

College World Series: Lexington Regional

Saturday, June 1, 2024

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Nick Mingione

Trey Pooser

Ryan Nicholson

Postgame Press Conference



Kentucky 6, Illinois 1

NICK MINGIONE: I thought it was a really good college baseball game. Two competitive teams. I thought their starter did a good job, and I thought Trey was just unbelievable in so many ways, landing multiple pitches for a strike, moving the fastball in and out, threw it up and down. He was very, very special.

I thought our defense played a major part in this game. Our ability to make plays all over the infield was crucial, and obviously we got some timely hitting, none bigger than the guy standing right next to me, sitting right next to me, Ryan Nicholson, a Kentucky boy. To do that on this stage, pretty awesome.

Q. Ryan, you set the pace early with that two-run homer. What did you see on that?

RYAN NICHOLSON: I felt like we gave ourselves some breathing room. Obviously just kind of set the tone early. Really just going off of that, it felt obviously awesome, but obviously there was a lot of game to play with for the rest of it.

Yeah, it was good to get it. It was good to get out to an early lead and take a deep breath there after that. But just kind of gave Poos some breathing room there, really.

Q. Trey, talk about your performance, what you felt like was working for you today.

TREY POOSER: Yeah, felt like just filling up the zone. I was trying to get ahead as much as possible, and fastball changeup combo was working really well today. Didn't really have a feel for my curveball as much, but the fastball changeup really played today.

Q. You were able to work out of a couple of jams, especially one in the second inning. How big was it, one out bases loaded to get out of that jam and keep that lead?

TREY POOSER: It was awesome. The defense behind me, thankfully they were there to help me. I don't remember exactly what happened in that inning, but I was glad we got out of that.

Q. Ryan, I'm not sure if you know this or not, but it's your 19th home run of the season today, and I think that's tied for the most at Kentucky since Coach has been here. How special is it to be in that category?

RYAN NICHOLSON: I didn't know that. I didn't know any of those numbers. That's pretty cool to do that.

Obviously yeah, that's all well and good, and at the end of the day when I'm done playing or whatever, that's something I can look back on, but right now it's just try and barrel the ball up early and try and put some runs on the board for my team really. That's all well and good, but it's whatever.

Q. As Coach talked about yesterday, you guys had to come out of the losers' bracket the second game. How big was it to get this win and be one win away from the super regional?

RYAN NICHOLSON: I think the biggest thing is probably that we used two guys today. I think it really sets us up for the rest of the weekend. Just what Poos did today was absolutely spectacular and Hags coming in behind him. We have a lot of fresh guys in the pen now that we have, so that's probably the biggest takeaway from today's game at least.

Q. Talk a little bit about the game moving up, what effect that had, if any, but also knowing that the weather was going to potentially going to be bad and seeing that crowd not only strong in the beginning but sticking through that weather and how that really fed you in the dugout during the game?



TREY POOSER: I don't think the game moving up affected us too much. We were going to be ready to play whenever. The weather, we have that weather all the time here it seems like. Seemed like for every Friday and sometimes Saturdays the whole season it's just been raining and cold, and thankfully it was nice weather today for the temperature at least. I just think we just knew that was our weather, and we just played how we play.

Q. Coming through the portal, there were players who were here successful last year and you add to do that and do things you haven't done before. What's that been like assimilating within one season and ticking off all these different goals with guys who were your teammates for less than a year, now you're pulling it all together this week?

RYAN NICHOLSON: Well, I think that comes really in the grand scheme of things. Like talking about gelling together, I think that's a lot in the fall. We're out there together nearly every day.

Then I think coming in as a transfer, I think for me and Poos especially and a lot of other guys in that locker room who are transfers, we have our own established identity already. We know who we are, we know what we're good at, and I think we excel at doing that when we came here.

Q. One of the big plays that Coach may have been referring to defensively, Pitre made the double play. What did you see on that? It looked like he needed every bit of whatever he had?

