

College World Series: Lexington Regional

Friday, May 31, 2024

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Nick Mingione

Robert Hogan

James McCoy

Postgame Press Conference



Kentucky - 10, Western Michigan - 8

Q. What was working out there for you today? You came in in a tough situation and pitched three strong innings?

ROBERT HOGAN: I guess just throwing strikes. That was the biggest inning, just being able to throw every pitch for a strike. That keeps the hitters off balance.

And I have an unbelievable defense behind me. So it's easy to pitch when you have guys like G behind me and James. They're getting the balls that not a lot of teams can. It's a lot easier to pitch like that.

Q. James, you entered the game in a bit of a slump, but you got a home run and a double. What changed in your approach today?

JAMES MCCOY: I was about three hours down here with Coach Ming just working on a bunch of feels, doing a bunch of crazy stuff. I thank him for everything he pours into us -- and Reeves (phonetic) was down there, too. That was really cool.

Q. Robert, 50 pitches today. What's your availability the rest of the week?

ROBERT HOGAN: I'm going to say I'm going to get some rest tonight, do some recovery. Probably do a light day tomorrow or take it off, no throw, and I'll be ready for Sunday.

Q. What was it like playing postseason baseball here in the regional?

JAMES MCCOY: It was really cool seeing all the fans

come out. They were kind of rushing the gates right on the opening BP. We were running in from doing our defensive work. It's cool to see the rush in to all the terraces there, and they have our backs the whole game.

ROBERT HOGAN: I'd say it's pretty cool. BBN (phonetic) is pretty awesome. Being here is probably the greatest decision I ever made. I couldn't thank Mingione enough, and this place, what it means to me. Playing postseason here means a lot.

Q. What does it do for you guys when you have a crowd like that, and you mentioned the way they support you, what does that do for you during the game?

JAMES MCCOY: Just puts the focus on the front of the jersey. The big blue nation, they come out and support us whether it's raining. It was Vandy, and I was getting soaked. Everyone else is still in the outfield and they're not running for cover. But they pour their hearts into us and it's really cool to see.

Q. James, what did you see on the home run pitch? Looked like it was quite a laser shot hit off the ground?

JAMES MCCOY: Saw a slider the pitch before. It was called a ball and he came back to it. I felt good swinging at it. At first I thought it was going to maybe hook more foul. I got out of the box, and I was, like, it's foul. And then couple more steps, oh, that's fair. So I kind of -- it was cool to see it go over.

Q. James, you've been with the program for a while. This is such a great opportunity obviously. One game at a time. But what kind of pressure if any do you guys feel taking advantage of this?

JAMES MCCOY: I don't think there's much pressure. We prepare for these games or if bigger stakes. And we just focus on preparing and preparing the best we can.

Q. Obviously the fifth inning they kind of come storming back, threatening (indiscernible), putting a lot

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of pressure on you guys. Really that whole inning, what's the mood in the dugout right after that to make sure you guys come back and answer, get the momentum back and seize control of the game again?

ROBERT HOGAN: I would say, for us, the biggest thing is just staying with us. We don't like to see what they're doing. If they score, then like we're going to score back and we're just going to try to lift each other up. We're going to try to have any time in the game when we're down.

That's the biggest thing is in the dugout we like to be up, no matter what the score is. If we're up or down we're always going to be up in the dugout having fun.

Q. How valuable is it with what you guys have to go through on a weekly basis when you're playing in your conference? How valuable is that now in this kind of situation?

ROBERT HOGAN: I would say it definitely is valuable, but the team we played today, you saw they were resilient. They came out attacking and I mean they almost came back. So having the experience we do in the SCC it definitely helps to where we can stop it and we know what we are.

It's the best conference in the country. It says it for itself.

JAMES MCCOY: Week in, week out, in the SCC, it's a tough schedule no matter who you are playing really. And it's interesting, Coach Ming always says those games all count the same. It just prepares you because week in, week out it's tough team and tough lineups every day.

And then you get to the game today and they're a tough lineup too. And they took advantage of our mistakes. And it's just a matter of we've been through it before. We've been through it for 10 weeks in the SEC. We know how to battle and come back.

Q. James, you mentioned being down here with Coach Ming doing a bunch of crazy stuff, helping you with this. Can you give any secrets? What's the crazy stuff and what clicked?

