

# 2026 Men's College World Series

Thursday, June 11, 2026

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach Skip Johnson

Jaxon Willits

Trey Gambill

Press Conference



we'll be right where we want to be at the end of the day.

I feel like we haven't really focused as much on them as we're focused on controlling what we can control and winning that first pitch and then winning every pitch after that.

**Q. Jaxon, Father's Day always revolves around the College World Series. It's a little bit of a family business over there at Oklahoma baseball. What's it like coming to Omaha with your pops and actually playing in the CWS this year?**

JAXON WILLITS: Yeah, I mean, it's pretty awesome to see, for him to be on the staff and then him to be able to help me both as a father and as a coach and to be able to have my back and help me in all the ways he's helped me along with all the other coaches. I feel like it's pretty big. It's something I don't take for granted.

**Q. Trey, I believe you've gotten a hit in every postseason game. Just how have you seen the offensive explosion become infectious throughout the entire lineup?**

TREY GAMBILL: It's been pretty fun. Having the whole offense click is obviously huge for us, but to be a part of it is something special. Not just me, but this guy next to me. We've had the talent all year to be able to do what we're doing. Sometimes it didn't click, like Skip said. We're just excited and ready to go that it's clicking now in such a big moment.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about your two years in the SEC and what you knew about the SEC before you got in it last year, last season, and kind of what you -- how it's different, better than, or the whole scenario?**

TREY GAMBILL: I love the SEC. It prepares us for moments like this, and you don't get any breaks. Similar to a regional or super regional.

Every week you've got to be ready to go. So I think that for us has been fun, because we're competitors. Then as a baseball team, it's helped us grow and prepared us for the

THE MODERATOR: Now joining us are members of the Oklahoma Sooners, head coach Skip Johnson, student-athletes Jaxon Willits and Trey Gambill. Coach, we'll start with an opening statement from you.

SKIP JOHNSON: Just really thankful for being here. Persevered through a lot this year. We played really good early in the year and we want through some adversity throughout the year.

At times played really good in the Southeastern Conference. The conference is really a tough league. Just prepared ourselves and went into a tough regional, played really good in the tough regional. Went in to play a good Kansas baseball team, and played really good there. Just getting ready to play in Omaha, and we're really thankful for being here and grateful.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Gentlemen, I'm wondering for each of you, what's your memory about the series in April against Alabama, and how you have seen them progress through the year?**

TREY GAMBILL: They're a good team, and obviously they took the series against us at home. I remember they got great pitching staff that locate and can really be crafty.

I also know that they've got some power on the offense. We're going to have to be ready to come and beat them.

JAXON WILLITS: Yeah, I mean, they're definitely a good team, as is everybody that we play in our conference. I feel like we believe that we're a good team, and we know that if we go out there and handle what we can control,



... when all is said, we're done.®

College World Series.

JAXON WILLITS: Yeah, I mean, I was able to see both the Big 12 my freshman year and the SEC the last two seasons, and I feel like the SEC is really tough, and it prepares you in a way that whether it's Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, you're facing the same quality of arms as anywhere. You're facing the best arms from anywhere in the country, Friday, Saturday, through Sunday.

I feel like sometimes in maybe some of the other conferences you face a really good Friday guy, really good Saturday guy, and Sunday it's maybe a little bit of a fall-off. I feel like you don't see that a lot in our conference.

So you've got to be buttoned up, and you've got to be ready to go every day of the year, whether it's a Friday in February or a Sunday in June. I feel like kind of having that consistency and being able to control what we can control throughout the whole season and stay consistent is really big.

**Q. Question for both of you. I believe of the eight teams in the College World Series this year you guys were the only ones to bus to Omaha. If the team can do it, why can't the fans? Can you guys give a little bit of a statement on the Sooner faithful to show up for the College World Series this year? What would you have to say to them?**

TREY GAMBILL: Our fans have been great all year. We love them. My parents go to every game or every one that they can, and they've been able to mingle with all these great people.

We'd love to see their support. Obviously people have lives and maybe just be able to turn on the TV, but any way you can support the Sooners, we would happily welcome you.

JAXON WILLITS: Yeah, I will say it was a little easier for us because we were already in Lawrence. But if they could make the I think eight- or nine-hour drive up from Norman, it would be huge to have their support behind us. And to be able to play in front of Sooner Nation and pack the field out there, I feel like it would be big for us and would help get the momentum on our side.

