

2025 Men's College World Series

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Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Arizona Wildcats

Coach Chip Hale

Mason White

Tony Pluta

Press Conference



wear-down. We're used to going on these long trips, connecting flights, long bus rides. We started this four-week trip, I guess you'd call it, in Houston. And it was hot and super humid. We've just been grinding through that. It prepared us very well for this.

Q. What do you guys think has contributed to your rise to this point over the last couple of years? Where have you progressed the most as a team?

TONY PLUTA: We had that little lull in the Utah series and the beginning of the Houston series. I think that was a gut check and a reality check, and we all just got right back on track. And that kind of just pushed us to where we are now.

MASON WHITE: I think we got comfortable as a team midway towards the end of the year. And then we started getting punched in the face. And people may have started panicking or maybe feeling like, oh, no, this might not go the way we want it to go.

We had a real come to just what's going to happen, what are we going to do about it? We got to work and we knew we needed to play game by game and keep winning. That's winning each pitch. That's what this team adopted and we're still going by that.

Q. Mason, you guys entered the field of 64, 53rd out of 64 teams in home runs this season, yet that first regionals weekend you guys explode offensively. And going into Chapel Hill against a very good pitching staff, you win that series as well. What's been clicking for you guys offensively the past few weeks?

MASON WHITE: Our park is very large and the wind blows straight in, so our numbers don't show how well this team can hit the ball out of the park. So, when we get into an offensive environment like Oregon, it just exploded. I think we hit eight in a game on a Saturday and a bunch on Sunday. That's what this team is capable of in a park like that.

Q. Mason, just following up on that, given what you

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from the Arizona Wildcats is head coach Chip Hale and student-athletes Tony Pluta and Mason White.

CHIP HALE: Obviously it's a huge honor to be here in Omaha. This is 75 years. It's amazing. I was here in 1985 and 1986 with the Wildcats on our World Series teams. And a lot has changed since then.

But we're just proud to bring the Wildcats back and get Arizona back on the map here in Omaha. And hopefully this is the first of many visits for us.

Q. Tony, you and Casey go back a long way. Could you describe your relationship with one of the other top relievers on the staff as well?

TONY PLUTA: Of course. Me and Casey went to high school together. We even played travel ball a little bit before that. So we're good friends. We have a certain camaraderie that not a lot of college baseball players have. We just have a great connection.

Q. Obviously Big 12 Tournament champions heading into the NCAA Tournament. You guys thought you had a case to host a regional, but how did going on the road to Oregon and North Carolina make you guys better suited for this pressure-cooker environment in Omaha?

TONY PLUTA: Everybody's on the road here. So I think being on the road was a really big help for us just to have a little bit of a hostile environment in some places, and I think that really prepared us for what we're going to face here.

MASON WHITE: We have a team motto. We call it the



said about the layout of your ballpark, what's your impression of this one, because it's pretty big out there and the wind does tend to blow in from the south this time of year?

MASON WHITE: It feels very familiar. You can't hit the ball up in the air. You can't hit lazy foul balls, exactly like Chip yells at us all the time: Get the ball out of the air. He screams, low and hard. That's how we played at home. Aaron Walton would hit a ball 110 miles an hour in the gap and get caught. And then someone would hit a hard ground ball, get a guy over maybe for a hit and score a run, and he'll be screaming, see, that's all you have to do.

I think that's going to play for us being here. And hopefully we feel more at home with that.

Q. What does it mean to be able to get Chip this far, back to the College World Series where he went as a baseball player? And, Mason, being a third-generation Wildcat, have you had a chance to reflect on how amazing this experience has already been for you?

TONY PLUTA: I think this is huge obviously. I'm super excited that Chip gets to come back. He's been here before. He's had that experience. Now here's here as a coach. I think that's amazing for him.

Just for us in general, we're beyond excited to be here. We knew that we could get here from the start. And now we're just proving that point.

MASON WHITE: Getting Chip here first time as a coach just means the world to all of us, especially the ones that came in under him.

And being a third-generation, it's huge. I get to say I'm in the legendary group of Wildcat teams that have made it here. There's a bunch of them. But being the first one with Chip, it's awesome.

Q. What do you think is the distinguishing trait of this particular Arizona team?

MASON WHITE: We grind out every pitch. It's been a long season. There's been a lot of long stretches of good and bad. But this team really adopts that pitch-by-pitch mentality that's been shoved in our face all year by the coaching staff because they know that's how you win baseball games. Guys who didn't buy into it, they bought into it now. And that's how we've gotten ourselves to this point.