JAMES MCCOY: I think one of the craziest things, if the plate here, we put a tee, like, where Reeves is. I'm standing there and he's like, all right, I want you to hit this ball off this tee at Amo (phonetic) over here. And it was swing and miss. It's like, whoo, that looked weird.

Then he was, like, I feel something. And baseball is all about adjustments and just having the feel with your swing

and figuring out those adjustments and what's working.

Q. Robert, can you talk a little bit about Dominic's performance and what that means to the team?

ROBERT HOGAN: So that was awesome. Being able to see him go out there and absolutely dominate. He's one of those guys that we needed that to happen. And having them come out today and do that and give us those innings, it saves arms for this weekend. Now we have a lot of guys for tomorrow.

And it's just something where we can all build off that. We can all build off of each other and we know we trust everyone who gets the ball.

Q. Robert, as a kid, you probably dreamed playing in the playoffs or postseason baseball on the mound trying to get that final out. What was that like today in front of this home crowd, when you can finally tell, hey, we're going to win this thing, we're going to get out of it? What's going through your mind? Was it everything you probably thought of as a kid being on the mound for that final out in the game like today?

ROBERT HOGAN: It makes me speechless because I didn't have any thoughts I'm just getting this out [Robert]

It's one of those things where playing baseball is really hard and it's like every other game. There was a lot of people. And every weekend we have it. And I thought of it, it's just another weekend. It's another weekend playing baseball, having fun.

Q. Robert, you had (indiscernible) a lot of baseball. You came here, (indiscernible) yourself, you came through the portal. You played a big role all year. What's it mean to you to lift this program to a place it's never been before?

ROBERT HOGAN: It's a pretty special feeling. This place is unreal. Like I said before, there's no other place I'd be right now other than here in Kentucky playing for this school and this state.

And the guys, too. They're my brothers. And I don't know what else to say. It's just pretty awesome being here and being able to play for these guys, Coach Ming, everyone. There's nothing I could ever have asked for.

THE MODERATOR: Opening statement from Coach.

NICK MINGIONE: When they opened the gates about 90 minutes before, just to watch our fans, like, just rush to get to their spots, it was a surreal feeling.



I've been at another place where it's been like that, but we hadn't had that yet. So I, first off, want to thank our fans for showing up in the sun, in the heat. They showed up. It was 90 minutes, I believe. It was 90 minutes before the game and they were waiting to sit there. They waited an hour and a half until the game's even started.

And then they sat through, how long was that game? Somebody help me. Three and a half almost, three and a half? So our fans, they sat there for five hours. So just super thankful to them.

I thought Dom gave us a great start. He went four shutout to start. And then give them a lot of credit; they started putting balls in play with two strikes. They just flipped the balls, hit it really, quite frankly, where we wanted it. And that's a really good team. They're champions for a reason.

But I thought Dom, he got us a lot of big outs. I thought Cam O'Brien, the job he did, to come in in the fifth was crucial, where we were able to minimize. I thought Evan Byers got us two outs. And obviously Hogan was fantastic, got us 10 outs.

And they had their chances. Give them credit. They put a lot of pressure on us.

But I give our guys credit. We bend but we didn't break. They did score in two innings, but they didn't score in the other seven, and I thought that was the difference in the game.

Q. Was there a little nail biting there? It was close there. Does that give a wake-up call to guys that at this point every single team is going to be good?

NICK MINGIONE: You guys have watched us play. How many times have we been in that same game? I feel like we've been there so many times.

I don't bite my nails; my wife's proud. Reeves, do you still bite yours or are you good? All right, Reeves stopped biting, so no -- I know Christen doesn't bite her nails, so no one in our family bites their nails.

But was it intense in every play and inch every matter? Absolutely, but to our point the other day, we've been in those games for 15 weeks. So this is the 16th week of it. So I thought our guys absolutely responded.

I thought a big moment in the game was in the fifth. They score five and then we immediately score two. And I thought that was the difference in the game. They immediately score five and we answer back with two. I

thought that was big.

Q. Devin Burkes, he's had his ups and downs all year, but he's leading off right where he left off last year in the Regional. Could you talk about how he played?

NICK MINGIONE: The guy is just clutch. Had four key blocks. Kept the game in front of him the entire time. Every one of those blocks saved us a base which ultimately saved us a run.

I thought his leadership was fantastic. His verbal and nonverbal behind the plate is absolutely crucial. And there's a reason why we bat him in the 3 hole. I think you can look at stats and other things, but that guy is as tough and as clutch as anybody in our program.

