

2025 Men's College World Series

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Murray State Racers
Coach Dan Skirka
Jonathan Hogart
Carson Garner
Dustin Mercer

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Joining us now are the members of the Murray State Racers, head coach Dan Skirka and student-athletes Carson Garner, Jonathan Hogart and Dustin Mercer.

DAN SKIRKA: Man, this journey these guys have taken us on has been remarkable. Truly blessed. Truly blessed. The leadership these three have provided has been second to none. Just where we were as a team when we started in August and to end up here, these three are a huge, huge part of it. Can't go unnoticed with that.

But top to bottom, just a group that is special. I love them. And just they compete. They play the game the right way. I think that just speaks volumes.

We talk about recruiting great people. I think we nailed that this year. And obviously they're pretty dang good baseball players, too. And, again, I'm just blessed to be on it with these guys. And let's make it, it's their day.

Q. Talk a little bit about this team bonding and how you guys just became this tough team that just comes through adversity and can come back from losses and come back the next day and just win that game against really tough opponents coming all the way to here.

CARSON GARNER: I think it just comes from the group of guys that he put together. I mean, they truly are -- I mean, there's not a bad apple in this bunch. It's really easy to just all get together and hang out and build that team chemistry where everybody loves each other and we believe in one another. And I think that's something that you see with our offense when we play.



It's never just one guy that will dominate a weekend or anything. It's 1 through 9 always having good at-bats. And it comes from just loving one another and trusting one another. That's pretty much all there is to it.

JONATHAN HOGART: Yeah, I mean, couldn't say it any better than that. We've worked way too hard not trusting each other, the long hours in the fall, the weight room time. You name it we've done it. We've worked too hard not for me not to trust these guys or others in the lineup.

No matter if I'm having a good day or anyone else is having a good day, we're going to come at you with all we've got. It comes from that.

DUSTIN MERCER: They did a great job talking about that. But love and trust, when you love each other, the rest comes easy. These guys, I have all the faith in the world they'll get it done. On a day, maybe I'm not performing at my best, it's easy to not get down on myself because I know everybody's going to pick me up.

I love every single one of these guys. The same with the pitching staff. I know we didn't touch on that at all, but we know when our 1 through 9 lineup is struggling a little bit that someone is going to step up and keep us in a ball game.

Q. You guys will definitely assume the traditional role of lovable underdog in Omaha, which happens when No. 4 regional seeds get here. Since you're arrival yesterday, has anyone come up to you said anything that would indicate to you that's where things are heading?

CARSON GARNER: Not really. Maybe, like, I know a lot of people are supporting us, maybe people where their team is already eliminated they picked us you up as a team to root for. Naturally people like to root for the underdog.

But people call us the underdog in the Oxford Regional. We went and won that. They called us the underdog against Duke. We won that.

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I mean, I don't know, you can keep calling us the underdog. I think that's what we like to be called. We like when people are doubting us, but I like where we're at right now.

JONATHAN HOGART: Yeah, we don't want to buy into any of the hype or anything or underdog story. We just want to stay focused on what we do best.

The community support has been phenomenal back in Murray. When we come home hundreds of people waiting for us hometown. My hometown is going crazy right now. They've made drinks, shirts, all kinds of stuff. A huge watch party Saturday for us.

It's really awesome seeing the support, but we just try to stay focused on what we do best, our process, what we've talked about a bunch. And we really don't want to think about it as an underdog story or nothing. We just want to enjoy the moment, be where our feet are and play the best baseball we can.

DUSTIN MERCER: I think Skirk said it well about a week ago, a lot of people are cheering for us, but how many people actually believe in us that we can get it done.

That's we stay to ourselves. A lot of people said we play the game the right way, and I think we do. We celebrate within ourselves, keep each other's heads up. We don't really try to buy into a lot of the outside noise because no matter whether there's 10 people in the stands cheering for us or 20,000, we love each other. We're doing it for each other. We're not doing it for any external factor. We'll go out there and compete and try our best. And that's all that anybody can ask of us.