TONY PLUTA: I think Mason said that perfectly. This team is really gritty. It doesn't matter what gets thrown at

us. Even if we get knocked down, we'll get back up. We're ready for anything that comes our way.

Q. Mason, I noticed a lot of the players have grown facial hair of some sort since Houston, but you don't have any. Is that a choice or is that just genetics?

MASON WHITE: I mean, I don't know. I don't want to be the guy that doesn't do it. But we started that somewhere in the Houston journey along the way. And I mean, I had a good showing in Arlington not doing it. And everyone was, yeah, you just do whatever you want. I was, like, sorry, guys, I'm not going to do that.

Q. What was it like when you walked onto the field at Charles Schwab for the first time for practice? Did you have a "wow, we're here" moment?

TONY PLUTA: Yeah, I kind of did. But I was surprised. It actually felt a lot like Hi C. We were talking about the dimensions earlier. It's a big park. And, yeah, we're just beyond excited and happy to be here. Feels like home.

MASON WHITE: Yeah, it's a big park. A lot of seats. It's really cool to see people in the outfield where you don't really feel that in college as much. But it was definitely a wow, this is real.

Q. Talking about weird things that may have just started within the past couple of weeks with the team. In the Big 12 Tournament, you guys are wearing banana crowns in the dugout, could you describe what's been going on, what's the vibe of the team right now and what's the background story around the bananas?

TONY PLUTA: It's just something for the team to rally around. We did something very similar last year. So it's just something to keep everyone engaged and excited. And it's just something to rally around.

Q. Ran this question past Coach Schnall just a little bit ago. Totally different field this year than last year with six conferences and one independent represented here this year versus four ACC and four SEC last year. First of all, what's your general take on the makeup of the field? And could you also comment on how there was so much talk about a takeover of the ACC and SEC of college baseball a year ago, and this year looks like the rumors have been greatly exaggerated?

CHIP HALE: I think that's a great question. I didn't know we were all new teams, the eight teams until yesterday. I was talking to somebody and we realized it. It's pretty cool.



It just shows you, especially for the West Coast, for UCLA, Oregon State and Arizona, we hear that all the time. Obviously recruiting is very difficult now. The SEC has been really strong in our areas.

So we kind of have got together as a staff at Arizona and said, hey, we can't complain about this. These kids are going. They're on ESPN every weekend. They've got great fans down there. The only way we're going to change this is to get back to Omaha. For us and for everybody on the West Coast. If we want to change this, if it's going to change.

So it is interesting. But still the great teams -- we played a bunch of SEC teams, played a bunch of ACC teams this year -- and they're tremendously good. When you get into a regional, when you get into a super regional, where it's two out of three, anything can happen. And we proved that. Lose 18-2 and then come back win two really close games. North Carolina was unreal. Very, very good team.

All those schools -- LSU, Arkansas being here -- they're tremendous teams.

We're just going to play it out. Like the kids said, we're going to grind it. And hopefully the West Coast can show this series.

Q. On that, what did you guys do to combat the challenges that exist now in the recruiting landscape with the SEC pushing as far west as it has?

CHIP HALE: I'll tell you what. Trip Couch is my recruiting coordinator and he's been doing this a long time. He came from the SEC, from South Carolina. And when we go through the recruiting process, obviously everybody goes through it, it's a frustrating deal.

You bring these kids in, whether they're portal players, whether they're high school kids. And you lose them to wherever, Texas, Texas A&M, UCLA, Oregon State, whoever it is.

He says to me all the time, hey, we only need to get about 10 to 12 good players a year. That's all we need to worry about. They're out there.

We have so many great players in this country, whether they're in Alaska or Washington or Florida, there's plenty of players. You can see from our roster, we've got kids from New York. We've got kids from Chicago. We'll go anywhere to get them.

You just have to get good players that are going to play good, solid baseball. And we've done that this year.

Q. You obviously have a strong offensive background, but throughout this run, you've given a lot of credit to the pitching staff. I want to tag along, on the recruiting questions here, you replaced a lot of the pitching production from last year, but not only that, the last two years -- it's not just a flash in the pan of success this season; the last two years the pitching staff has been really strong. Can you also describe the impact that Coach Kevin and John have played in this team's role?

