

College World Series: Lexington Regional

Friday, June 2, 2023

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Nick Mingione

Mason Moore

Devin Burkes

Travis Smith

Postgame Press Conference



Kentucky - 4, Ball State - 0

COACH MINGIONE: I'm so thankful for the fans. Want to thank them first and foremost for coming out. Awesome crowd!

And I also want to say how amazing their starter, O'Donnell, was. We have a really good lineup. And I thought he did a great job. A lot of credit goes to Coach Maloney. He's one of the premiere coaches in all of college baseball. He had his team ready.

Travis Smith, what an outing for him. Got us going. They had some traffic in the first. His ability to work his way through that I thought was big moving forward.

The job that Mason did after that was just incredible.

I also want to compliment Devin. I thought that home run was a huge play in the ball game. I think our guys took a deep breath and we went after it after that. Then obviously we were able to push some runs across in the fourth -- I mean in the eighth, to get us three runs to get us to four.

Overall great game by both teams. I loved the way we defended. We talk about pitching and defense all the time. And we got that from Devin all around with our infielders, outfielders. It was a well-played game for the Cats.

Q. Seemed like most of the game there was -- most of the game was, seemed like a pitchers' duel. Was (indiscernible) the changing up speeds, (indiscernible) throwing off speeds and stuff going out of balance. (Indiscernible)?

DEVIN BURKES: Yes, sir. He did a great job. He was throwing a lot of pitches for strikes. I wouldn't say it kept us on our heels, but I feel like it definitely, like, slowed us down a little bit. We actually had to navigate at-bats really good. He did really good. Props to him, man.

Q. Devin, what did you see in that at-bat that you hit the home run? Did you think you got enough of it? And breaking the tie, how big?

DEVIN BURKES: Honestly, man, I was trying to put the ball in play. I think I was lead-off that inning, so I was just trying to get on base for the guys. I know I got it pretty good. And it went out.

Q. Mason, you were getting through the inning so quickly with so few pitches. What was working for you?

MASON MOORE: I think throwing both pitches for strikes, curveball and fastball. We knew their attack, we knew they would be up there swinging. I new coming in I'd have to attack the strike zone.

And I trust my defense a lot. We make plays, so I knew from the beginning if I just attacked the zone and let them swing that we'd make the plays and get outs.

Q. Travis, what were you seeing these first few innings? I know Ball State had competitive at-bats, had some base runners on, but you made the big pitch to get out of the inning several times.

TRAVIS SMITH: Saw they were going in swing mode early. They weren't really taking pitches and they were fighting off two strikes. So just driving it down the strike zone and just let the defense work, and I got out of it.

Q. Mason, the crowd got louder and louder as the game went on when you were locking down the eighth inning. The adrenaline, what was that like for you? You really held it down late in the game.

MASON MOORE: Nice to have a crowd (indiscernible) showed out today. It just shows that they support us in



everything we do. It's nice to have the crowd show out for us. Gives us confidence in ourselves.

And going out there in the eighth inning, I knew I had a job, one inning at a time. Having the crowd behind me I was getting a little tired, but having the crowd got me through the last couple of innings.

Q. Did you tell Coach you had to go back out there in the 9th?

MASON MOORE: I told Coach Roszel, can I go back out. And he was, like, yeah, you got it. I was, like, all right. I knew I had one job, and the crowd and the defense helped me out in the last inning.

COACH MINGIONE: There was no way I was taking him out of the game. Some of those sinkers he was throwing were dive bombing. It was incredible.

Q. You never really know when the key moment's going to be in the game. He thought that first inning Travis battling, get through that and (indiscernible) would be key.

COACH MINGIONE: And give them credit. They came out immediately ran a hit and run. And the guy got the ball in play, bounced it over Gillie's head.

And the great pitchers, they have another gear and another level. And they have the ability to make the pitch when the game demands it. That's exactly what Travis did. He got the line out and immediately followed up with a punch-out.

And I thought it sent a statement that -- and I told the team that. At that moment Travis was saying no, you're not scoring. Like they had their opportunity there and then for him to go out and give us four shutout innings this is a guy that started as our mid-week starter. And I said this in the in-game interview, I really believe no moment is too big for him.

And for us to hand the ball to a redshirt freshman in this environment, with everything on the line, but there's no moment too big for him. And I tell you what, our players love playing behind him. They love Travis Smith. They love the way he goes on the attack. He has SEC Friday night starter stuff, and they love playing him behind.