Q. Jonathan, you've been on one heck of a ride in your college baseball journey. Can you describe the journey that you've been on, landing at Murray State, and just your feelings walking out onto Charles Schwab Field at the College World Series?

JONATHAN HOGART: I started as a juco product at Wabash Valley. After my two years there, great run there, great group of guys. Went to Louisiana Tech. Got injured there. Thought I was done with baseball.

I hit the portal and then here comes Coach Skirka. He called at probably the most perfect time because if he didn't call then, I was heavily debating on just packing up the cleats and never touching them again.

Because of that man, I get to stand here, sit here with these two amazing players and teammates and forever

friends and brothers that, I'm just so beyond blessed, so thankful and beyond grateful that I get to do this opportunity with these amazing people and one heck of a coach.

Q. Can you speak to the culture or what exactly it is within the Murray State program that Coach has built that allows you to thrive in this situation where you go on the road in a regional and super regional?

DUSTIN MERCER: I think he has the utmost trust in us. Ever since I stepped on Murray State's campus, I had a similar journey to Hogie, just a little different with injuries and stuff like that.

I was also really close to hanging it up when Skirk called me. Then I showed up. I had a good fall. I broke my wrist, missed pretty much that whole year. In turning that around, Skirk never lost faith in me. He never questioned anything about my injury, how I'd come back from it. There was never even that conversation.

Then once the season started the next year, he put me in the 2 hole and he's never taken me out. And I've been on some pretty bad tears before.

Just having that faith knowing no matter I'm 4-for-4, 0-for-12 with 11 strikeouts, he has that faith that I'll get it done when it matters. That belief in me makes me rise to the occasion as much as possible.

CARSON GARNER: Piggybacking off of that, we're talking about culture for the team. One thing that I would say is kind of the biggest quality that we have on our team is toughness. A lot of adversity this year. And I think that made us better, whether it's rainouts or moving our home series to away series or shovelling snow off the field so we can practice or practicing in the snow.

Funny story, my freshman year I showed up and it was about 25 degrees outside, snowing and we had a 14-inning innersquad. I showed up on the field with my dugout jacket on and I was warming up in the outfield in my dugout jacket. He didn't like that very much, being from Michigan. I got an earful for that. And it made me a lot tougher.

And I think just that kind of speaks to what we are as a team, is that whatever we face, we're just going to be tough about it.

DUSTIN MERCER: He never wore his dugout jacket in practice again.

CARSON GARNER: Never again.

Q. Dustin, you mentioned we hadn't talked about pitching yet. The run that Graham is on, has there been any part of that that has surprised you guys even though you've been on this whole journey with him?

DUSTIN MERCER: To say "surprised," no, because I faced him in the fall. But, I mean, it's absolutely incredible what he's been able to do against some of the top talent in the country. He comes into the game, I'm like, well, we're in good shape because he comes in and nothing seems to faze him.

Ole Miss was putting together a heck of a run and we put him in. The stadium is on their feet, 12,000 on their feet. It's loud. He just makes pitches and comes back to the dugout and sits on the bench and just acts like we're playing at Johnny Reagan in front of 72 people. And he's just one of those guys. He's one of one.

CARSON GARNER: Unfazed.

DUSTIN MERCER: Yeah.

Q. Dustin, and Jonathan and Carson can add to it, Missouri Valley Conference regular season title, conference tournament title. These last two weeks aren't a fluke. This offense is very prolific. You win Most Outstanding Player in the Oxford Regional because of all the extra-base hits. This field is big here at Charles Schwab. This should play into, I think, the strengths of this offense. Could you talk about, 1 through 9, the quality of at-bats you guys always take?

DUSTIN MERCER: I think our offense plays at any field. I mean, it could play better at some, like you mentioned, but the way we play the game, doesn't matter whether the wind's blowing in 20 miles an hour or blowing out, hard line drives always play. I mean some of them I hit in Oxford weren't necessarily hard but they were well placed, I should say.

