

2026 Men's College World Series

Monday, June 22, 2026

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach Skip Johnson

Jaxon Willits

Kyle Branch

LJ Mercurius

Postgame Press Conference



Q. Jaxon, just even when things during the regular season might not have been going your way, how much faith did you and the rest of the team have that something like this was possible?

JAXON WILLITS: I think we knew that the talent was always in the room. And that's something that Skip and all the coaches preached to us from day one in the fall, is that this group of guys is special. Whether we were playing well or not, we believed that we had the talent in the room to go out and win a national championship.

And I feel like we were able to just take it one pitch at a time. And when things weren't going our way, we took it one pitch at a time. And when things were going our way, we took it one pitch at a time. And at the end of the day we had success with it. And we kind of got hot at the right time, and now we're national champions.

Q. Kyle, that eighth inning swing, kind of the cherry on top of an outstanding past month for Oklahoma baseball. Do you sense that the job was officially done in that moment? Or do you have to wait until the final out of the ninth inning to be sure?

KYLE BRANCH: Definitely in the final out of the last inning. And my teammates did a good job of kind of settling me down.

But, yeah, it was a big moment for me for our team because we were up big, and I was just competing. It was a two-strike approach. Skip's been telling me to hit and run the past couple days. And that's really all I was thinking about, but got a pitch up and then just continued to play hard and play pitch to pitch.

Q. Jaxon, I asked you before the finals if you're able to kind of appreciate it. You kind of admitted you still got two more games to win. It just happened. But are you able to kind of soak in that you did it at OU in Omaha, you were most outstanding player, your dad, kind of all of that? If you're able to kind of just put that into context.

JAXON WILLITS: Yeah, I mean, I'm not really sure how

Oklahoma - 13, North Carolina - 2

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the national champion Oklahoma Sooners -- head coach Skip Johnson and student-athletes, Jaxon Willits, Kyle Branch and LJ Mercurius.

SKIP JOHNSON: I don't know if I should say an opening statement for the game or for how it went. But talking about the game, I mean, we played a really good baseball team. Hats off to North Carolina. They're really good, well coached. I mean, their lineup was incredible. The pitchers they ran out there are incredible.

And we took the momentum over early. And we made some great plays defensively and got some big hits. These guys were separating balls from strikes, staying in their routines, the thing we talk about, pitch to pitch, and getting some big hits.

Kyle and Jaxon was incredible, and LJ coming out of the bullpen was picking up Nick. I thought Nick was a little bit tired when he started the game, but he was just trying to hit targets. That's what we talk about. I was really proud of him in that moment.

And really thankful for the site committee, the NCAA. Of course, when you're at the College World Series, everything is a class act. I thought the umpires were incredible all week.

And it was incredible. I'll let these guys talk and we can talk in a minute.



... when all is said, we're done.®

you put all that into words. But I was -- I'm just trying to soak it all in now. Looking back on it, it's something I'll never forget, to be able to do it here with my dad, with everybody that we have on this squad. I mean, it was a special group of guys. We were a close group of guys.

And to be able to go out there and to have success we have is something I'll never forget for the rest of my life. And I'm just going to look back on the last couple of weeks and just remember these memories forever.

Q. LJ, the emotion coming out of the bottom of the third or coming into the game and then get out of that inning, how much momentum did that create for you guys tonight? And just overall, here over the last couple of weeks, really, coming out of the bullpen, what do you think flipped for you that has helped you get to this point, obviously?

LJ MERCURIUS: I think when I was coming into the game, the mindset was always the same. Take my deep breath, finish my breath and just execute a pitch. And I knew if I did that, we'll be able to get out of the inning.

But really, I think the biggest thing coming out of that bullpen is Skip's a genius, I listen to Skip and whatever Skip says, I'm going to do. Simple as that.

Skip says take a breath and throw one pitch, I'm going to take a breath and throw one pitch. I think that's really the only thing is earlier in the year or when I was struggling, I wasn't finishing my breath. I wasn't taking a breath. And that's the biggest thing we preach.