So he was 5-for-5 today quality at-bats, 5-for-5, every at-bat he did something positive for Kentucky. I thought that was good.

And I thought the production up and down our lineup was crucial. I talked about our pitching. I mentioned some of our defense. But we had seven different guys that had an RBI, seven. And if you look at what our 7, 8, 9 guys did. They scored five of our 10 runs between those guys.

So I think anytime you have that kind of production up and down the lineup, it obviously makes us hard to beat. And we were able to do it all. We hit bunts, bombs, ran the bases, stolen bases, got thrown out a couple times being aggressive but we were on the full-on attack. We drew walks, got hit by pitches and hit on a lot of cylinders offensively.

Q. Today starts a journey for a lot of teams who are hoping it goes two or three weeks and ends in Omaha. When you have a program that's had moderate success and has never been there, can you talk about the hunger of the people who were coming into the stands 90 minutes before, your hunger, the players' hunger to get to a place this place has never been before?

NICK MINGIONE: It's been a lot of work. A lot of ups and downs. I've learned a lot as a coach. I haven't been perfect. But the one thing I will say is that as our program has continued to try to climb and make adjustments and get better, our fans have done the same thing. And you can just see, year after year, you can just see it building, from the end of '22 to last year, to this year.

And I just want to compliment this team -- you've heard me say this a lot -- they're so good at moving on to the next thing.



Like, we talk all the time. You've heard us say how this win will expire at midnight and it will. They move on immediately. And that's how, we look up, at one point we're 15-1 in the league. This is incredible. How are you able to do that?

If I told our team we better go 15-1 beginning of the year, they're going, Coach, you're crazy. They literally have taken each game and they move on and they say next and it's a new day -- win or lose, next, next, next.

And ultimately it's a lot like building a house. You really have to do -- a brick house -- you do have to do it one brick at a time. And have you to keep laying them. And one gets off, you've got to reset it and get it going, and just keep going.

By the time you look up, you do it enough times for a long enough period of time, after a while you look up, and it's, wow, look at this. We built a mansion. But you can only do it one brick at a time. That's what we've attempted to do.

Q. You talked about the fifth inning. And I think going into that inning Dom only gave up one hit. I think we all agreed he's better than the stat line. They had three infield base hits and (indiscernible) and scored five runs. How do you keep yourself and your team from getting frustrated when teams do those frustrating things to you that you've been doing to them all season long?

NICK MINGIONE: That's our ability to move on. I thought it helped. I did not think Dom got frustrated. I thought he kept making his pitch. Then it was, like, boom, they put the ball in play, give them credit.

I thought he held true to who he was. He didn't get frustrated. And you're right. That's us at our best where we're putting balls in play, creating pressure and making plays.

So I thought he did that. I thought Cam he settled that game, too. Cam O'Brien. He did what he's done all year. He's been our fireman. Every time he gets to a spot where we need to bring in a fireman, boom, and it gets hairy, he's right there.

I thought they held it together. I also, again, like how we responded right after. To score two immediately, I thought that was crucial.

Q. Obviously when you're up 8-0 it looks like maybe you're going to get out without using any of your top

relievers. You have to do what you have to do to win the game, but how do you feel about the pitching situation for the rest --

NICK MINGIONE: You know, if you asked me before the game how was it going to go, it was going to go Dom to Hogan. And we used Cam in between there, and we used Devin who got us obviously two outs.

You could see Hogey was starting to run on fumes. I think those two outs by Evan Byers was big. That was the plan to go right to Dom, right to Hogan.

Would it have been nice (indiscernible) to try to put the game away? Yes, but that's a good team. That's a good team. And it was going to be hard to put them away.

And if you look at that team, how many times they scored eight or more runs in their last 15 games, it's pretty impressive. It's pretty impressive. So I knew deep down they were going to make their run and their push. And it played out the way we wanted with Hogan.

Q. (Indiscernible) number two overall seed and you're capable of getting where you want to go. How do you keep these guys loose and concentrate on the goal but also have fun and play loose?

NICK MINGIONE: They've actually done that all year. There's a couple of times where I've got to be honest, I'm looking down there, do I want to look down to see what they're doing? They're like, you know what I mean? I really don't have to really coach that as much with this group because they're keeping it loose.