But when you go up there and you have a good approach and you fight, it makes it really tough on a pitcher, especially when you get through us three at the beginning of the lineup and they maybe try to take a deep breath, but then you look at 4, 5, 6 you can never let up on the offense. And I think that can wear on a pitcher, especially a starter.

Q. Jonathan, could you discuss the evolution of your batting approach? Obviously the lead-off homers, but you go up there swinging right out of the gate. You don't take many to start with.

JONATHAN HOGART: Me and Skirk talked last year and

he showed me a graphic of some strikes I was taking. And what I thought were like borderline pitches were about center cut as they get.

The approach, I went to summer ball and worked on swinging more and just not looking for such perfection in pitches and just looking for something I can hammer and move. That's kind of been the approach more and more.

It worked a little bit in the fall. And moving to the spring, just trying to stay aggressive but also just not thinking much. Just going up there, ready to go. I trust Skirk, I trust our hitting coach. Just trusting in them that they had that trust in me. Just trying to give the boys the best momentum early as I can.

Q. Talk a little bit about the senior leadership of this team and how much pressure, what that takes away from your coaching staff having to worry about them. These guys take care of themselves, sounds like.

DAN SKIRKA: They do. It's a veteran bunch. To be honest with you, that's something I've learned in my head-coaching journey to prepare these guys as leaders. Dusty and Carson have been with me for four years. That's been a process.

They learned from some really good senior, junior and senior leaders when they were underclassmen. But there's a lot of conversations. We've read books together. We have them at the house. A lot of conversations. Those relationships go a long way.

But I do rely on them for a lot. We don't technically have captains this year. But they've learned from some really good previous players and it does take so much off the coaches to know that locker room is in good hands.

Off the field, man, they're taking care of business. Then when we do get together, we don't have to deal with any of that peripheral stuff. It's just get to work and try to get them better.

Q. First-time visits to the College World Series tend to bring out a lot of different emotions in people. What, if anything, has the last 24 hours been like for you? Have you at any point felt you're having an out-of-body experience so far in Omaha?

DAN SKIRKA: About three weeks straight of it, to be honest with you. We keep saying it, we've never been here. Going into the regional, I reached out to a lot of mentors, hey, what do we need to do. To be honest with you, our process hasn't changed, but all the peripheral stuff you have to do. And we've had a lot of help from some

administration that's taken a lot off our plate.

But a lot of out-of-body experiences. I keep saying I'm running on adrenaline and Red Bull right now. There's hasn't been a whole lot of sleep. But just experiencing that regional was electric. And then we go on the road to a really good Duke club. Just soaked it in, had fun, competed like crazy.

Quick turnaround, less than 24 hours and we're in the air flying here. Since we've landed it's been go, go, go. You see the smile and look of just pure joy on these guys' faces. It's pure. They're having the time of their lives.

And they've earned it. This is my first trip here. I've never been here. I wanted to earn it, to be honest with you. And I know it's a bucket-list experience. And a lot of people have told me that in the coaching community, and you've got to get to Omaha, you've got to get to Omaha, and my kid's getting older, and, oh, you have to take him out there. I want to earn it.

Thanks to this group of Racers they helped me get here. And it's been awesome and we're looking forward to a little bit of a lengthy stay here.

Q. We, at 11.7, have heard from multiple Missouri Valley coaches talking about the quality and strength of this league year after year. You guys, as a conference, in regional play, since 2021, 17-9. That's Dallas Baptist in 2021. It's also Indiana State, Evansville last year. But Murray State gets to Omaha. Can you talk about the overall strength of the conference lately and Murray State's overall journey this season?

DAN SKIRKA: I think it starts with a lot of really good coaches. They've invested and there's really good programs. It's our third year in the league. That's what stood out to me. It's not just the head coaches but pitching coaches and hitting coaches. It's well-coached college baseball.

You see the number of players, the number of draft picks we've seen in our league and the number of players who have moved on to some Power 4 schools and don't miss a beat. They're starting, hitting top of the order, pitching meaningful innings. When you add really good coaching with really good players, that's going to prepare you.