RYAN NICHOLSON: Yeah, we talked about this in the postgame. Just a really athletic play from Pitre. He's been making those plays -- I think he's made quite a few of them over the course of the season. Just something like that really at the start of I think it was the top of the inning really can give our team and Pooser a lot of momentum going forward, especially it can suck the life out of the other team offensively, so I think that was just a big momentum swing, and that got a lot of boys going there.

Q. Trey, on Illinois's lineup being so power oriented and aggressive, was that part of your game plan, to almost use that against them? What was your thought process trying to get up-and-down their lineup?

TREY POOSER: Fill up the zone, throw strikes, get ahead as early as possible, and just stay our plan that we been doing the whole season. It's attacking hitters from pitch one and trying to get that lead up.

Q. Trey, going back to the beginning of the season,

you started out of the bullpen and now at this point great start in the SEC tournament and a great start today. Could you have foreseen this success earlier this year?

TREY POOSER: No. You always want to do good. You don't ever know exactly how it's going to go and everything doesn't always go as planned, but I'm glad it has gone the way it has, and just keep rolling. Just got to keep going.

Q. You come out today, get that win, first game to win in a regional since you've been here. Do you feel like you got that monkey off your back?

NICK MINGIONE: Yes. I told Christen, it took me four tries: '06, '17, '23, '24. It took me four tries. Happy. Just another thing that we haven't done before. Still obviously have a lot of baseball left.

But yes, monkey off my back. It is gone. Don't bring it up anymore, okay? No, I'm joking.

Q. You talked about how hard it was and how much focus on getting this one. Does it give you even that much more appreciation looking back to '17? You kind of took it for granted, and now four tries to get that second win.

NICK MINGIONE: You know, this time of year more than likely you're going to play a champion of some sort, right, so first game, we played a champion. They had won. They were champions in their league, right, today. This is the Big Ten championship. It is not easy.

When you get to this level and you get to the winner's bracket, which we've been able to do, you're going to face a good team. You're going to face a good team. It's going to take a game like today to where you're going to have to pitch at a high level, you're going to have to defend at a high level, and you're going to have to execute offensively at a really high level, and if you don't, you won't win.

We did that. We did all three of those today. We did all three of those today, and that's what it was going to take to put us in this position.

Q. You moved him into the rotation in March. What kind of went into the decision then and did you foresee him becoming your ace?

NICK MINGIONE: You know, he's had experience before and starting experience at the college level, and anytime you can have that, that is a bonus. The transfer portal does allow you to be older, and it allows you to develop your high school guys. If you look at our lineup I feel like



we had a great mix that played in this baseball game from a pitching and an offensive side.

When you look at the guys up and down our lineup, Pitre is a high school guy, Devo is a high school guy, Nolan McCarthy, James McCoy, Ryan Hagenow. We had a good balance of guys.

High school recruiting is always going to be our foundation, and if you can add guys that have experience -- I remember having my first conversation with Trey and asking him what's important to you, and he's like, I want to win. I want to go somewhere I can win and develop, and I said, all right, congratulations, you said Kentucky.

Same thing with Ryan Nicholson is a guy to play for his state institution and his school to do this, a guy from Louisville, Kentucky, and it means a lot.

But these two guys have also been coachable and they've tried to get better. You can see Ryan getting better throughout the fall. By the time we started getting to middle of October some of you have hear me share stories with him where he started putting together really good batting practices, and his focus during those 20-, 25-minute sessions kept getting better and he was able to move on after a bad swing and a bad round and you could see it coming.

With Trey, Travis was there. Travis had a knot in his lat, so that's why we switched it, and he's been throwing good ever since. Just super proud of him to do this in this environment. If you told him at this time last year you're going to pitch in front of -- how many people did we have today? 6,000, people you're going to pitch in front of over 6,000 people to keep your team in the winner's bracket to put you one win away from a super, like man.

But to his credit he has showed up every day and done everything he can to getting better and help Kentucky win.