**Q. Also for both of you guys, what was the experience like taking in -- I think it was (indiscernible) practice of the Kansas City Royals, but did you watch the game? What was it like meeting Bobby Witt Jr.?**

TREY GAMBILL: Bobby was really nice, and which is really cool because he's a big-time, big player. He's

making a lot of money, and he doesn't have to go out of his way to do that for us.

Obviously he's connected to the program, even though he didn't come here, he got drafted out of high school. It was really cool to go catch a game, see what it's like at that level and in person was really nice.

JAXON WILLITS: Yeah, I mean, it was pretty awesome for him to come up. He shook everybody's hand, whether it was support staff, players, coaches, chopped it up with us for a few minutes, had a good time.

I feel like he really went out of his way to make us feel comfortable and included.

THE MODERATOR: Jaxon, Trey, thank you for your time. Questions for Coach.

**Q. Coach, there's no doubt that you guys are playing your best baseball right now at this point in the season. Was there a turning point or anything, one individual event you could point to and be like, hey, this is where it turned and we started playing our best baseball?**

SKIP JOHNSON: Early we played really good early, and I think the biggest thing that helped us is when we came from behind against Georgia Tech. And I can kind of play it in my mind, and we get done, and we win the game. I talked to the team. Gambill says, Hey, can I talk to them?

I said, Sure.

He tells them, Hey, we're going to get hit in the mouth tomorrow. We're going to go through some of the adversities.

I think that kind of made a lot of those guys comfortable. Made the pitchers comfortable. It made the team comfortable. Like, hey, we just got through coming from behind, and we got hit hard. I think it freed them up and they just started believing in each other, even the guys that were on the bench.

And what I mean by that is when we start the first game of the year, everybody is happy because everybody is getting to play intrasquad, and then you start making lineups and guys are not getting to play. They get kind of disgruntled. We're trying to teach them to be selfless people in a world that's really a selfish world.

They became really selfless. They didn't really -- they didn't care who got the credit. They went out and played for each other. That's been the coolest thing that I've seen.

We seen Tockey hit a home run, we've seen Cord Rager throw good, we've seen Deiten Lachance hit a home run. When they pick each other up, it's like they mean it, and you can feel it.

When you are sitting in a church, and you can hear a preacher preach, and you can feel it, you can feel that they really care that much about each other.

That's probably the coolest thing for me. Wins are wins and losses are losses, but when those kids start pulling for each other like that when in a world that it's really selfish, it's been pretty fun to watch.

**Q. What were your key takeaways from the series in April against the Crimson Tide, and how have you seen both programs really progress in the last month and change?**

SKIP JOHNSON: I really hadn't watched them the last month. I've been trying to deal with other teams week to week. They're really good, well-coached. They've got a really good pitching staff, really good Friday night starter, one of the best shortstops in the country. An older team.

I mean, I think the right fielder is also a big-time hitter. I mean, they're really good. Looking forward to the opportunity to go out and play against them on Saturday.

It's an opportunity. There's no doubt about that. They're good. I think we've been really good. I think these guys are starting to -- they thought they were good, and now they're starting to believe that they're good.

**Q. Same question for you that I asked the players about being in the SEC. Last time you were here, you were the Big 12 champs. Made it all the way to the finals. What have you learned in two years about the SEC, the grind every weekend?**

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, I've always said this. It's like a football atmosphere in a baseball arena. What the kids go through emotionally, you only get so high, and you have really got to practice it. You've really got to practice those things and focus trying to control the controllables.

I think the SEC is the best conference in the country. You can see it from week in, week out, whether it's coming out of the bullpen, whether it's the starting pitchers, whether it's going through the lineup.

The fan base is incredible. Our fan base has been incredible all year long for us. We're excited to be in the SEC, and we know that's helped our baseball team, and it's helped our baseball players.

**Q. My follow-up to that is how you've kind of evolved the program since 2020 with commitments from boosters and construction and renovations and stuff going on in the outfield wall and stuff like that? It just looks like a different program since you guys joined the SEC.**

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, I think the biggest thing for us is we were going to build a field all along. There's no doubt about that.

Moving to the SEC, every field and every facility is really nice. I can't thank the Kimrey family enough for what they've done. It's transformational in our program.

OU cares about baseball. You know, Joe C. cared about baseball. We just hired Roger Denny as our new AD. Unbelievable. I mean, he's been around. The things you talk and the communication was incredible. We're excited for the future of Oklahoma baseball.

I didn't come to the University of Oklahoma to leave a job vacancy. I came here to leave a mark on the program and to carry on the tradition that Enos Semore left and Larry Cochell and all the great players that played there. So excited to do that. OU baseball will be there long after I'm gone, for sure.

