

College World Series: Lexington Regional

Friday, May 31, 2024

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Illinois Fighting Illini

Coach Dan Hartleb

Drake Westcott

Jack Crowder

Postgame Press Conference



Illinois - 4, Indiana State - 1

DAN HARTLEB: Obviously fun game when you win, but we just beat a really good Indiana State team. We have great respect for them. Mitch and I are really close friends and talk about games and teams and just life all the time.

So it's tough coming in and beating one of your friends, but we're not going to back down from that.

Our guys did an unbelievable job, starting with Jack Crowder. Going out from the start, he was in command. It was one of those situations didn't have to make any bullpen decisions today, and that's pretty special.

Drake came up with some big hits. You just look all the way around -- we pitched it, we played very, very well defensively, came up with key and clutch hits. Just well-played game.

The other thing I want to point out is the play that Cal Hejza makes diving in the 5 hole and throwing the guy out at first base, which could bring a little bit of momentum. But he made an unbelievable play. And Drake did a good job at first base falling over and catching it.

Q. Jack, at what point in this game or maybe it was in the bullpen warming up did you know you had your ace stuff tonight?

JACK CROWDER: I think first inning. The bullpen felt normal. Went out for the first inning, had a feel for the slider, feel for the changeup. Fastball was moving in and out. Kind of felt from there I had control of all three pitches which is mostly a good sign for me.

Q. Have you had a more memorable start than this

one?

JACK CROWDER: No, I think this one tops it. Haven't pitched in the postseason here yet and had a pretty decent outing. So this one definitely tops it for sure.

Q. Jack, I think you got ahead of your first round through the first nine batters. Obviously that helps, but not only what sense do you get from it, but what sense do you feel from the batters that they're struggling to get a read on what you're pitching? What's that feel like?

JACK CROWDER: The pitching staff, we always talk about first-pitch strikes, getting ahead in the counts, (indiscernible) establish that I'm going to be in the zone. It makes hitters think and know that I'm going to be in the zone, but I don't really know what pitch is going to be in the zone. So getting ahead and getting 0-1 instead of 1-0 is a huge confidence booster for the team and myself as a pitcher.

Q. What were the rest of you looking at each other maybe between hits and when you go back to the dugout and (indiscernible) realize he's on fire tonight?

DRAKE WESTCOTT: I'd say it was probably in the second. The Big Ticket had his best stuff today. We were talking about it before the game and he was locked in all day. And he came up when we needed him most. And everything he had, all his pitches were working, hitting his spots and just competed.

Q. Drake, seems like you were seeing the ball pretty well tonight. You had the RBI single in the third, I think. And then what really impressed me was staying in it against a pretty tough lefty and driving the double the other way in the eighth inning. Talk about what you were seeing out of the Indiana State pitchers, who for the most part pitched pretty well.

DRAKE WESTCOTT: They have a good staff. Those pitchers have good stuff. And it comes back to their approach of hitting and what we've done all year. When you've got a left-hander with high velo, crossfire, just



keeping your front shoulder in and driving the ball backside, staying on pitches and we were able to stay on balls, everybody in the lineup.

Even guys who didn't have a bunch of hits tonight, we were still hitting the ball hard all through the lineup. I think it's important as an offense to just keep doing what we're doing, just staying through baseballs. And when you stay with the ball, you track it deeper, see it deeper and use the whole field. That makes you more dangerous as a hitter.

Q. Drake, six out of the nine guys in the lineup drew walks, nine walks overall. Does that illustrate the patience that the whole team collectively showed that created opportunities to score?

DRAKE WESTCOTT: I think, that's something we've been doing all year. And when we're at our best at an offense it's when we're spitting out pitches out of the zone and hammering stuff in the zone. When we get walks and just pass the bat along, like Coach says all the time, pass it to the next guy, pass it to the next guy.

When you're able to do that get some guys on base and someone comes up with a hit, that's just huge for the offense.

Q. Jack, Indiana State talked about your composure on the mound. They have seen you an awful lot (indiscernible) first NCAA Regional going and (indiscernible)?

JACK CROWDER: Obviously played them for four years, we play them multiple times a year, so we're pretty familiar with them. (Indiscernible) Just staying composed and just trusting my pitches, trust my defense, trust it like every start, throw strikes and make the defense work. It worked today.

Q. Specifically with your stuff, seemed like the cutter was really working for them, was that kind of the best you've seen on your cutter?

JACK CROWDER: Yeah, definitely from a strike percentage-wise, I'd get them in for strikes. Usually people spit off because they don't think I'm going to land it and stuff, but today I was landing them, making them think that I can throw that first strike, throw it for a strike and landed some change-ups too, made them think that it was going to be in the zone.

Q. Not only are you all set to face the number two national seed, you're set to face the number two national seed in their house. They've been drawing great crowds all year. You guys have played in big

places, but how do you rank this one?

DRAKE WESTCOTT: What it comes down to is another baseball game. You've got to show up, do little things right because that's what wins games. Go out, compete. Doesn't matter where you play, show up and play our game.

Q. Drake, where you started your college baseball career, playing at Louisville, playing in Lexington winners' bracket game, something you kind of (indiscernible) or was not make a big deal of that?

DRAKE WESTCOTT: I think it's too big of a deal, personally.