Q. I want to ask about in the second inning, everyone is going to remember Trey getting that strike out to end it. It was full count. But just a few before that James had an incredible throw from the outfield that basically kept everyone on base, prevented any run from scoring. In hindsight, how big was that play for him to gather it, throw it home and keep all of them --

NICK MINGIONE: Yes, James is an amazing outfielder, and his defense is absolutely crucial. I asked our team at the end, I've got the list of all these great defensive plays that I want to go over with you guys because there were so many of them.

But I asked the guys about the great defensive plays and they actually hit on every single one and that was one of the ones they brought up postgame because they had to stop them and that actually saved a run.

These are things that do not show up in a score sheet, to your point. These things do not show up in a box score. Our sport is like amazing. These stats are awesome, but they don't tell the whole story.

They don't tell the whole story because there's so many -- think about that play. Then what about the line drive that he caught over his head to end the 7th? There was a guy at third base. If he does not make that play -- that saved another run.

So he alone saved us two runs. Saved us two runs. If he doesn't make both of those plays, the game is totally different. It's not 4-1 in the ninth. So his defense alone, to your point, saved -- I thought Waldy did a great job cutting multiple balls off, and he actually made a play over his head. Awesome job.

Nolan did the same thing. Cut a ball off in the left center field gap. I can go all around. All these defensive plays. Devin Burkes had two key blocks. One of them he has a backhand with a runner at third base; saved the run.

Ryan Nicholson. What about the play he made going down the line against a left-hander Westcott. Crushed the ball. What an unbelievable play.

Then what about the play Grant made up the middle in the 4th and then Ryan picked it? How about that play? How about the play that Ryan made on the double play and there's a runner coming back at you to get the throw? It was awesome.

Pitre's vertical that he mentioned. What a play. We talked about Grant's. What about Mitchell Daly's -- we call it HTWA. Does anyone know what that stands for? How to win awareness.

We had a ball hit down the line that James cut off and he throws the ball to second base and Grant was retrieving but he thought it was a sure double, but James does such a good job, so he goes back to the bag. Well he's not there. Well, who was there for backup? Mitch Daly. What a play. HTWA. How to win awareness.

There were some of those plays. You think about all those plays that happen in a baseball game, and a lot of those aren't going to show up in the box score. But to your point, James, huge play in the ballgame.

Q. Has Trey kind of earned the right to be referred to as your ace?

NICK MINGIONE: Yes. We've got some other good ones, too. You look at Mason Moore. What is he, 8-3? He's got beat by the same team. Twice. Two of this his three losses are from the same team. That guy could be sitting at 8-1. But I'll let you guys decide what title or label you want to put on him.

I like to think our ace -- I like the thought of the most important pitcher on our team is whoever is on the mound at that time. That's the most important pitcher. They're our ace. So whoever is on the mound at that time, that mentality needs to be you're the most important pitcher because you're the one pitching at that time, in that moment.

All pitches and innings aren't created equal, but that mentality of you being the most important pitcher on the team at that time because you're on the mound is really important. But if you want to call him an ace -- I know he won't argue with you if you call him our ace.

Q. Back to the thing about the transfers, with the transfer portal being in all sports now, how tricky is it to get that right balance between transfers and your high school recruits as far as building your roster, and how important is it?

NICK MINGIONE: Yeah, we got another commitment today out of the portal, and he has watched our team play. He's watched -- you have to be able to ask the right questions. There's recruiting and there's evaluating, and those are two different things. The evaluation piece you have to nail it. That's where it starts. And then the recruiting starts. But if you don't evaluate right, it's going to be hard for you.

We have and I have a series of questions that I ask kids and their families to try to dig up as much information as I can get. Because you know this, but one bad miss on an evaluation can really change. I give Ryan Hagenow a lot of credit. He's continued to give our coaching staff a lot of credit about the people we've brought in through the portal.

It's a tricky piece, but we have a series of questions. I have a lot of weaknesses. Christen has told me that one of my gifts is my intuition on people. I don't take credit for that. I'll give the Lord credit for that.