When we joined the league, we knew it was going to be a jump, and it's done nothing but make us get better. On the field, off the field, we just keep raising the bar at Murray. And kudos to the league for preparing us.

You mentioned a couple really good programs. There's more of them. There's really good players. Week in and week out, you've got to be ready to go to win those series.

When you go to Duke and you've got to win a series to go to Omaha, we've played some really good, quality opponents in a weekend setting, where you're grinding to try to win that series on the road. So definitely prepared us for that and yeah, so, yes, 100 percent.

Q. This team, obviously is a mid-major compared to a lot of Power 4 teams here, but the way the team's constructed and put together, 14 recruits, 14 juco transfers, eight four-year school transfers and one D-III transfer, how do you go about putting together a group like that, that's able to come together, like you and Dustin said, love and trust each other and play for each other and just mesh and create such a synergy that's catapulted them to play at the highest level and compete and win against the best teams in the country and find their way to Omaha for the first time?

DAN SKIRKA: The culture, I know it's cliché, but that's the number one thing on my mind 24/7. That's what these guys want. That's what I promised them in the recruit progress. I don't promise playing time. We don't have all the bells and whistles. But I can guarantee them that we're going to pour into them. And that's on and off the field.

We really want them to be the best version of themselves when we leave our program. There's a lot that goes into that. And a lot of it is off the field. It's small group meetings. It's team dinners at our house that my lovely wife allows us to have.

We go bowling. We compete. And our conditioning, we do some different stuff. It's all in an effort to get them to be together. They do presentations in the fall. They share some stuff, and it hits home.

When they can do that, open up. And then they talk about love and that's awesome. Sorry. Because we try. We really do. We love these guys. That's why we're doing this is to pour into them. I love baseball. I love competing. But I really love developing these young men.

To be able to do that through this great game, it teaches all those life lessons, and I share my stories. I'm from humble beginnings, right, but to open up and to tell them what I've been through to help them.

And it hits home more now with my son being nine and wanting to be the type of coach that I want him to get to play for. And I get it when parents are turning their sons over to me and our coaching staff to lead them, to develop

them, we take that serious.

It's a daily effort. And a lot goes into it, like I said, we're prepared to win baseball games, but at the same time we're trying to prepare future husbands, dads, future bosses, and trying to do it the right way. And a byproduct of that is winning some baseball games, getting to do something cool like this. Again, I'm blessed.

Q. Not to continue to push you into your emotions here, but to hear the guys give you credit for saving their careers putting the roster together the way you did, how much does that mean to you? How much does that kind of mold this experience that you're all able to have here together?

DAN SKIRKA: We've had a few successes in doing that. A couple of guys where they've come to Murray and it might have been their second or third, sometimes even fourth, school. When we've had those success stories, when guys finally find a home and are comfortable and can develop, it's easy to kind of sell that to the next guy and not feel like a used car salesman but say, hey, we did it with Dusty. He got pushed out of a program. He found a home somewhere being from where he's from, he never expected to be in Murray Kentucky.

Hogart is the same way. Took three times to recruit Hogart. Recruited him out of high school, out of juco, out of the portal. Took a third time. You hear that guy. You love him. You can go back to previous years on the roster. There's a lot of those guys. It makes it special because we did pour into them. They're great kids. Sometimes you've got to find the right place. That's what we constantly search for.

I've answered some previous questions this week about the roster construction, and I always start with people that know me, to be honest with you. Whether it's a juco coach, high school coach, summer guy, former player, alumni, they know me and kind of what we're about, and then I think you can sell that to kids. That's what they're looking for is a really good experience, somebody to pour into them and give them a chance. Because I don't want to say there's not places to do that, but they're getting fewer and fewer. The level of patience and development is dwindling a little bit in college baseball with the current landscape, but we're going to try. We can promise them that.

When people know that and they can tell a kid that after he's been somewhere else and they gave up on him or didn't pour into him like we do, I think that's when we have success.

They come to Murray and they're open. They're hungry.

