

College World Series: Lexington Regional

Friday, May 31, 2024

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Western Michigan Broncos

Coach Billy Gernon

Cade Sullivan

Dylan Nevar

Postgame Press Conference



Kentucky - 10, Western Michigan - 8

BILLY GERNON: I'd just like to say on behalf of our baseball program and our university, we're excited to be here in Lexington in the regional. Quite frankly, we expected to be here today and, quite frankly, I'm disappointed that we didn't win. We didn't come here to survive. We came here to thrive. There was an expectation to win this thing, and even though there was a valiant effort late in the push, we just didn't play well enough today.

So I challenged our guys to come out and figure out how to win this thing through the losers' bracket tomorrow at 12:00.

Q. Cade, you've played a lot of baseball for Western Michigan, first ever regional, you fell behind early. How do you guys as a leader in the dugout as a leader stay up in the and come back?

CADE SULLIVAN: The atmosphere here was unreal and unmatched, things that we might not have experienced before, but our main thing in the dugout is you have to stay up one pitch at a time throughout the whole game. As soon as you let yourself get down you know you're out of it. And we were not out of it.

Q. Dylan, do you know you broke the program record for RBIs or single season record for RBIs?

DYLAN NEVAR: I just found that out, yeah.

Q. Obviously with the outcome being different, talk about what that means for you and the team and what you accomplished.

DYLAN NEVAR: It means a lot. It's great that I'm able to produce for our team and help us win. Obviously we didn't do that today, but just focus on tomorrow and winning that game.

Q. Cade, when you're facing a team like Kentucky, they're so aggressive on base paths, what does that do for your mindset or what do you do to prepare?

CADE SULLIVAN: We've been preparing for that all week in practice. We knew they were going to run, we knew they were going to bunt. We just took more time on it and tried to prevent it as best we could.

Q. What kind of flipped in the dugout for you guys to come back and make that run?

CADE SULLIVAN: Once we were down at that point, all the guys decided we've got a nothing to lose mentality. Go every single at-bat, take it like it's a tie ball game and go from there.

Q. Coach, obviously down early. What kind of confidence is the comeback now for your team over the rest of the weekend that you've seen it, experienced it, now you're ready to make a charge and really intend to get to the Super Regionals next week?

BILLY GERNON: This is a conditioned group of athletes. My entire career I've never been afraid of tough scheduling. We opened up with No. 1 LSU and first to see Paul Skenes and we were sitting in a hostile environment there. Nobody was fazed by this environment.

But I'll just tell you, these guys, it's a resilient group. There's a high expectation. We're just disappointed as we rolled through the Mid-American Conference tournament with three games without flinching we gave up a total of five free bases, total. And we gave up one in game 1 and one in game 2 and we had 14 today.

So I challenged the guys. It's never been about who we play, ever. It's always about how we play. And the "how we play" today wasn't good enough. And I told them, I'm

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not going to give you some moral victory speech. We didn't come over here as the 4 seed to have a valiant effort. We came over here to win. We came over here to win. And we didn't play well enough today. 10-8 against the No. 2 national seed.

You look at the facilities and resources they have and everything. I was proud of my guys. It was 10-8 but I'm most proud they didn't quit. But I'm most disappointed as their leader that we didn't play better because had we, it would be a different story out there.

Q. Their starter looked to be a pretty good groove there in three or four innings and then things changed there in the 5th. What did you see from him at the beginning of the game and what changed?

CADE SULLIVAN: At the beginning of the game, he was filling up the zone really well. As the innings progressed, we just started to see more pitches, started getting into deeper counts, and I think that's when we started to succeed more.

DYLAN NEVAR: Just battling, getting his pitch count up. Had staying aggressive to our pitch, not spitting out good pitches, not giving him any at-bats.