Today I saw the cap sack. I don't know if you saw that. This is new. They mixed in camo. Did you guys catch that? It was, a regular cap, then camo cap, regular cap, camo. I saw them sitting on the bench, early in the game, I bet that's for the cap sack -- whenever we do that. So they're thinking ahead.

I saw Jackson Nove today. I'm walking down to the dugout, getting ready to coach, and I'm like, Jackson Nove had full catchers gear on. He's a left-handed pitcher. All right, they're lose. We (indiscernible) keep playing that way.

It all starts, it can only be if they compete first. It starts. It's the building block of anything we do. You have to compete at the highest level.

Q. With Dom, what went into that decision?

NICK MINGIONE: Our starters. You guys know this,

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those that follow our program closely, we think about it every game. We've gotten a lot of mileage out of our starters. They have thrown the bulk of innings. When we're at our best they take us deep into the game.

They've done that. So therefore they've thrown a good bit. And so we chose to not throw Dom in the SEC Tournament. Threw him for maybe an inning, we get out of there. Not beat up. There's some things going on. We really gave him some good rest.

I give Coach Rizzo credit. Him and Dom worked this past week and actually moved Dom on the rubber some. I thought that adjustment really helped. And that's the thing. Just compliment our guys. James, we tried like, honestly, 30 different things with him. 30 different things to get him these different feels.

And we put a ball over here and you gotta hit the ball over here. Put the ball on the tee, try your hand over here, put your elbows together, spread your feet out, spread out, get your hip. Back and forth. Do circles. Angle your back that way. James, that didn't work. Grab this stick, this pig PVC pipe. Swing that thing. Hear the swoosh. That didn't work. I'm going to hold your hip. You're going to swing.

It was like a marathon. But to his credit he just wanted to be coached, and he wanted to figure it out. The same thing with Dom. Give him a lot of credit. He made an adjustment on the rubber. It paid big dividends.

I appreciate that about our team. They're always trying to get better. All of them. Even the guys on the bench are finding ways to get in there. We have good players that didn't get a chance to get in. But they'll be ready when their time is called. But they work.

Q. What's the difference in the talent, if any, from the position you were in last season and had to fight out of and taking care of the first --

NICK MINGIONE: Game 2 has been our deal, in '17 we won the first game. Lost the second one. In '23, won the first one, lose the second one. So we've got to be able to -- to win a Regional, you know this, you can win it three games or you have to do it in five.

So we haven't done -- in those two years we have not won the second game. That has been our biggest challenge. So now we have Pooz and Nimo both available, on good rest, to try to win the second game against a really good team.

Guys, this has been a really cool five days, really cool five days. We had our selection show with our No. 2 national

seed.

We get done and this little dude right here stands up in front of our team and says he was going to get baptized on Thursday and invited our team.

And yesterday at my house -- it was optional -- had the whole team there. And Reeves got baptized and then we came out today and we win. It's like pretty good five days. No. 2 national seed, your son gets baptized, you win game 1. Praise the Lord. Pretty amazing.

Q. Can you talk about how cool it is to experience this with your son all year, him being in the dugout next to you the whole time?

NICK MINGIONE: We're a family. And those of you that followed us, when Christen and I took the job here, Christen is brightest person I've ever met. She has two degrees.

And she just basically -- we decided that this was going to be our team and we were going to do this together. So we really do have a family.

And Christen and Reeves, they're there all the time. Christen pours her heart and soul into this. Our fans, all the families, Reeves does the same thing. It's not hard to be a coach's wife and it's not hard to be a coach's son, but we do it the best way we know how.

The only way I know how to do it is to do it together as a family. And everybody on our team is the exact same way. They're just a group of guys that love each other. They want to do everything they can to help Kentucky win, and it's been a great group. And our fans have noticed that. Our fans have noticed the unselfishness.

And the way they root and pull for each other, it's been fun. But I can't do what I do without my wife and my son because they are the most important thing in my life, and they're there with us. My wife is competitive and so is Reeves. Now he'll tell me, Dad, what happened with this? He'll keep me straight. Keep me straight.

Q. Reeves, what advice would you give for your dad?

REEVES MINGIONE: I don't really know.

NICK MINGIONE: How do you want us to practice?

REEVES MINGIONE: Everything you've been doing the last few years. Last year, '17, just keep doing the same thing over and over again. And if that doesn't feel right with some guys, work with them, they'll get better.



