

# 2026 Men's College World Series

Monday, June 15, 2026

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach Wes Johnson

Xander Mercurius

Jaxon Willits

Postgame Press Conference



Oklahoma - 4, Georgia - 3

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Oklahoma head coach Skip Johnson and student-athletes Xander Mercurius and Jaxon Willits.

SKIP JOHNSON: I thought Xander went out and was really calm in the first inning, made some really good pitches. We come in and a big hit to start the game. And then another, trying to move a guy over, hit-by-pitch. And Deiten -- I don't know what happened, we get second and third, and he hits a ground ball to short, I believe.

And then Jaxon got a big hit, and it really settled Xander down, where he can just pitch and make it one pitch at a time.

The momentum kind of shifted there a little bit. They hit a big home run. They hit another big home run. Really tough lineup. Really hard to navigate through that lineup. It's really deep. Of course I mean they're a really good team.

And it shows you what kind of character and what kind of warrior, I don't know how they say his name, Caden is, Aoki. He stayed in the game. That shows you a lot -- when he throws maybe 31 pitches in the first -- it shows you what he was about.

I mean, you could tell, the guy, he's war-ridden, and pitched in some really big games. Really calm, making pitches.

I'm really proud of our team for getting some big hits at some times at the right time, and Xander really throwing, and Cleveland coming in and just trusting the process and

taking it one pitch at a time. And really proud of these guys.

**Q. Xander, your fourth start of the year, right? You're in the College World Series. You just shut down probably the best offense in the country. What has enabled you to pitch your best at this time of the year, this stage? How have you been able to make this leap that you've made down the stretch?**

XANDER MERCURIUS: The guy sitting right next to me, Skip Johnson. He's been great. He's been helping me every single day just becoming better. And that's all I can do. That's all I can hope or ask for.

My teammates putting up runs in the first inning, helping me out. And just can't do it without my teammates.

**Q. Jaxon, you had success against Caden tonight. What were you seeing out of the hand against him?**

JAXON WILLITS: Yeah, I mean, we had a really good approach going into the game from both of our hitting coaches. And I feel like we had a really good sense of what he liked to use in what counts. And then I think all three of my hits were in two-strike counts.

So I feel like I was really good in my two-strike approach, really able to back the ball up and just stay consistent with that line-drive-up-the-middle approach. And I feel like I was able to have some success against all three of his pitches.

**Q. Xander, what was the conversation in between the seventh and eighth to go back out there? Did you have to talk your way into getting back out there? And what was the ninth inning like just watching Jaxon work with the traffic that he had there?**

XANDER MERCURIUS: All I said was I just kept pounding my chest, just telling him I'm good. I honestly felt amazing. I guess I heard my velo dropped at the end. But I felt amazing.

I just kept pitching with conviction and just trusted all my

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stuff.

And the ninth inning, it was great. I was top step, just watching Cleveland do his work. Keep talking to him. Just start -- just help him out. Give him some synergy and just watching him pitch and go do what he does.

**Q. Jaxon, I noticed you pointed to the sky as you were coming down third base. Does that have anything to do with your great-grandfather?**

JAXON WILLITS: Honestly, I'm just trying to give all glory to God. When I'm out there on the baseball field, I'm not playing for myself or playing for anyone on this earth, honestly. I'm there to glorify the Lord and play for him.

I feel like he helped me do one of the hardest things to do in sports in the first inning, and I just wanted to say thank you and to give all glory to Him.

**Q. Jaxon, a question that was just asked of Xander about Cleveland and the eighth and ninth and how he kind of gritted through those two innings and ends with getting the best hitter in the country out to kind of win that game. What was your reaction and what were you -- I mean there was a lot of talk and as he turned around and did stuff. So curious what the conversation was there.**

JAXON WILLITS: I am out there at shortstop just trying to make those guys calm down because I know they get amped up. I know they want to make pitches. They want to throw it 96 miles an hour. And I feel like when they look back at me for that 2 seconds, they need to see somebody that's calm and collected. And no matter how big of a situation it is, they need to see something that's focused on the next pitch. And that's kind of my thing.

I try to relay to them. And that's what I tried to relay to him and Cleveland all night was just breathe there pitch is all that matters. It doesn't matter, like, he thought he punched a guy out. That doesn't matter anymore. Just breathe and execute this pitch.

**Q. What does it mean for you guys to leave the field and you see Brent Venables and all the other OU coaches traveled up here to support you guys?**

XANDER MERCURIUS: It just shows the support that OU has. We're a family. We stick to that as a team and we stick to it as a program and we stick to it as a school. OU is a great school, and all of our sports stick together.

We're all athletes. We all go through the same struggles. And we're just happy to have coaches of the other sports

be here and giving us some synergy and love.

JAXON WILLITS: It was pretty cool to see all those guys come out and support us. I mean, Brent talked to us for a second. I'll be honest, he had me ready to go play linebacker, ready to run through a wall. He's pretty good at what he does.