BILLY GERNON: This is a team game, obviously, but individual accolades are very important. And Dylan Nevar is the reigning freshman of the year in this conference going back to 2022. That wasn't by mistake. This RBI record, this guy has a knack for driving in runs, and he broke the school record for RBIs.

We were in the No. 2 national seed Regional in 2016 Louisville. 2016-17 we had the player of the year Tanner Allison. He's the one that set the RBI record. The player of the year did, 60 RBIs. For him to accomplish that on this stage, I think, speaks to it. And for him to break the record against Michigan, the home run record against Michigan in the second game of the year where the Dodgers play in spring training, speaks to the talent and speaks to the character of these players. They don't let their individual accolades get in front of what they're trying to do for this team. It makes it a big-time privilege for me to call them their coach.

Q. Kentucky was in a similar situation last year in a Regional, found a way to dig out of it. What sort of things in your experience have to happen for you to battle through this bracket after dropping the first one?

BILLY GERNON: Well, I just talked to you about my entire coaching career. There have been challenges I've had to face. You're playing in deep water early in the season

because of the weather that you're experiencing, and you played the likes of Michigan and Pepperdine and Iowa, and then you're playing No. 1 LSU.

So your back's against the wall when you're a mid-major, in the north anyways. You kind of develop this resiliency and this bulletproof attitude that you can take punches.

And this program has taken a lot of punches, and we just keep coming. This is a relevant team. The last four years, this program right here has got the fourth best record in the conference in conference play. Fourth best in the last four seasons, with a championship.

So it's championship caliber. And I'm proud of it. I'm proud that since I've been coaching that there's been two MAC tournament championships in the school's history. I've been coaching both of them. So my guys understand it. I do too. I'm a blue-collar, lunch pail, you name it, that's how I coach and those are the players that I bring in here.

I'm not concerned whether they'll be ready tomorrow or not, not at all. Got a veteran group. Got a great leadership group. Both of these guys serve on my leadership council, makes up nine players that we meet often. Their job is to see smoke and put it out before it turns into fire. And it goes back to really the bad teams, nobody leads; good teams, coaches lead; and great teams, players lead. And great teams are made of great teammates. That's what we had.

And so I'm not going to have to say too much. I kind of got rid of the Knute Rockne speeches on the bus other than telling them today that I felt like there was nobody in the country that they couldn't be better than for three hours. And then I just kind of leave it to them, let them do their thing.

I think as a coach sometimes you've got to understand that the best thing you can do for your team is get out of their way. I'll get out of their way tomorrow, but I want to make sure that they know I'm disappointed. This was not an attempt to have some moral victory over here. It was not. We're trying to continue to move our program in the right direction. We had an opportunity today and we missed it. I'm disappointed. Now I'm going to respect Kentucky's program, and especially the tremendous hospitality that's been rolled out to us since we've been here.

I'm far from not Louisville, Kentucky. I respect sweet tea and southern hospitality myself. I don't want to diminish the quality of team that Kentucky has by any means, but I had an expectation for my team to win today and we didn't. So I'm disappointed.



Q. Why do you think you didn't play well?

BILLY GERON: I don't have an answer for that. I don't think it was nerves. I don't think it was anything else. I will say that I think Kentucky's offense speeds you up a little bit. I think we got sped up in some situations.

I was a little surprised at the error that Grady had at second base. I think he was feeling the speed coming down the line. I think some of that I was a little surprised that the ball that Jackson Kitchen dropped in center field, the wind was whispering out. Dylan almost had a home run early down the line with the wind whispering out. And I think it was McCoy got one down the line, wind flipped. And Jackson was too deep in that situation because we just put up a 5 spot which was the most runs scored in the game in any one inning. We took some punches today and delivered some punches back.