DAN HARTLEB: To go back to your question, these guys are entertainers. College athletics, entertainers. Play in front of people and crowds and fans, and awesome atmosphere. You earn your way into these situations. To me this is fun. I know these guys will come out and respond well to it.

Q. Jack's had a four-year career. Had to be one of the his better starts here. How did you see it coming together tonight?

DAN HARTLEB: It is his best start. He's given us some key wins along the way. He's gone out there every Friday night which is not easy to do. If you look at Jack's career early on, and these are going to be all things he's done -- this is a compliment to him -- his first couple of years didn't get in very good shape. And he would break down during the year. And then he would lose his focus.

And last year, he would be in situations, he'd pitch two or three innings and all of a sudden blow up. It was a focus thing. 100 percent a focus.

Coach Hound (phonetic) has done an unbelievable job to help him mature. Jack has done a really good job getting in shape and making adjustments and maturing. It's part of growing up, not only off the field but on the field, that maturity. I was proud of him where he's gotten to and just the focus was there all night. I went up, gave him a hug after the eighth inning, he said, you're not letting me go back out there, are you? I said no way. He was locked in. Unbelievably efficient performance.

Q. You just talked about Coach Allen and he's battling cancer. Talk about kind of what that has meant to the team and the fight that you guys have had all season long.

DAN HARTLEB: It's been a very difficult situation. Coach

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Allen came to me basically a week before the season or maybe a week and a half, told me he was having some issues. I wouldn't let him go out of my office. Made some calls to our team physicians, got him for tests right away. This thing unfolded in a very short amount of time. He continued to get more and more uncomfortable.

And we got to a point where, while he traveled the first weekend, he was not going to travel the second weekend. We had to tell the team what was going on.

It was difficult. It was difficult for them. He's built a great rapport with the pitching staff. I thought this was going to be by far and away the best pitching staff we had had since Mark's been our pitching coach. It's been incremental to try to get the right guys in, helping guys mature, working with them, and I was really excited about that.

And then just got hit square in the face. It was difficult for that group, and we scuffled a little early. The thing that helped us in this situation, I'll get back to Mark, but the thing that's helped us was Cameron Hill, the person who has come in to be our pitching coach, Mark has been his mentor for a number of years and he pitched in the Major Leagues. He's still trying to play, wants to get back into baseball. He works out every day and throws, which is it's nice because those guys are out there watching how it's done.

And so it wasn't seamless, but Cam has been around in the offseason when he's trained with Coach Allen. And so there's familiarity from a face standpoint and just he had been around. So it was a nice transition in a very, very difficult situation.

But Mark has done a really, really good job even though it's really difficult for him, but he stayed in touch with the guys. I know a couple times he wasn't pleased with some things that he saw and chewed them out. Probably took a little bit out on them. But he's been involved in scouting reports. He watches every game. We get feedback on availability with guys.

So he's still there helping even though he can't be the coach. And that's kept him going, which has been nice. It's a break for him. He's scuffling going through a lot. Got a lot ahead of him but the team has played for him. It was neat.

When we clinched things at Purdue, we brought a phone out into the huddle, called him, and the guys got to interact with him. It was a really special moment. Just they all know that this is a game and he's fighting for life. So it's been an inspiration.

Q. Jack was a highly recruited kid in high school, developmental program. What was it for you to watch someone, 22 years old, put it all together on a big stage like this?

DAN HARTLEB: It's rewarding and it's awesome. I mean, you can ask Jack and his parents, there was some serious head butting, and I don't usually lose those situations, but we butted heads, and I didn't give in in some areas. And as much as he probably didn't like me at times, he's responded.

To me, that's why you're in college athletics, is to watch guys grow up both on and off the field, help them mature and develop. It's a shame when we lose someone in the transfer situation, but Jack's just a true competitor that has really come into his own. So very rewarding to watch his progress and to go out tonight and give us that performance.

Q. I know it's only four on the board tonight offensively but did you see things that you think could easily turn this around and -- did you see potential for bigger things tonight the way you were hitting balls?

DAN HARTLEB: We hit some balls really hard. It's baseball. I told guys, you get into championship play, don't expect balls to be flying out of the yard like we did at certain times.

Hopefully we get that situation, we can drive a bunch out of the yard. But we faced really good pitching tonight. Didn't have that opportunity. The ball wasn't flying and you have to find ways to manufacture runs and win when you're not hitting home runs, and our guys did a great job of that. Came up with some really key hits.

The thing, to me, if you look at the box scores, we had nine walks. And pitching-wise, we had zero. So there's a difference. Our guys did not swing at bad pitches, and like Drake said, one of the things we tried to do is aggressive in the zone, spin on things out of the zone, pass it on to the next guy. Load the bases up enough, you'll do some damage.

Q. You've already started Cooper on Saturday. Any reason you wouldn't hand him the ball again tomorrow?

DAN HARTLEB: We'll have to see. We'll have to see. I'm not sure. We have to make that decision. We'll make it on the bus or at the hotel.

Q. You touched on it, but with all the great things Jack did today, he saved your bullpen. What does that



**mean for you going into day two of this only using one
inning?**

DAN HARTLEB: It's huge. You don't know what's going to happen with your starters. You just don't know. Not to really have to use anybody, Joe Glassey, he bounces back. And so he'll be fully available. We have a complete bullpen and you do whatever you can tomorrow and stay in the winners' bracket.

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