**Q. Jaxon, you're a guy who stepped right in as a freshman a couple years ago, played a big role. Are you able to put into context what Xander and Cord -- these guys stepping right in on the mound? Different craft, but I'm sure you can appreciate what they've done as true freshmen here in Omaha?**

JAXON WILLITS: Yeah, I mean it's tough as a freshman. You come in and it's a big jump, one of the biggest jumps in sports from high school baseball to college baseball. And I feel like a lot of people don't realize that.

But especially for them to do it in the SEC this year, it's really tough. So to be able to just kind of take it one day at a time, one pitch at a time and to be able to slow everything down and realize that all that matters is the task at hand. I feel like they've done a really good job at that. And because of that they've had a lot of success.

**Q. That pick-off play seemed to take away a lot of momentum from Georgia in the middle of the game. Was that something that was pre-planned before the game, because it seemed like it was a scouting report thing? Or was that something just in the moment?**

JAXON WILLITS: I'll get it. I feel like I kind of saw the way he was taking his lead. The first pitch he was on second, he was doing a five-step lead, and on his fifth step he still had his chest facing third. And he went 0-1. So, I'm, like, well, I'm not going to it with an 0-1 count. But if he throws a ball here we're going to run a pick.

He threw a change-up in the dirt, and I'm, like, man, now's the time now's the opportunity. So we ran a quick pick.

And I feel like all the times that nobody wants to work on that in the fall when it's 100 degrees and everybody's complaining that we have to do team defense for 45 minutes, it all came together in that one play.

XANDER MERCURIUS: Amen.

**Q. We talk a lot about pitching and defense this time of the year. That was one of the cleanest games I've seen you play all year. Anything you want to talk about the freshman going out there taking care of business for you?**

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SKIP JOHNSON: I thought he stayed in the process, one pitch at a time. I mean, he executed pitches when he had to execute pitches.

I thought Deiten did a great job, was switching back and forth, calling pitches and talking in between innings. And some of the things that we're talking about, I mean, it was really good that those guys behind him played really good defense. It was huge.

As a matter of fact, I really thought that us taking the momentum and keeping the momentum helped a lot. The big pick-off, just like what he's talked about, sometimes it gets monotonous in practice when you have to work on details. That was just a detail that we work on.

And sometimes it never works. Sometimes it works. And it worked in a big moment, which they weren't afraid to use it. That's the thing that I was excited about. They weren't afraid to use it. Most times people are afraid to do the things that they practice. And why do we practice? To have the courage to do that.

**Q. I want to ask about two different moments. The top of the eighth, Wynn hits that shot to right. What was going through your mind? And then the last batter of the game, the player of the year, he can finish it for them or put them in the lead. What was going through your mind? What was that feeling like?**

SKIP JOHNSON: I just got through telling Britt, I said, tell yourself what you want to happen, not what you want to happen. And you try to picture -- you're in the pitch with them. If you're a pitching coach, you're in the pitch with them.

And you might not be pitching it -- you try to use your visualization to help you get through it too. It might be weird for some people in here, but that's what I do a lot.

And really I thank Jesus, I went to the mound and, with man on first and second, I said Jackson, I know he's a real religious young man. I love Jesus, too. But I just said, hey, man, he's with you. This guy's hit balls on the pull side and he's going to maybe hit into a double play.

I'm trying to paint a picture so he can visualize in his mind what could happen, an outcome. And Jackson is a really good player. I mean, you can tell, he's the player of the year. There's no doubt about that.

And that's why it's called baseball. He missed a pitch and popped it straight up. Just missed it. He could have hit it nine miles like he hit the other one. Glad that it happened.

And I'm really proud of on your guys for having the courage to execute the pitch. It's the guy that's willing to fail in the moment to have the courage to fail that ends up succeeding in a game. I don't know what it is about the spirit of baseball, but that's what happens.

**Q. And the Wynn shot, did you sense it might go that far?**

SKIP JOHNSON: No, I had no clue if it would go that far. All I knew was the ball was jumping out. I don't know if the wind was blowing out when it started or they put new baseballs or we had new bats. The balls were jumping out of there today. I haven't seen that park play like that -- I've only been here three times. I've never seen it play like that. It was a pretty surreal moment.

**Q. Obviously you have Xander's brother LJ. Talk about the progression you've seen from both Xander and LJ throughout their time here at Oklahoma?**

SKIP JOHNSON: So, we get LJ. We saw -- me and Reggie -- we went to the area code games and saw Xander, and he reminded me a lot of the right-handed pitcher that pitched at Duke -- Stroman. He reminded me a lot of Stroman. He had great stuff. A little bitty guy. Had a big arm. He wasn't afraid of the moment.

And then we get him signed and then we sign LJ. And we kind of make an overhaul a little bit with LJ. He was a sinker-baller. We started working on him back-spinning the baseball. We knew he had a plus weapon.

And we started him early in the year, and he throws good. And then he kind of gets hit in the mouth. I think it's really from him being tired. But their work ethic never backed away.

We talk about the process of the mental game a lot. I learned when I was with Ken Ravizza and Coach Garrido and Coach Harm (phonetic) at the University of Texas. You have to practice those moments, and you have to practice taking a breath.

And we have things we do in practice to help them do that. And I can't thank them enough for staying with the process.