They're eager. These kids want to learn. They want to be pushed. And we definitely do that.

Q. Wanted to ask you like three quick ones here. Are you guys at 11.7 scholarships?

DAN SKIRKA: Not technically. We're just shy.

Q. And I've read that you have to teach a class as part of your duties; is that true?

DAN SKIRKA: I don't have to, but I do. It's Coaching Baseball 2. Kind of a tidbit is there's no Coaching Baseball 1. I don't know where it got lost at in translation. I get multiple emails each semester. It's funny, they call me professor, which is weird. They say, "Professor, I didn't take Coaching Baseball 1. Will I be okay to take Coaching Baseball 2?" I give them a smart aleck answer. If you try really hard, you'll probably be okay. It's pretty neat. It's mostly athletes.

It's cool teaching them baseball. I show them a lot of the videos I show these guys. At the end of the semester we have a 20-minute conversation about baseball. Informing them to be able to watch the game, maybe coach the game a little later in life and appreciate it.

Q. The other thing I read is you cut the grass at the field. Do you hand that off?

DAN SKIRKA: I don't cut the grass. I don't know where that started. It's blown up, obviously. I wish some days I was able to put on headphones, go mow for about an hour, get away from everything else. No, we've got some guys who do that for us.

Q. You mentioned reaching out to several mentors. What are the best pieces of advice you received regarding being here?

DAN SKIRKA: Almost everybody said don't change. And I've taken that to heart. These guys are on quite a roll and they're believing in the process. Our practices, we've been lifting. You know how superstitious baseball players are, they're eating the same meals, wearing the same clothes, that part is kind of funny.

We're sticking to what we're doing, that's having fun, competing like crazy, trying to stay loose. When that thing tees up, you can see how hard the guys compete and never give in. Trying to stay who we are; that's Racer baseball to a T.

Q. What's the fan support been like throughout the tournament? Have fans been able to make it to Oxford



and Duke; and, if so, what's that support been like to you guys as a team?

DAN SKIRKA: They have. I don't know all the particulars. But I know our allotment for the Oxford Regional sold out in minutes and people were fighting like crazy from Murray to get down to the regional. It was neat because everywhere in Oxford, they kind of recognized us. Those Ole Miss fans are very awesome, very passionate.

We had some great conversations. Obviously when the game is going, they're Ole Miss fans for a reason, but after we won, so many people rooting for us, we got a lot of messages and posts on social media that they're rooting for us now.

And to get to Durham was unbelievable. It was about 50/50 at the Durham Super. The Murray fans, alumni. Man, they came from everywhere. It was neat. We had a former player from Hawaii. He's military. He flew in. He said, I'm not missing this.

Took his leave. Got in, was able to watch two games. He said, I've got to get back or I'm in trouble. That was neat. That just shows the length they support this.

They feel a part of it. They got to Durham, and I don't expect this to change. From everybody I've heard from, they're trying to get to Omaha.

Q. I asked Dustin about Graham. Was there a point, his ERA is above 12 going into April, was there a point where you and Coach Atkins thought, maybe this isn't going to take like we thought it would. What kept you running him out there at some point?

DAN SKIRKA: That's a good question. But a couple of bad outings for a reliever and that ERA can blow up. It's tough because you don't have the innings to lower that, minimize some of that. But he did. He had a couple of outings where he got hit around a little bit.

Had a good outing at Ole Miss, good outing at Kentucky. We knew the stuff was there. You've seen it. I tell him all the time he has the slowest heartbeat in America. Slowest heartbeat in America. They said it, in between innings he's sitting in the dugout, you'd think like, Graham, do you care about this? He's just even-keeled as it gets.

So he was made for that role, and we knew that we had the stuff. Dusty mentioned that facing him in the fall. But to do what he's done, obviously we didn't expect it. He's broken the school record for saves, I think it's five now in the playoffs or in the regional and super regional, maybe four. It's unbelievable the run he's been on and the

confidence that they mentioned, players and coaches have in him. It's awesome. Really happy for him.

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