When I started to appreciate it and really settle into listening and taking that breath, my game changed, and it shows. So I think whatever Skip says, you better frickin listen, yeah.

Q. Jaxon, in your last 10 wins this season, the team averaged 10 runs a game. When you hear that, what impact does it make? And, two, Deiten talked about it after the super regional, but for you to carry it on through the World Series, what does that mean?

JAXON WILLITS: I think the biggest thing that that does is it just lets our pitching staff go out there and attack and lets them kind of have confidence that no lead's too small and we're going to go out there and we're going to pick them up. Whether they give up two runs or 10 runs, we're going to be in the game. And I think it gives those guys a lot of confidence.

But for us to be able to go out there and just string it together. And I think there was no one batter throughout

the postseason that just was up here on the podium every night. It was a new guy on the podium. And that's something we talk about a lot.

And I feel like just the consistency and all the guys having great at-bats, 1 through 9, and then you didn't see it but a lot of the guys that weren't playing, I mean those guys were locked in, and they could have gone out there and gave us just as good of a bat. So just to have that consistency throughout the whole time, it was really big for us.

Q. LJ, for you, and all you guys came from different places to get here. I'm curious your perspective, since you came from another school, what you've seen through the hard times and the good times of this season that's allowed this team to have that kind of special chemistry and come together so that you still were able to play your best at the end, even though the entire season wasn't necessarily like this?

LJ MERCURIUS: Yeah, I think the biggest thing I've seen in my three years of college so far, is teams have two choices. It's either you kind of split apart when things aren't going well, or you come together when things are aren't going well.

And when you come together when things aren't going well, it's probably the biggest and the best thing you could do because every day, when we were losing games, we were still in the locker room, having fun, cracking jokes and just pulling for each other.

And even, shoot, we started a little bible study there, and we had about 20-some dudes show up and we were just giving it to God, and kind of just speaking and listening to everybody. And I think that was the biggest thing. We just came together through our faith. And that really helped us later in this back half.

So when teams come together like we did when things aren't looking good, it's kind of what propelled us to be able to be successful.

Q. Kyle, you had the big hit in the second inning that scored the first run for Oklahoma in this game. In the bottom half of the inning, Dasan Harris sends a throw right over your head over to third base, an absolute seed that nails the runner and ends and gets the third out before the run scores. Can you walk me through your point of view throughout that entire second inning?

KYLE BRANCH: Absolutely. So we had a couple really good at-bats before that to get guys on base. And I think I had swung and missed at one or strike one was called.



And I just went to my two-strike approach. And, like I said, Skip, hit and run, it's funny, it worked twice.

But just tried to shoot a ball through the 4-hole. And got a fastball and that's exactly what I did. I just wanted to execute that. And took it pitch to pitch.

But that throw from Dasan was really special because the moment that tag was made, I looked home and he was still -- he hadn't touched home yet. And I was just, like, man, that is above me.

I think the whole team the whole dugout was screaming 4, and Dasan had the wherewithal to go three and just put it on the money. That was one of the best throws I've ever seen.

LJ MERCURIUS: I don't really have much else to add. I was yelling 4, too. (Laughter).

Q. Can you just describe what this last month has been like and going back to the Tennessee series and the feeling then compared to now?

SKIP JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, kind of was -- we played at Oklahoma City. I thought it was a good thing that we played there. Played on dirt. We were fixing to go to the conference tournament. We're going to play on dirt, even though we have a dirt field that we practice a lot on. I think that was a big deal.

But the last month was probably -- it's like LJ just said a minute ago, it was really a God thing. Jeremy, I mean, there's a lot of people out there praying for us. Every day I get texts about, hey, man, we're praying for you guys. It's really a God thing. It really is. And it's amazing. I mean, he took that game over tonight.

I was sitting there praying for Kyle every at-bat. I'm like, Jesus, let him take over. He's an unbelievable kid. And those kids are really selfless. I mean, they're really selfless.