When it came time and we watched and we evaluated all the teams, it just became apparent that we had to go with him. And sometimes you like it when the players prove you right. But he was phenomenal.

Q. Travis, when did you know you were going to be

the starter today? And what does it mean to hear that phrase and also know to be the trusted guy to set the tone for this tournament?

TRAVIS SMITH: I found out Wednesday during practice. I threw a bullpen on Tuesday -- a lot of people threw bullpen on Tuesday. Just want to thank Coach believing in me and Coach Roszel for giving me the rock. And tried to show out for them.

Q. Mason, how long did you expect to pitch today when you went in there knowing that the Regional is important (indiscernible)?

MASON MOORE: From the beginning in the bullpen I expected to go two or three. I had my stuff today. I had the confidence. And the guys behind me were making plays.

They kept riding me. And I'm glad that they had that confidence to keep putting me out there. When they do that just gives me confidence to go out there, perform the best I can for the team.

Q. Throwing again?

MASON MOORE: Yeah, I can throw again this weekend.

Q. Devin, your guys were pushing to be a Regional host almost all year, really. Finally get there. You had some anxious moments down the stretch. You get there and then you deliver the first win in the history of this ballpark. What does that mean to you guys big picture?

DEVIN BURKES: Man, it means a lot. We're doing things here, we've never done it before since I've been at Kentucky. It just gives us all the confidence in the world. It's just a blessing. It's a blessing.

Q. How much does the fact that the guys in 2017 help you? I know you the history of the program but is that any inspiration to you?

DEVIN BURKES: That was a great team. We have a lot of those guys come back and actually show love to us and tell us what to expect from this environment. And it really helps us, really helps us navigate different situations and things like that. So just really good.

Q. Devin, obviously you guys still had to come back out in the top of the ninth and close out the deal. But how good did that eighth inning feel, after such a close battle, to get those three runs?



DEVIN BURKES: Felt great. We were just clawing, trying to push runs across. Like I said, that starter was really good. He did really good today.

But it felt great. We actually -- I just felt the whole team just relax and just kind of stay focused but just kind of be like, okay, we got it.

Q. I know your job is not done but for you guys to get one postseason win under your belt knowing the nerves were going into today, do you feel you could breathe a sigh of relief a little bit?

MASON MOORE: I think getting this first win is good for us. We haven't ever hosted a Regional here with this team. And getting that first win, getting out there, getting our reps in, it just gives us the confidence to go out there and want to keep playing better for the team and the coaches.

And the crowd helps out a lot too. All in all, it just gives us all the confidence in the world to keep going out there keep winning.

Q. I know this goes without saying but only having to burn two arms in this game, Mason didn't even throw as many pitches as you expected in the five innings. How does that help moving forward the next couple of days?

COACH MINGIONE: You know this better than anybody, the strength of our team is the amount of guys we can use as starters or out of the bullpen. And anytime, this is -- you can play as many as five games or as many as three. So the fact that we used two guys -- and even for Mason to throw 50 pitches in five innings, that's incredible.

When you start doing the math, he's averaging, what, 10 pitches an inning, if I do my math right. He's got 10 pitches an inning. It's obviously big.

We got Mag hot but he didn't come in the game. So really we used two arms and got one guy ready to go.

Q. You had a layoff after the NCAA Tournament, how important was it to come and get back to playing the way you want to play today?

COACH MINGIONE: You know, there's a lot of good things. And sometimes there could be some challenges that come with getting knocked out and not winning that first game. One of the good things is your team's able to come back, kind of get their legs underneath them.

I give our team a lot of credit because last Friday we

scrimmaged for eight innings and we put them in separate dugouts and went back to the fall, and you would have thought it was a Super Regional game the way they're getting after each other, they're chirping at each other. They wanted to win.

Last Saturday we played six innings. And we've got some guys on the mound, and we got some guys some at-bats, not as many as you hoped, but when you have that long layoff it helps the pitching side.

And the guys defensively, to give their bodies a break, but sometimes it could take you a little bit to get going offensively.

So it was good. It was a good break. It definitely helped. And I think it really showed with how sharp Travis and Mason were today.

Q. Crowd really got going at the end. Those were exciting moments. What was it like for you to see him lock it down and the crowd to just get behind them, those moments?

COACH MINGIONE: Just thankful. You guys know this, but basically anywhere you go in our league, that's what the environment's like. And for us to have that environment, and it started kind of late in the year there, we started getting more and more people -- and as you heard Mason say it does so much for 18- to 24-year-olds, and 25-year-olds like Darren.