Q. You start out, first inning, you guys are stealing bases. You're up a bunch of runs; you're stealing bases. I think I know the answer to this, does that aggressiveness, is that ever going to be pulled back a little bit? Are there situations where you wouldn't do that?

NICK MINGIONE: We're at our best when we attack, and we force people to make plays and make mistakes. And there's times where we made two outs on the bases today. But we also forced them to make three errors.

Right? Even in the first inning. Think about this, we scored a run in the first inning without a hit. Without a hit. How do we do it? We did it with a walk, stolen base, they tried to pick, made an error, boom, there's your run. We never got a hit.

The ball never left the infield. Right? I mean, to get to third base. Like, we didn't do it. So that's at our best.

We feel like if you do that to 18- to 24-year-olds over time, they're going to make mistakes. Even I thought Grant did a great job, got thrown out at third, there's one out, that's the time to do it. There's 12 ways you can score from third base that you can't from second, especially with one out.

That's the time to do it. Guy made a perfect throw, tip you cap. Pass the bag. So what. Next play. Move on. That's us at our best when we force our opponent. Is there a time when we back off, I don't know. I just love when we play that way and I think it totally affects our opponents.

Q. Can you talk about what Hogan has meant. He mentioned the aspect of the team. Can you talk about what he's meant to the team as a player and pitcher all season long?

NICK MINGIONE: I told him this. We do something. Ty Crittenberger is one of our seniors. He's as good a leader as we have. And he hasn't played much. He's waiting for his opportunities and when he does he'll take advantage of it and he'll do great.

But we did a deal not too long ago where we talked about what makes our team great? Like what is it? And Ty Crittenberger stands in the back right-hand corner and actually where Shelby is sitting, and he raised his hand and he said what we value makes us different. And what we value on the pitching and defensive side is quality pitches.

Okay. And after every game our standard is to have 80 percent quality pitches. So the following day, Coach Roszel, he is turning up his chart right now, I know exactly

what he's doing, he'll send me a text and we'll see where we're at with our quality pitches. Before the game tomorrow we'll talk about the quality of pitches.

Whenever Hogey meets that standard, and most of the time he does, and I say, all right, Robert Hogan, 84 percent, the team goes crazy for the guy. They love him. And I mentioned that to him even, might have been yesterday at practice. I said I love the way the team loves you, Hogey.

And we did another exercise where I said -- it was actually after one of our chapels; they were talking about serving and how people are at their best when they serve -- I said who serves you guys? Who is one of those guys that you could ask, hey, this guy will do anything for me? It was a story about the people sitting -- holding their friend and putting him down through the roof to go see Jesus or whatever because there was just people everywhere. And it was, who would do anything for you?

And the team, immediately, Hogey. He'll do anything for me. He's, like, one of those guys that they just -- he will serve them. He'll do anything for them. And it's pretty impressive. It's pretty impressive. They love him. They love each other but boy do they love that guy. They love that guy.

Q. How good is it for you as a coach to see, as a team, you guys have had ups and downs, comebacks, big leads, everything. It's been all over the place and exciting to watch but coming in now as a favorite, as a top seed and seeing your team take a hit and respond and not feel the pressure, from a coach's perspective how much was that, we're in a really good mental place here; it's not just loose and kind of normal but they're focused and we can kind of take the pressure?

NICK MINGIONE: Makes you proud as a coach. You guys know this, but we talk about this all the time. When your team can have experiences, they can draw from those experiences. As parents, Christen and I don't want to give Reeves things. We want to give him experiences because that's what shapes and impacts them.

That's why that Friday, against Vanderbilt when we won the SEC that's an experience we never will forget. And every time our team has been in those games and had those experiences. I feel like we've played this game I don't know how many times.

So over time, you just get used to having to make a pitch, get used to having to make a play or having an at-bat, all those things matter. Every time you have that experience, it helps you.



And it's much like when you get a cut, you get a scab, your skin gets scarred, your skin gets tougher and tougher, and get cut and your skin, it's after a while just so hard to just penetrate it. You are scarred up.

You're, like, man. And our team has been through a lot. They've been through a lot. I feel we've played that game right there I don't know how many times. Whether it's a 4-2 game or 10-8 game, we've played it.

And the guys have experienced that. I'll be pretty upset if they hit the panic button. I don't think they did. I think they just kept going along, playing the game, playing the game, make the pitch, play the game. Worked out good.

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