And it was amazing how they came together and started caring a lot about each other. A lot of times we as coaches sit there and talk about, hey, you don't know who is going to get the biggest hit, you don't know who is going to make the biggest play or throw the last pitch of the game or whatever. But it's just about being selfless.

Because when we start the season everybody's your friend and everybody gets to play intrasquad. And all of a sudden you don't get to play intrasquad, then you get to play the games, it gets really hard because you want to make everybody happy.

And you can't make everybody happy. You've got to play with the guys that are going good, that make your lineup better, that are hot in the bullpen, that they're showing you confidence.

But everybody talks about us -- they got on a big run. I'm telling you, they got really confident, and they cared a lot about each other. They didn't want to give in. And that was what was incredible. They never gave in, and they were selfless for that.

Jaxon Willits, getting the MVP, was really fitting, because he's one of our hardest workers, and he's our best leader. When you have your team with one of your best leaders is your hardest workers, and then he does that, I don't have to say much. That's called attitude. And that's really what it's about, having a great attitude.

Q. You just touched on Jaxon. What does the Willits family mean to you and to Oklahoma baseball?

SKIP JOHNSON: They're part of my family. When we took this thing over, I got the opportunity to be the head coach at the University of Oklahoma from the administration. They're here.

I wanted to be different. I wanted to be a family. I wanted -- we got to hire Reggie, and I said, Reggie, I want your kids to be around. I want their kids to be around. That's what it's about. I want those people around. They care a lot about each other because that's what's important to me. And the Willits family is very important to me. There's no doubt.

Every coach that we had did an unbelievable job -- I mean all year long. They said, hey, I couldn't believe -- one guy asked me -- I couldn't believe those guys are getting hit -- that's what you call detailed and prepared from the coaches, from the coaches, and preparing those guys and making sure they hold them accountable for the details of the game and getting comfortable.

Our mental coach was incredible throughout this deal and making them stay in their routines, take a breath. It was incredible.

Q. Just wanted to ask you about LJ and just the week he had here and what he had to say about putting the complete faith in what you told him and just the way he embraced the bullpen role, how important he's been, kind of just all of it with his season and his run the late season.

SKIP JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean he started out as a starter,



threw really good early. And I thought he kind of got tired. We moved him to the bullpen. And when we moved him to the bullpen, he kind of bought into that, you know. He kind of embraced that.

And in the course of the last four weeks, it was really special to watch him go through his routines, getting there -- him and Cleveland, Gavin, all those guys that were out there did a great job of picking each other up because you never know when it happens. You throw bullpens and you do all those things, you just never know when your number's called.

And we threw a lot of guys out there yesterday. I think we set a record for most pitchers used in a game. I think I cut a trail to the mound. I was trying to get those guys out there just to try to get an out. And a bunch of them answered the bell. They threw really good. And just didn't get it done.

But tonight, we had a game plan going into it. Nick went through the first time through the lineup. When I was going to pull him, Deiten, Walk, Willits, they all go, he's getting out of the game? And Tock, he's getting out of the game?

When a team is player-fed instead of coach-fed, it's a lot different. I was like, all right, I'm going to give him one more chance until he gets in trouble. And then he got in trouble and LJ picked him up. And that was special.

Q. Those characteristics about family and what you discussed, in putting this team together and what LJ had to say about being around this team, in the offseason this last year and the previous year, when you gathered these players and put together this roster, how much of those things are in your mind in that situation? Because obviously there's a lot more options today when you're in the SEC in how you build a roster than there were a few years ago. How much do you still take into account those kind of characteristics when you're building a team?

SKIP JOHNSON: I mean, we take that all the time. We ask them questions, I mean, all the time. We spend a lot of time trying to find out their character from the place they were at or their high school coach or their junior college coach. We watch them. We do all those things.

We bring them in and we ask them questions, and in some places some guys are not the right fit.