But it's just -- it's a big deal. And when you have people in your corner, it's amazing what it can do to guys. And I thought it showed and Mason said it right there: I'm starting to get tired in the eighth.

And here comes the fans. And it pushes him over the edge and next thing you know he finishes the game. And that might not happen without our fans. So I'm grateful.

Q. You talked about defense a lot. After watching Ryan Ritter for a couple of years (indiscernible) that it would get better or be that good, but Grant Smith, have we talked enough about him?

COACH MINGIONE: Yeah, you know, I cannot tell you enough. Like the guy has just been incredible all year long. You saw him today go up the middle on the other side of second base and make a play. You saw him go in the 6 hole and make a play. And they have green runners. They have seven green runners in their line-up, guys who are 4.2 or less down the line, can really get down the line.

Whether or not he's gotten enough credit or not, I just



know, I mean, he's as good as anybody that I've ever coached. And that's saying a lot because Ryan Ritter is like amazing. And he won the Gold Glove.

And I believe Grant Smith can do that as well. They're both special shortstops. And I would put Grant up there as good as anybody I've coached. And I just hope he gets the opportunity to get a Gold Glove because there's no question in my mind that he deserves it.

And Ryan Ritter is the standard. He showed what it should look like. For us to have another infielder come behind --

And speaking of our infielders, I thought our infield defense was absolutely phenomenal. We hit a lot of balls in the air, we had a lot of outs in the air. But they put a lot of balls in play.

I mentioned Grant's plays. I thought Jase did a great job at third base. And Pitre did a good job on the double play. How about the lineout that he caught? That was huge in the first inning.

And Gillie was just sensational. Mason comes in. Immediately we get the guy on first base. We go right to Mason to try to get the ground ball. Pete gets it. Throws it in the dirt and Gillie picks it.

And late in the game, Gillie just sits right there. That ball is hit, I bet over 95 to 98 miles an hour and he just wears it off his body. Like, man, that's real toughness.

And then Devin behind the plate was absolutely sensational. Even in the first inning. Strikeouts, how do you get strikeouts? Elevated fastballs and buried breaking balls. And we're throwing balls in the dirt, and he's blocking it, saving runs.

I thought our defense was crucial. There's no way you shut a good Ball State team, a really good offense, without pitching and superb defense. And our guys were that today.

Q. You talked a lot this season and especially this week about playing aggressive. Did you see that to the extent you wanted to out of your guys today?

COACH MINGIONE: We ran a couple of hit and runs. I talked to the team after. We missed under -- we didn't get the ball on the ground some, but we tried to steal a base, we attempted some bunts. And eventually we got our big inning in the eighth.

I thought Jase Felker's at-bat was absolutely phenomenal. He had a nine-pitch at-bat, puts the ball in play, and now

we get it going.

Devin walks, we get the wild pitch. And I thought Pete's ability to hit the ball in the middle of the field and score those two runs were absolutely crucial.

It would be easy to skip over Jase's nine-pitch at-bat. And I thought he was super aggressive. We had six hits today and three of them were two strikes. Our guys' just never-quit attitude to put balls in play and grind out at-bats, even with two strikes, was crucial.

Q. Where have you seen the biggest growth for Mason from year one to year two to do what he did today, especially all season?

COACH MINGIONE: That's a really good question. The one thing I'll tell you is Mason is a phenomenal athlete. How about the play off the mound, the back of the mound? He runs backwards off the back of the mound, jumps up, catches it, throws a strike to first base.

And Mason would always send us videos of him dunking in high school. I mean, that's how good an athlete he is. But I would tell you that he had fastball command. It's really amazing, and you guys know this, but the spring sometimes in Kentucky, the weather could be a challenge. And so he would go from basketball to baseball, sometimes that's a really hard transition because he's running up and down the court. In order to pitch and throw you've got to have feel for the baseball. And sometimes the football baseball combo is pretty good because there's that break to where you start getting your arm in shape. He went straight from basketball to baseball.

It was really amazing when he first got here, his fastball command. He could always command the ball and sink it. But now his ability to land his slider and his change-up. That has made him a three-pitch guy. When you sit there, go, wow, we just ran a guy out of the bullpen who was up to 94, 95, maybe a -6, but he's throwing three pitches for a strike, we almost brought in another starter. And he's that good. But his ability to land his off-speed pitches for a strike and to be able to locate them for swing and miss, punch-out, when we need it.