**Q. Just kind of along those lines back here after 2022, were there things you learned four years ago that you can apply to getting to that mountaintop this year?**

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, I mean, I don't know how much you learn from it. You know, it's a totally different team. I think the team that gets the most comfortable early and understands it's about details, it's about execution of your plan, and they're comfortable doing that, they'll play good.

If they're not, they won't be here very long. It's those guys that do that and those teams that do that. Every team here is really good, and they've been through some adversity through the year, and they've been really good, really talented. Some have more talent than others.

It's not about the talent. It's about executing an imperfect game, trying to make it perfect, trying to make every catch on every play, score more runs than the other team, situational hitting, getting a big hit, taking the momentum from the other team. All those little bitty things that happen within the game matter a lot.

I mean, here it's magnified, and you should be able to practice that, too.

**Q. Your pitching staff has always just oozed talent. The regional weekend you started three freshmen in your first three games. Can you talk about the progression you've seen from those guys that has been with your program the last couple of years and then just Cord Rager, outstanding performance in the super regional in Game 1 there.**

SKIP JOHNSON: Yeah, as we started the year, we lose three starting pitchers. We go into it, and we always start feeling sorry for ourselves, you know? Man, we just lost another three starters to the draft.

Coach Butler, our recruiting coordinator, did a great job of trying to put a staff together. We start trying to teach them the process of how we teach pitching. You know, throwing strike one, being in control of yourself, and it's evolved.

Cam Johnson was really good early. Kind of struggled late. You watched the freshmen, our freshmen class. I've said it from the very beginning, it's probably one of the best classes I've been around.

I can think of some other -- a class that I had at the University of Texas that was really good. Then watching Cord Rager and Xander Mercurius and Nick, I always say his name wrong, Wesloski. He always says, He doesn't even know my name. It's kind of funny. Then we have Smith. He struggled with a stress reaction, and now he's back, which is really good to see.

We're not afraid to put them out there. That's the biggest thing. Our players have confidence in them because they faced them in the fall, and they knew how good they were. Xander has been throwing out of the bullpen.

What Xander did the other day, people don't look at him. He threw really, really good innings. It's pouring down rain. The NCAA doesn't know what we're going to do. We stayed there until 11:00, 11:30 at night because we don't know if we're going to play or not. We're trying to figure on out; we can't figure it out. We go home.

For him to throw that inning, that inning when we came back was really big, it was really big, because it settled us down as a team. We got some more big hits, and we're here today.

Yeah, we're not afraid. I don't consider those guys freshmen anymore. They've been through the gauntlet of the season. Now it's just kind of stay out of the way, make sure they understand what their routines are, take it one pitch at a time, try not to get too emotional, throw it down the middle of the plate. Maybe they hit it at somebody.

**Q. I'm curious, when you reflect on the last month or so or SEC play into the postseason, where do you think your team has grown the most up until this point?**

SKIP JOHNSON: Probably they've grown the most being selfless, helping each other. That's what I said earlier. I think that's where they've grown the most.

They've played really good baseball. We finally played -- we hit and played defense the other day. We haven't done that besides the first weekend. We played really good the first weekend.

I was, like, I was kind of worried about it a little bit. I'm, like, man, how do you do that? Usually there's something. We go out and punch out 10 or 11 against three really good Big 12 teams. Really good Big 12 teams. Any of those three teams could be here today.

They just really kept grinding and kept persevering. They believed a lot in each other. Now they believe. It's been fun to watch.

**Q. As the pitching coach, how you started the season with this is your rotation, and here we are at the College World Series, and this is your rotation. It's completely different. (Technical difficulty with audio.) How do you get those guys' mentality to embrace?**

SKIP JOHNSON: (Indiscernible) this is where you can help us win that game. As coaches, we always say, nobody knows at the beginning of the year who is going to get the most important hit, who is going to have the most important at-bat, important pitch. That's the most important thing to talk about. It came full circle.

Cord, we've been starting on Sunday. Xander was in the bullpen. Starting Nick, who was behind. We actually start him on Tuesdays right out of the bullpen. Move LJ. We thought LJ got a little tired, gave him a little bit of a break and started throwing him out of the bullpen. He's been really good out of the bullpen.

As far as Bodin and Bixby and Jones and Cleveland, what Cleveland did at the super regional, I mean, that guy went through the lineup like three times in two different nights back-to-back. I mean, those guys are pretty good.

