

College World Series: Lexington Regional

Sunday, June 4, 2023
Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Nick Mingione

Austin Strickland

Postgame Press Conference



Kentucky - 10, West Virginia - 0

COACH MINGIONE: Can't say enough good things about the guy to my left. What a start at the time where we needed it the most. His competitive spirit shined today. Our guys just love playing behind him.

And obviously he got us -- I thought the first inning was great. He rammed the ball in the strike zone. Got a good, quick inning, allowed our offense to score two. From there on I felt we played our best style of baseball, where we got a lead, we added to our lead. And we pitch and defend at a super high level, but it all started with Austin.

Q. Austin, what's worked for you these last two starts that were such a departure from what you had before?

AUSTIN STRICKLAND: I think being able to put pitches in the zone and out of the zone when I need to. I've been feeling really good in my delivery, really good with what my pitches are doing, where they're going to move, when they're going to move. And there's a lot of confidence that comes from that, knowing your stuff and knowing yourself.

So I just tried to really -- some of the things I worked on with Coach Roszel is just stay boring. I just try to go out there and just put it in the zone, out of the zone, execute what I need to execute. And it's been working quite well.

Q. This has been a buildup the last few weeks to get to this point where you're throwing more innings and making starts your last two times out. What's that process been like for you?

AUSTIN STRICKLAND: Hasn't always been easy, but I've been getting in with our training staff, and the 've been really good at helping me out and trying to get my arm back and ready.

Had to take a bit of time off after the SEC tournament. Coaching staff was supportive of that. Just giving myself a chance to rest. Haven't gone super far in a long time, since high school.

Just our coaching staff being supportive of keeping my arm healthy and our training staff always being here is helping a lot.

Q. West Virginia scored 19 runs the first two games in the Regional. What was the plan of attack going into it? How were you able to keep them off balance the rest of the afternoon?

AUSTIN STRICKLAND: They've got their guys, their top-of-the-order guys. They're all really good. And J.J. Wetherholt is a really good bat. Our game plan was just pitch to our strengths.

We have what might not be their strengths, but hitting is really hard. So you just pitch to your good strengths and you ram it in there and you prove that they can hit it. More times than not good things are going to happen.

COACH MINGIONE: I'd like to add something about Austin. You've heard me talk about all year how unselfish our team is and how that started -- you've heard me say it over and over about Mr. Barnhart's message to win for Kentucky.

And Austin was one of the guys, at the beginning of the year, we trained a bunch of different guys to be starters. And when the season started, Austin was one of the guys we just pulled aside and told him, hey, Austin, you're not going to be one of the opening day starters, and that could change.

And he wanted to start really bad. And this guy basically said, Coach, whatever we need to do to help the team win. And as the season went on, you noticed how we just kept giving him more and more innings.

And I thought one of his breakthroughs was when he got through four. He got to the fifth inning about a month ago and it was, like, he was so excited because he had just



been going one- or two-inning stints, and he was throwing the ball so well that we just kept giving it to him.

And earlier in the year Austin had a conversation. We had maybe took him out when things got in trouble. And Austin pulled me aside and said, Coach, can I have a conversation with you? And I said, sure. He said, Coach, I would like a little longer leash. He goes, if there's any way in the future maybe you could let me finish some of the stuff that I get into.

And I said, Austin, you've been here three years. You've been super unselfish, absolutely. We kept giving him a little bigger leash. He just kept getting better and better and better.

And to his credit it started with him in his heart being so unselfish for Kentucky. And at the very end of the year, when we needed the biggest start of the season, he gave it to us. But there's no question in my mind he was blessed because of how unselfish he was earlier in the year.

Q. What was that like, that time earlier in the year and staying with it?

AUSTIN STRICKLAND: I've always just kind of been like whatever needs to happen to help the team. And like he said, did I want to be a starter? Sure. Everybody wants to. But whatever needed to happen.

I have a lot of people in my corner. It was really tough to kind of break that 3.2-inning glass ceiling. I was, like, man, if I can just get that last out to get to fourth innings, that's just, you know, you've got to break it.

As soon as I did I've gone four, five, four, 6.2, six. I feel like I needed to prove to myself -- and I knew everybody believes in me. The whole team believes me. I had to prove to myself, man, if I can just get that one more the sky's the limit.

I really appreciate Coach having that conversation with me and him trusting in me to give my best effort. And I believe in myself and I believe in my whole team. But I just believe that when I'm out there I'm the best competitor there is.

Q. West Virginia got a couple of barreled shots in the first inning. Made good plays on those. How much does that go into everything you've been talking about, hey, guys behind me are making plays, builds confidence that later in the game, hey, I can throw it in there and let those guys make plays out of it?