It's easy for us to talk about one pitch at a time. It's really hard to live because the game, once you take -- wants you to take it away from it. You make a quality pitch and he hits it off the end of the bat and it flares over a guy, you've got to get to the next pitch. You can't dwell on that pitch.

The good ones can do that. And really the game is about

just throwing the ball to the target because that's the only thing you can control. I know it's a lot of clichés, but I'm just telling you it's the truth.

**Q. Jackson Cleveland is on his fourth school in four years. It feels like as the season has progressed that you've gone to him more. It's rare when these fifth-years make those big jumps. So what have you seen out of him from the last few weeks?**

SKIP JOHNSON: Well, he works extremely hard. I know his girlfriend's dad -- Meneau (phonetic) found out about him and he called. He played at Angelina when I was the head coach at Angelina or somewhere like that when I was head coach at Navarro.

And so we get him in. You could tell he was really mature. His dad's a schoolteacher. I mean, he goes about his business the right way. He goes about his work the right way. It's four schools in four years, but he landed at the right one at the right time.

Really proud of him for that, and for him to have the courage to do that. Like last week, he throws four -- or two weeks ago throws 40 pitches in one day. And he comes to me that morning at breakfast, he goes, "Hey, I'm good. I want the ball."

There will be guys that maybe give him a chance to play professional baseball, who knows. But he's really pitching for his teammates.

When something happens like that, and he's selfless and he wants to pitch for his teammates, that's what we're in coaching about. That's what we're playing for. We're trying to teach these young men to be selfless people.

**Q. Following up on Xander. He missed a lot of bats with the fastball today. Wes talked about his fastball command being a key part of it. Just trying to make sense of how this guy in his fourth career start is doing this against that lineup in Omaha. Does the fastball development have a lot to do with it, or where else have you seen over the last four or five weeks?**

SKIP JOHNSON: Maybe it's my fault. I try to go with a certain rotation at the beginning of the year. I saw it in the fall. I mean, he's a tough kid in tough moments. Just trying to get those guys along.

When I was at the University of Texas, I threw Taylor Jungmann, Dick Howser Award winner, out of the bullpen when he was a freshman and then started starting him, too.

And I think the thing with me and Xander is he's just a tough kid. And to play in these things right here, you've got to be tough kids. You've got to be tough teams. There's not one team that's been in this whole World Series that ain't tough.

I mean, Alabama, to Ole Miss, to Troy, all those guys have got tough kids. They've got war-ridden kids on there. They play for each other. That's why they're one of the eight that are still here. And I'm really proud of him. His fastball command's been there for a while. And our strength coach and our trainer, they helped him get better and better in our development program to tick his velocity up. He's been up to 99 miles an hour this year.

So I still think that in that game today, we're talking about it, I know he pitched a great game. He rushed some pitches. He rushed some pitches where he tried to make them swing and miss instead of executing a pitch. That's the thing we learn from it, just execute it.

And I'll give him 24 hours, when we go to practice, and I'll say, hey, man, execute the pitch, work hard in between innings, because a lot of times guys get in between innings and they'll throw 88, 89, all of a sudden a hitter gets in there, they want to go 95 and they get out of control. It's about being in control all the time if you can. It's easy to talk about; it's hard to live.

**Q. Just in terms of what this run's meant to you, just as a coach, being around these guys every day, can you put into words just being a game or a win away now from getting back to a championship series?**

SKIP JOHNSON: Want to try to make me cry or something, what's going on? I'm just thankful. I'm thankful for our coaches, what they've done. I'm thankful for our administration. I'm thankful for all those coaches being there. That's what we talk about. When I was hired from Greg Tipton and Joe C., when I got the job, I felt, after a year or two years I was here, I felt it was a family-owned business. That's what being an Oklahoma Sooner is. And you can see it and you can feel it. You can feel those kids, when they decided to do it and be selfless in a world that's really selfish in this world we're living in now, it's pretty amazing.

I mean, 20 years from now, when they come back for a football game and they're drinking beer, they're not going to say, hey, man, you remember that pitch that guy threw? It doesn't matter if a guy is an equipment manager. It doesn't matter if the guy's the best pitcher or best player, it just matters if he's a great teammate or not. Because that's what really matters. And the dugout, I'm telling you guys, the dugout is what's really helped those guys. I can't

talk enough about them.

**Q. After the pick-off, Brock hits the home run in the bottom half of that inning. That ended up being the difference in the game, obviously. Just how important it was to get that run right back and just how good Brock has been in general throughout?**

SKIP JOHNSON: That was huge. We talk about winning innings and we tied that inning. They hit a home run -- we came in and it hit a home run to take it up another run. But we talk about just trying to win innings. And I thought it was really good. Aoki, he made some big pitches in that game. I'm telling you, big pitches. It could have went either way. You can sit there and say he lost the game, but really, he probably won the game.

I mean, you look at it, I mean, it had to be a win or loss, because that guy threw 100, and, what, 115 pitches and he didn't walk anybody. We walked three. And so he just kept throwing it in there, throwing it in there, and he stuck by his process, which was really fun to watch. I mean, it was kind of in a world that the ball was just jumping out of that place. I'm telling you, it was jumping.

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