He's like the unsung hero really when you go back and look at it, but I think that's -- they don't care who gets the credit. You can do amazing things when you don't care who gets the credit. We talk about it, but everybody wants the credit, you know?

Really it's about the players. It's not about Skip Johnson. It's not about Reggie Willits or any of our coaches. It's about the players and what they've done. That's been the exciting thing.

I've been really pleased with that as much as anything. I know whatever happens on Saturday, it happens. Whatever happens the next day, whatever happens. It doesn't matter to me. Just go out and play, give us your best, and that's all we can ask for. We can't ask for them to be somebody else.

**Q. Stemming off of the pitching questions, last year Easton Carmichael, one of if not your best sticks in the lineup, and then this year Deiten Lachance has kind of picked up right where Carmichael left off. I think some programs would dream of a smooth transition at least offensively at the catcher position. Can you talk a little bit about Lachance's impact on this year's lineup?**

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, we knew going into this year with Brock, he was a catcher, and he was First Team All-American. Coach Butler went out and found him.

Lachance played for my son at McLennan Junior College where Jimmy Crooks played as well. We knew Lachance was going to be a good player. We knew that he was going to be coached the right way and so getting him the transition.

Easton Carmichael was a great player. He's going to end up playing in the Big Leagues. He's a great kid, great person, great leader, great player. Lachance is kind of like the same thing. He's like a Jimmy Crooks, but right-handed.

He has fun. He's a baseball player. When I called him this summer, I said, Hey, Deiten, what's going on? It was right after the draft. I was kind of worried about him drafting because he had 21 or 22 homers and had 106 RBIs in junior college. I mean, I was a junior college coach for 16 years. I had a guy hit 30 home runs, but not 106 RBIs. That's crazy.

He goes, Yeah, Coach, I've been playing in the men's league. I've been playing shortstop.

I'm, like, what? Shortstop?

He loves to play baseball. I mean, you know, he imitates old catchers like Gary Carter and Charlie O'Brien. He's just fun to be around because he's a baseball guy. Brendan Brock is uber-athletic. He runs a 6.4. He hits with power. He can play outfield. Lachance can play first base.

It's been fun to watch that position evolve as we go through. When Tockey was scuffing a little bit, Lachance was playing first. It was really fun to watch.

**Q. I believe maybe people are watching the recent play of the offense, and they've seen they've found a power stroke. Can you talk about overall the way the offense has been swinging it lately and what has changed recently, and what do you plan on thinking is going to be the strength of this offense in the Charles Schwab field out here?**

SKIP JOHNSON: I don't know how the power surge -- we practice and they continue to practice. It's not a difference in our offense of what we do. We're still going to do what we do offensively. That's what we practice all the time.

Maybe they're getting on time a little bit. Maybe they're getting confident. I mean, I can remember this, and I know this, and I can only describe it in one way. I had a young man that was 88 to 90 miles an hour, and all of a sudden he learned how to throw a curveball. The next outing he's 95 to 97. It's confidence. It's the thing that you search for in baseball. It's the thing that we talk about a lot is trying to get confidence and hold confidence.

They're confident. The chaos style of baseball is only a deal where we're not afraid to make a mistake. It happens. The game is not perfect. Really that's kind of how we go about our business. We're going to try to run. We're going to bunt. We're going to hit. We hit home runs now. Who knows? The bats, the balls, I could go in a whole conversation about the bats and the balls and exit velocities and stuff like that. That's a whole other time, believe me.

It's been fun to watch. It's really what college baseball is getting to. I'll never forget this. We were in Nashville, and we're playing the Sunday game. I get on the elevator, and there's a father and a daughter. They go, Hey, Coach, we really liked the game last night.

I'm like, man, it was 13-10. How did they like the game? I'm like, 2-1 or 5-2. 13-10? I'm like -- they paid \$44 each to get in the game. I'm like, 13-10?

That's what our world wants to see, home runs. They want to see somebody jump up and down. Maybe we can bring the hit by pitch and the fighting like hockey. I mean, I don't know. You know? Bring something different to it.

I really love where college baseball is. I can tell you that. They play with passion. That's the unknown thing that people don't realize when you see the fire from the fans. They play with the passion. You can hear it. You can feel

it.

Once you can feel something on a baseball field by watching them play and they play with that kind of passion, you knew. Like watching Pete Rose throw a ball down or watching him run on a base on balls, that was what it was, or Fernandez pitched when he pumped his fist when he struck a guy out. You can feel what he feels on the game, and that's fun to watch.

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