But when we put that 5 spot up, Danny Schlereth and I were talking about whether to send Joe back out, Shapiro, because of the long sit. And Joe has a rubbery tight balance. We decided to go with him because of the extreme vertical break he has in all of his pitches. He went out and hit plunk, plunk, plunk hit two guys. We needed to shut down right there because we flipped the momentum when we put the 5 spot up. When that momentum got shifted, we needed a shutdown right there. The bullpen did a good job coming in burning that up a little bit, but I thought that was the breaking point in the game. We issued three walks, hit a couple of their guys.

I think it was the first inning a walk scored on Brady Miller, who just wasn't himself today. I thought it was a good zone, and I thought it was a tight zone, meaning good. I respect the strike zone, but it was tight. There wasn't much on the edges. So it really forced you to get in there, and I think that kind of caused Brady a little bit of problems.

Q. You mentioned the bullpen. And I know the offense the comeback up short, but the bullpen kept it close, talk about what that meant to keep those guys in the ball game.

BILLY GERON: It did, and it did it at the MAC tournament too. When you looked at the last three innings when we were putting up the zeros, there was one free base we offered down the stretch there when our bullpen went in. That's why we were able to climb back in the game.

It's really not that difficult. Free bases, defense, and pitching wins games. It just does at all levels. Just like fumbling the football, turning the basketball over, and we spend a lot of time on defense, defense, defense.

Of course, they want to hit, hit, hit. They want to throw 100 miles an hour. We start everything in the fall on defense. If we can't build our team around that, I don't feel we have a team. I went through that in 2022. We were decimated with pitching injuries and we had an electric offense and it didn't matter. It just didn't matter.

So we spent a lot of time on the defense and, listen Daniel Schlereth, has done a tremendous job. In only his second year as a college pitching coach, second year. He's done a tremendous job, done a tremendous job with our bullpen and those guys, Hayden Berg, making a victory lap here, he's in his last year. I thought he was electric today. And Turner Doran was really good too. We had the error late too at third base and we were able to get out of it.

But those free bases that we issued a team you can't do that to. You can't give them four outs, and we did too many times. And I thought that was the difference in the game.

Q. What kind of challenges did Robert Hogan provide in the back end of the game to your hitters kept you getting the big hit in some moments when you had runners on?

BILLY GERON: You're right, there was opportunity. Even in the inning where we scored five, there wasn't a big hit there. There were some guys coming through the line that could have really done some big-time damage, even though I'm not discarding a five-run inning whatsoever, but it could have been more damage.

I talked to CJ Richmond about that, who has been an electric offensive player all year for us, and he just said that the cutter was exploding on him, the slider/cutter, whatever you want to call it because he went I think it was double down the left field line, but he saw a really nasty slider. He said it started middle and exploded towards his back foot and he said that it had a ton of movement.

And I think he tried to repeat that pitch and it missed and it started out and came over the back half of the plate and CJ was able to take it down the left field line.

But hitting's about rhythm and pitching is about destroying it. And Hogan did a good job and stayed in a good mix, and I could tell that Nick and his staff did a good job of staying in a mix on our hitters, because we can't -- most teams can hit off speed, but we crush fastballs, and you better land your off-speed and that's where the difference was. I thought Hogan was landing his off-speed for a strike. And strike one is the best pitch in baseball. Schlereth agrees with me even though he knows more

than I do. But he did a good job out of the pen. You have to tip your hat to him.

Q. I know you were focused on your team, but were you surprised at all that Nick rolled out Niman as his starter?

BILLY GERNON: No, because I know my splits on my team. I know Nick's got some horses. We're the Broncos, so we have a big stable. But I know he has some horses in his stable, too. We actually kind of prepared for that a little bit. There was some no-talk about starting pitching and all that.

I think they were able to pretty much guess we were going to go Miller or Vicek. But we've seen some of those match-ups come at us, and Nevar seems to handle the left-handed pitching better.

But I've seen the splits on our guys. No, I wasn't surprised. I thought Sullivan said he was good. He was in the zone early and the fastball was electric, and he did a good job, kept us off balance and kept filling up the zone; but no, I wasn't surprised at all.

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