CHIP HALE: Kevin Vance and John DeRouin -- John is our pitching strategist, and Kevin is our pitching coach -- they've done a tremendous job. There's kids on our staff right now that have very few innings that are going to be big parts of it that's what we do with Owen Kramkowski. Owen pitched very little last year, but we knew from what the pitching plan was for those guys and what they were creating with his shapes, that he was going to be an impact guy for us.

We have guys this year, with Mason Russell coming along, that's going to be a big impact guy for us. Now, Smith Bailey comes in, and the maturity level was so high that the shapes took hold in the fall, and we could see that he was going to be an important guy for us.

But that's been a big deal. And in this ballpark, pitching is going to play big in this thing.

Q. When you look at the stats, some of the main stats for the participants in the College World Series, you guys aren't that high in a lot of categories, yet here you are back in the World Series. What do you think has enabled Arizona to maybe be a team where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts?

CHIP HALE: That's a great question. Sometimes I look at, when I'm coaching third, and I look up at the scoreboard and I'm shocked at how low some of our averages are because, it's funny, Tommy Splaine has been here for four years, and all he does is get big hits in big situations.

I think that's part of it. I think our guys have risen to the occasions when we needed to. We've been much better in the bunt game, the small game a little bit, that we haven't been in the past, as you've seen a bunch of us. You know those bunts have been huge for us.

Just clutch hitting, grittiness and, again, the pitching, keeping it close. Obviously you saw what happened Friday in Chapel Hill. It didn't matter how gritty we were when they were hitting the ball over the ballpark.



We need good pitching every night to stay in the game and stay close.

Q. To be able to do something as special as winning the College World Series as a player and then leading that same program back there as a coach, I know it's been a crazy few weeks, but have you had a moment to take a step back and reflect on what this program and what the University of Arizona have meant to you and your career?

CHIP HALE: Yeah, it's interesting. We did a bunch of media today. They gave me a tablet and it had all these videos of me playing in '86 here. And it brought back a lot of memories.

And the Wildcats and University of Arizona had a rich history here. Coach Kindall obviously winning the three, Andy Lopez in 2012, and Jay bringing them back in '16 and '21.

It's a huge deal to be here. I don't know if you know this, but the city of Tucson is the U of A. It's a college town and we get a lot of support at Hi Corbett with our people. Even when school's out we get five, 6,000 people a game.

It's huge, and just to look back on it, I'll wait until this is all over because we've got a lot more work to do.

Q. You talk about winning in '86 and having that legacy with the U of A. I spoke with Clark Crist a couple of days ago. I don't know if there was a total overlap with you guys at the U of A. Do you have any comments on him, and he was part of the 1980 team as well?

CHIP HALE: He was done in '80. And, yeah, we try to keep in touch with Clark. Obviously he's had the medical issues, and he's battling his way back. He's one of the great Wildcats. From the day I walked on campus there he was always around and Coach Kindall would always tell us what a great shortstop he was. Obviously Coach Kindall was a fantastic infield coach.

Clark's been in the game a long time and has been a really big resource for me.

Q. What is your impression of Coastal Carolina? And also what's kind of the message to the team? Obviously it's been built up that this was the team that beat Arizona in the 2016 College World Series finals. What's kind of your impressions of them and then the message that you're telling the team?

CHIP HALE: They're really good. I've watched a lot of

video of their pitching and kind of the way they play, their style of play, and they do a lot of things really well. And they're gritty like us, obviously a mid-major. They won a bunch of games in a row.

Bottom line with the team, what we tell them is just keep playing good baseball. Doesn't matter if you're playing the New York Yankees or Los Angeles Dodgers or South Point High School, if you don't play good baseball and catch the ball and throw it to first and get your bunts down and run the bases correctly, then you're going to lose to those teams. And you can beat them if you do those things well.

Q. Since you played at Rosenblatt Stadium, you came in here, mentioned there's been a lot of changes. Do you have a good story about your memory of Rosenblatt?

CHIP HALE: Well, obviously when I came here in '85, we lost two games and went home. And the first game we played was against Texas, and Greg Swindell pitched. He didn't throw anything but a fastball after the third inning and beat us -- I think it was 1-0. I don't think we scored a run.

But we ended up beating them in the next regional, went to Austin and beat them to get to Omaha. That was a pretty cool thing.

What was funny, I managed Triple-A for three years, and we came back here and we played at Rosenblatt, obviously, and it was completely different. It was a great old stadium. What Omaha has done for this, it's amazing just to see the differences. I always compare the '80s, it was more of like a mom-and-pop store. Now it's become this huge, unbelievable industry. It's great. And I'm just proud to bring the Cats back.

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