But I want to just build this team, and we've got to continue to evaluate right out of the portal because there's a lot of really good players.

But these two guys, among others, when they just say, I want to compete, I want to win, I just want an opportunity, I want to get better, these are some of the key catchphrases.

Q. How important is Ryan Waldschmidt for you at the top of the order, and how big was that two-run home run at the top of the ninth to give you a little extra breathing room?

NICK MINGIONE: He, in a lot of ways, I feel, two totally different hitters, but I feel like him when we had Evan White. When Evan White stepped to the plate, you just knew something good was going to happen. You never Evan was never out of an at-bat; Waldy is never out of an at-bat.

But he's special. The guy behind him, too, is pretty amazing, too, in Pitre. But we've up and down -- this is two games in a row where everybody in our lineup gave us at least two good at-bats or more. Every guy. Every guy.

Waldy hits the two-run home run, but why was it a two-run home run? Because Grant, who's played a ton of college experience, draws a walk, a 3-2 walk, and he battles and battles and it turns into a two-run home run, much like Mitch Daly. Why was Ryan Nicholson's a two-run homerun? Because a guy like Mitch Daly stood in there and wore a pitch for Kentucky.

But he is the table-setter. He can change the game at any point in time. We got him back full time after his ACL surgery, that is when our lineup just took off. I can really believe in my heart it was the insertion of him every day full time in left field in our lineup, and we've been scoring runs ever since.

Q. We've talked a lot about your style of play this year and about how versatile it is. I think these first two games are a great example. The first run yesterday you don't (indiscernible) two bombs today. You've got a lot of buttons you can push with your offense, but how often do you tell yourself, I'm not going to push any button, I'm just going to let these guys play it out?

NICK MINGIONE: Yeah, a lot of things go into that. The score, I'm just going to peel off about 10 of them for you, the score, the out, the inning, the defense, the pitcher on the mound, the weather, where are we at in our lineup, where are they at in their lineup, what did the guy do his at-bat before, and what is the count.

Those are 10 factors.

You think about all those different things. After yesterday's

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

game. I paid Nick Ammirati a lot of credit in front of our team. He put on 11 different plays. 11 in one game. He put 11 different plays.

There's a lot that goes into it, but also forces our opponents to prepare for us. So what about the play that -- was it Grant hit right down the line and hit right off the third baseman's glove? Well, why is he playing right there? Why was he just a tad late?

You know this, the threat of the bunt. So we gained an advantage. He lost a step to his left and right by coming in. So there's all these things that go in. The game of baseball, you guys have heard all the time it's a game of what? Oh, man, it's a game of inches.

You're just fighting for one. This league and this job, it is just you're fighting for inches. It is like the greatest form of tug-of-war you've ever seen, and it is like flat out stalemate. I used this example at the SEC tournament and just two teams are just pulling and it's like you gain one inch you're like, yeah, you're doing good, keep pulling, and then all of a sudden they gain it back and you're like, come on, pull harder, and you barely move. You barely move. It's like just fighting for inches.

Today was a good example. The play with Grant up the middle where he was out by an inch, Pitre jumps up, catches it by an inch. James, Waldy, all these things, and we missed a couple home runs by less than an inch on the barrel. I want you to think about it. They catch that ball, maybe this much longer, like that much more, we have a couple more home runs.

This game is just -- and you've got to take care of it. We do want to attack, and you know what, we're going to make some mistakes and we're going to make outs, and some of them are not going to be good and Coach Mingione is going to be frustrated and I am going to do my best to hold it together. We have to attack, and I believe when you put pressure on 18 to 24 year olds, most of the time it goes your way.

Q. Obviously 2-0 is great, but it seems like your pitching staff is in a really great position. You haven't burned through a lot of arms. Where you guys sit, how confident are you going into at least one more game, but if you have to go to two, how well set up are you guys to have a pretty good arsenal of arms for that?

NICK MINGIONE: Yeah, obviously what Trey did today was crucial because it's allowed some guys -- I would tell you this: That our pitching staff, guys have been better when they've had a day in between and you don't have to use them on back-to-back days.