When they start there, we make them make their beds and they send me pictures of beds being made. And I mean it's stuff like that we're just trying to get those guys to be attentive and detailed of what we try to do.

It's pretty remarkable when you try to do in our world today. I mean, the SEC molded us through the year to what we've done. It molded us. I mean, it's the best conference in the country, and it molded us.

It was a super regional every weekend. And those guys continued to grind it out and pick each other up. And it shows you what kind of character they have when they became selfless. That was what's really special. Really proud of them for that.

Q. UNC threw eight arms at you guys today, but you guys managed to score on five of them, minus Glaub's short outing. And you guys put traffic on the bases in eight of nine innings, minus just the ninth inning. What does that say about your guys' overall approach today at the plate with the overall ramifications of this game being played for the national championship? How did you guys rise to the occasion?

SKIP JOHNSON: Good coaching. Good coaching. I mean, what Russell and Reggie did to game-plan, and Bonneau helping me and Todd Butler in the back helping us, I mean from our strength coach to our trainer, I mean it's called good coaching. It's called those guys buying in, those guys listening.

You can't just walk up to a good program and just step in and get your foot wet. You gotta jump in. If you jump in, you buy in and you listen. I mean that's what it's about.

Our job as coaches is to get those guys to excuses and teach them something that's going to be with them the rest of their life. You got to show them how much you care before you show them how much you know. That's what our coaches do. And that's living proof of it, winning the national championship.

Q. You've spoken a lot about not knowing who's going to come up big and being selfless and all that. Your number 9 hitter went 3-for-4 with six RBIs tonight. Your thoughts on Kyle Branch and his performance?

SKIP JOHNSON: That's a Jesus thing, man. I was praying hard. I'm telling you. And I talked to him earlier about getting on top of the plate. If they're throwing on one side of the plate or the other, take one side of the plate off of him.

And he's an unbelievable kid. He works extremely hard. And he scuffled a little bit this year. But guys with the right attitude come up in the best moments of the game. That's what baseball does. If you keep persevering through it, you come up with the right attitude, and the game will pay



you back.

I don't know what it is about the game. It's the spirit of the game. It protects those guys who continue to work at it and attack it, and it exploits the guys that are afraid of it and they're timid.

Q. I want to pick up an analogy you used after the super regional when you said going to Omaha is like throwing a bunch of marbles on the table and they're all going in different directions. How did you manage to keep everything on the table once you arrived in Omaha?

SKIP JOHNSON: That's what I call having a great chief of staff in Ryan Gaines, and deputy director in Greg Tipton, and athletic director Roger Denny, and SID, all of them coming together every morning at 8:30 having a meeting, knowing exactly the plan that we have to do to make sure everybody's somewhere at a certain time.

I mean, it's not me. I mean, believe me, I ain't the most -- I mean, I'm organized when it comes to deer hunting or filling deer feeders, but I ain't organized when it comes to that. I got the best guy, so I just get out of His way and let Him do it. And he'll call me when the time's right.

Q. On a night like tonight, big celebration, a lot of guys are out there telling stories. And one of them was, I guess, at Georgia Tech, maybe after the nine-run inning, the grand slam three-run homer, there's a lot of laughing going on in the dugout, literal laughing, like, I don't know if it's we can't believe this, or isn't this fun, or what kind of laughing was it? What do you remember about that? How did that kind of change and accelerate where you guys got to tonight?

SKIP JOHNSON: Oh, they could believe it. I promise you, because they believed it. There's no doubt about that. They wasn't giving in.

The coolest moment at Georgia Tech was when Trey Gambill talked to the team and told them, hey, we're going to get hit in the mouth, and I really think that helped the pitchers because it says, hey, man, they can go out there and throw the ball to the target. They hit a three-run homer, we're going to go out and get four. That's what they believed and they believed in each other, and it's a powerful thing when -- you might not have the most talented team in the world but you had the most competitive team in the world and good teammates and with the right attitude and you can go a long ways.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