Q. Obviously the goal for this weekend is to advance to Super Regional, but this was the first time in history of the program that you thought you shut out an opponent in an NCAA game, how meaningful is that?

COACH MINGIONE: To God be the glory. It's just heart. It's heart. There's 64 teams left and they're all good. That team won 35 games, and they got a guy, 15 homers, eight

homers, it's a really good offense. And we have been built on pitching and defense. And we were able to do that today. But we've been playing baseball here for a long time, over 120 years, at Kentucky, and to do that for the first time, is that what you said?

Q. First time in NCAA.

COACH MINGIONE: Yes, pretty amazing. Coach Roszel is a great pitching coach. He's a great man. You can hear Travis saying he's wanting to do it for his coaches, for his teammates. And just thankful because it's hard to do. It's hard to do in college baseball. It's hard to do. So I'm sure they'll want to take BP, that's what they talk about, pitchers BP, shutout, can we -- maybe they'll get that.

Q. You don't get the pleasure of playing too many games here in 90 degree weather. Does it feel any different?

COACH MINGIONE: I didn't notice. One thing the guys talk about, sometimes when you slide on the turf and it heats up, it will burn your hand. I say, that's easy, slide with your hands up. But the temperature of the turf could get really warm. But other than that, I thought the park played and the turf played -- James Nelson is our field guy. Does an amazing job. Had the field ready and it played good.

Q. And what does the rest of the day look for you guys, watch the late game, recovery involved?

COACH MINGIONE: Good question. If you asked our guys that question, they immediately would tell you hydrate. I think I've brainwashed them. They are fully brainwashed. Hydrate. Get something to eat. I tell them you can celebrate tonight, this victory, but every win has an expiration date. When they get up tomorrow, this win has expired and we're back to zero. I'm so thankful for this team because they've been really good at turning the page and going to the next thing. And we won 17 games in a row at one point because they would hydrate. They would get something to eat. Some of them, remind them go take a shower, and then just move on. So they'll come out. I asked some guys if they planned on coming out to the game, I think it's important anytime they get a chance to watch the game -- we've had, man -- my son is in his Little League tournament out at Southeastern, and our players have been coming out to the game. We had 14 guys at his game the other day, they were, Coach, this was a really good reminder of like, man, baseball.

Grant Smith told me yesterday he came to his game yesterday, they've been out three different times. Some of the guys have been all three games, he told me yesterday,

Coach, this was a good reminder how baseball is really easy and simple.

And he went out and gave us three great at-bats and do all that. But this is a special group. This is a special group. They've crushed it in the classroom, over a 3.3 GPA in the spring. Over a 3.5 in the fall. These guys are winners. They'll come up tonight and they'll get some rest and they'll be ready to go tomorrow.

Q. Building off that, Coach, talked about your league preparing you June baseball is different, the rest of the weekend is going to be tough. What are you expecting out of tomorrow and your guys to win this weekend?

COACH MINGIONE: Even just considering the two teams that are still left, like, that are going to play today, left to play today. Indiana, they won over 40 games. And same thing with West Virginia. Like two super talented teams and had a lot of success in their respective conferences. This is never easy. This is one day, and tomorrow will bring its own challenges. Those are two really good teams coached by two really good coaches. So it's going to exactly feel like an SEC weekend. There's no question. They're super talented and well-coached teams.

Q. You know your team. And yet when they came out, they were just so calm. But it is a part of it. What did you say to them?

COACH MINGIONE: Yeah, there's been a bunch. We've said a lot. You've heard me talk about Mitch Barnhart and his message to the team at the beginning of the year playing for Kentucky. And I reminded them of that before today's game. Hey, we're so unselfish and there's zero personal agendas. We're going to play for the name across our chest. We're going to play for who, and they all said, Kentucky. Who? Kentucky. Who? Kentucky.

And we are at our best when we're on the attack and we're super aggressive. We go for it. We just keep coming. That is us at our best. I just reminded them of that.

And Kaley Evans is one of our -- she's our fellow athletic trainer -- you know this but trainers have a really good feel for the team. Kaley, what have you got? She was like they are overly happy today. They're just like in the greatest mood. And I'm like, okay, thank you, Lord, that's how they have to be. This comes with enough added pressure.

She told me that before the game. They play their best when they're loose, and they love being around each other. So they'll need to do that again tomorrow, and I fully expect them to do that.