I anticipate Ryan Hagenow, he will not be available, but besides him, I feel like we have everyone back. Hogey, everyone. We'll have a full bullpen ready to go to try to win one, and if that doesn't work out, then we're going to have to win another one.

In order for us to do what we want, a minimum of one win, maybe two. Their guys are rested, and the job those two guys did was crucial, absolutely crucial.

Q. When you face a team like Illinois that is so power oriented and almost dependent on the home run, what is on the checklist for someone like Trey?

NICK MINGIONE: Yeah, his ability to mix his pitches was absolutely crucial. Trey coming out of the portal, I thought he had one of the best changeups in the transfer portal. He had one of the best changeups. That was a huge pitch for him today. You heard him say that maybe he didn't land his breaking ball as much as he wanted, but his ability to just throw an off-speed pitch at any point in time, first pitch or behind, the count was absolutely crucial, but his ability to just mix pitches, and you just try to get him a little bit out in front, maybe a little bit late, you throw him enough soft and you beat him by a fastball and they're just a tad off, but his ability to mix pitches was crucial.

Before I finish, too, I know we've got time for a couple more, but I thought our fans were unbelievable. In Vanderbilt, that series, they just sat through rain today. I looked up, I was like, look at this. This is absolutely awesome. They just sat there through the rain and just got soaking wet.

That meant a lot to us, and we felt them. We felt them today. We're going to need you again tomorrow and you might have to sit through rain again, so please bring it.

Q. You talk about new experiences, and this is a new experience for you. You don't have to play two games on Sunday. Are you going to take tomorrow off? What's the schedule going to be like?

NICK MINGIONE: Good question. Good question. I haven't been able to put this little man to bed the last couple nights, so I'm going to put Reeves to bed tonight. He usually asks me, Dad, are you going to put me to bed tonight? I'm like, yes. Did I save the question?

So I'm going to put Reeves to bed, try to spend time with Christen. I'll get up in the morning and -- had a great breakfast today with some close friends of ours that we were able to squeeze that in, and then I'll just study both teams again.



I'll rewatch this game, make sure I'm sharp and fresh on Indiana State. Spent four and a half hours on them last night after the game preparing for them, and I'll just make sure that we have our ducks in a row.

But I watch so much video, it is crazy. The amount of time and how much video we watch, it's like, phew. But I'll get up, spend some time in the Word and then I'll just keep studying video, studying video, studying video, studying video and just keep watching.

I don't know, sleeping in for me lately, I've been getting up at like 6:00, 6:45. That's kind of been my sleep-in.

Q. What about the guys?

NICK MINGIONE: That was like a really rambling schedule. I went morning, back, forth.

The guys, we won't have a wake-up call for them. We'll basically set our schedule much like we do on the road for a night game. Their job is to hydrate. You've heard them say that over and over every time I ask.

They'll get some good rest and then they'll start showing up to the ballpark usually around 1:00 and they just hang out. We have this beautiful facility right above us and they're just hanging out playing their music. I looked in there today -- this is unbelievable. I walked in there, they had four different baseball games on on the big screens in the locker room, and they're just watching baseball. They are like baseball rats. They'll start to show up probably around 1:00 and they'll just watch baseball. That's what they do. They just hang out with each other and watch baseball. Pretty cool.

I also want to share about Ryan. You know we had goatees earlier in the year, a lot of us, including me. It's because he watches YouTube videos in his free time, and in the '04 or '06 Red Sox, they had these - Jason Varitek and all them, he had the whole team growing goatees because they just love the game of baseball.

This is a very intelligent, high-level team, and like I mentioned after the game, hey, what were the great defensive plays, and I have all my notes, got my little sections, and I'm just checking them off because they noticed and they remembered every good defensive play.

I tell them sometimes that they're like baseball rats. They understand the game at a really, really high level, and they'll watch baseball tomorrow, and then we'll play a game to try to get us one more win and for the fans, for them to have another cool experience.