on you is he's a ball player. And he's an unbelievable kid. And he's so sound defensively. Peebles does it different. You could argue he can match up with Cal with some certain things.

But Cal has been our guy for a couple of years. And he's experienced so much and he knows how to work or orchestrate a game from behind that position and be that leader. I don't know, he's our Jake Taylor, I guess.

Q. I know it's probably easier during maybe a regular season game, but with what was at stake, when you guys are leaving a lot of runners in scoring position, how do you y'all try to talk together as a team about not getting frustrated, feel like those chances you had were slipping away, and it's going to be beaten the back of the head or something?

TONY VITELLO: It's a delicate balance, because we had bases loaded twice, I believe, and didn't have anything to show for it. If you look at those at-bats, two of our best guys didn't necessarily look themselves. And I think it was probably because there's a little extra tension or a little extra try-hard. But it's kind of hard to not have that.

And also Cortez is really good. And I think, in particular, I don't know what he said, but in particular, I think he had a good day for himself as well.

So there were a couple times where it's, like, hey, we need to relax or change the mojo a little bit. But it was kind of the flow of the game. There's usually a flow to a game, even in the postseason, where it's chaos. And it was challenging for us.

And I think the biggest thing is just to relax and play ball. That served us well, and I think that the tension stuff that maybe appeared a time or two since we've been here, it clearly doesn't work.

Q. This might be building off that question, but up until the seventh inning you were 0-for-14 with runners on base. Is there one particular thing you can point to

or other than just being out of sorts, like you were saying?

TONY VITELLO: Probably the head coach being out of control. I don't know. I mean, good competition, you know? And also at times the park can play a little bit different. I think it's pretty cool, Jace hit one for them and we got the ball deep there at the end. Both teams had several balls deep.

We hit a couple of homers. It's unique in this park. Normally things kind of happen 90 feet at a time or doubles and then you have stuff like that happen. So maybe guys just trying to do a little too much and getting big and getting outside of themselves.

I think sometimes you throw out, shorten your swing in the dugout. All it really means is just stay true to your swing that you train in the cage.

And I'm sure the other team would argue or other people that would listen to this for whatever reason, but I feel like we're in the cage more than anybody. So you might as well invest in that time or let your investment, I should say, in the cage pay off and just use your swing.

Q. First of all, solid Jake Taylor efforts.

TONY VITELLO: I did see a couple of faces, like, who the hell is that guy? He's not on either roster.

Q. Walk us through the next 25 hours for you. Like, are you going to stay up all night going through scenarios? What is your routine?

TONY VITELLO: No, I left one of my damn AirPods -- I pulled a Zander and left one of them. So I had one in and I could hear the party out on the street. So last night was tough to sleep.

I'll put both those in. You just go sound machine -- brown noise instead of white noise for me personally. You can make your own selection.

But, yeah, you've got to eat. You've got to rest. You've got to say hi to your family. Got some friends in town. So probably can't take in Omaha the way they will, but at least say hi to them. And I think you just gotta be a dude because they're probably champing at the bit to get back out there in the old backyard baseball redo or rematch.

And I think our guys, just hearing their conversations, it's kind of like, you know, 1-1 has kind of been the theme for us this year. A lot of game threes. So you can't do that, though. You've got to be a dude and do those things. And

then start to filter down to game time and we'll approach pregame as we see fit. And then 6:09, just play ball.

Q. I asked Aaron this. Frank's a small town Nebraska boy. Is there any benefit to that. Tell us what he's done, he's been around the block a few times, but specifically with this year's staff to get you ready for the final game of the year?

TONY VITELLO: He acts like a small town guy. I guess I shouldn't have said that. No offense to anybody. We like giving him crap because he dishes it out to so many people including umpires and things like that. I think we've got that under control for now. He's been around the block, starting with his roots.

I mean, I love the fact that he basically forced his way into coaching. I mean, he's doing laundry at a junior college when things were different.

And he's a self-made man. And he's been in about any situation you can imagine, including the situation we're in tomorrow.

But he's just given me comfort from day one. Wanted to have somebody that had head-coaching experience, somebody that could relieve the stress of kind of what's the most important thing. Coaching up the pitchers, and on top of that, it's kind of like a campfire -- anytime we're up in the office or at a table and he wants to tell a story, he's known -- he knows baseball about as well as anybody.

I was talking with one of the umpires. We ran into each other at a coffee shop. And what a weird conundrum. He's so competitive and ornery when he's in uniform, and he tries to hide it. But he's one of the best individuals I know.

If someone's sick, he's the first one to -- just get soup for somebody, which these kids all Door Dash crap now. I don't know if he knows that. But he's one of the more caring and kind-hearted guys there is, which is insane if you haven't been next to him because when he was at other schools and we were competing against him, I would have thought the opposite, let's put it that way.

A benefit just to have him on our staff. And certainly a benefit that he's got the experience that he does.

Q. What went on with Christian Moore there on that slider, that play at second base? Is there an update on him for tomorrow?

TONY VITELLO: He was doing media and stuff afterwards. So I didn't have a personal conversation with him. But we had a couple sliding into second, just back of

his leg was something that came up during Evansville.

And he made an outstanding play out there. So it's not like he can't move around. But we just felt like with the potential situations coming up, it made more sense for Ariel.

And I say "we." I mean, eventually you put Ariel out there. But yesterday, did what I thought was the best thing. But at this point it's kind of up to Hunter being out there, C-Mo being out there, who is going to play center, who is going to play right. They've made me look smart and they've gotten us as far as they have. And the other thing they've done is made me a happy fella.

I already got emotional trying not to wuss out on you here, but if we want a belt at all or any kind of trophy, today, it was the same as A&M. We got to be around each other more than any team in the country. And we had a dry erase board meeting. And the guys wanted to lead the country in velo and RBIs and all kinds of crazy stuff.

And it was kind of a trick question. What the coaching staff wanted to lead the country in is unselfish type thing, having fun and getting to be around each other as much as possible.

So I know Hot Sauce was here. He can respect the belt analogy. So we at least brought one belt home today.

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