AUSTIN STRICKLAND: It's incredible. When you feel you have to be really perfect and split the corners and make

every single pitch, there's no freedom there. You feel like you're kind of trapped. And, man, if they get a hit, you don't know what's going to happen.

But our defense, our positioning was incredible today. Had a couple line shots. And our guys were just right there. Every time the ball gets put in play our defense, especially our infield, just vacuums.

Our outfielders catch everything, infielders catch everything. Hunter Gilliam picks everything. It's such a freeing feeling. And it goes back to, I can shove it right in there. I can just throw everything right down the middle and let it break. And I know if they put it in play, our team's going to get an out.

Q. Coach does talk to us every time about the unselfishness of the team. But the other thing he talks about the resiliency. What is it about this team? Is there any doubt in your mind that you guys can come back?

AUSTIN STRICKLAND: Never a doubt. I feel like we're like most teams. After a loss, like yesterday, our locker room was pretty quiet. But we got our leaders who step up in the group chat -- hey, guys, we've got to come out with an edge. We know we can hang with any team. We can beat any team but we can also be beat by any team.

When we come out with our edge and just prove to ourselves, hey, we're the best team out there, I don't think anybody's going to beat us. If we're down, we just ran out of time yesterday. That's all it was. We got our innings back today and our offense really showed up. And we'll keep showing up later tonight.

Q. I think if I'm looking at this right, Nolan McCarthy only had one at-bat in May. Was that an injury? Or what made you put him in this position --

COACH MINGIONE: James had been giving us good at-bats. And James' defense had been phenomenal. James', every time the bat leaves his shoulder he has a chance for an extra base hit.

We just felt like Nolan had been taking really good BPs. He's been a phenomenal teammate throughout this time. And Nolan, he's another one of these unselfish guys. We have a lot of really good players. You don't get to be in a position we're in without having really good guys on the bench waiting their turn.

I think Austin is a perfect example of that. That guy's been in our bullpen helping us win games and get to this spot. He has an opportunity to start the last couple of weekends,

and all of a sudden look at what he does.

And Nolan is another really unselfish guy. A lot of other teams he's probably in their the starting lineup every day. We allowed both of those guys to go back and forth, and Nolan has been really unselfish, taking great batting practices. I guess he made us look really good.

Q. You talked about the leash a moment ago. Also you get early run support which can make that leash a little bit longer in a game like this where you can save your bullpen maybe if this thing gets to Monday?

COACH MINGIONE: Yeah, and one thing, Austin, I overheard him and Gillie just talking about how Austin must have told him, you get me some runs and I'm going. I'll finish it if I can. We'll save our guys. Get me runs.

We just kept adding. I thought there was three different times in the second, third, sixth where we scored and they didn't. Austin immediately came out and put up a zero and allowed that to keep going.

We had those three shut-down innings and ultimately we had six shut-down innings and just allowed the offense to keep adding.

Q. Seven hits with runners on, four runners in scoring position. That's been a thing that's plagued you all throughout SEC play. Finally breaking through in that regard, finding those hits and not having zeros on the scoreboard, how big was that?

COACH MINGIONE: I thought we had a couple of big hits. Nolan's home run was big. And Gillie's RBI in the middle of the field was crucial. Reuben gave us some great at-bats.

But our guys, we've just been barely off. We've just been missing our quality at-bat goal by one or two at-bats each game. It hasn't been far away.

And guys, West Virginia is an awesome team, coached by some great coaches. Randy Mazey is an amazing coach. Steve Sabins went to a really cool college called Embry-Riddle. But they're just a really good coached team.

For us to shut that team out Strick and Mag and James -- I thought James threw great. You just don't do that to that team, that offense, what they can do. They're a special team. They won 40 games. Our guys just executed at a super high level.

Q. How do you feel about the pitching now going into

tonight, knowing that you need two more?

COACH MINGIONE: You know, I talked about this. We do a staff meeting every week. And I just complimented Richie Wells and Ryan Devriendt. Because all you can ask at the end of the year is just do you have your team healthy.

To start the Regional, we had every player on our team healthy, ready to go. That's really hard to do. We've been in a lot of situations where you just don't have some of the guys that you hoped for by the time you get to the end of the year.

And our staff and our nutrition staff, everybody, has done an amazing job to get the guys there. And you know what? We have all of our arms available.

And I think in order -- you guys know this -- in order to win a Regional, especially to come out of the losers' bracket, you have to have pitching depth. That showed today. And we needed to keep showing up.

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