

# Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Wednesday, May 21, 2025

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

**Tennessee Volunteers**

**Tony Vitello**

**Levi Clark**

**AJ Russell**

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 15, Alabama 10

TONY VITELLO: As you saw there at the end, we know Coach Vaughn well for a lot of reasons. It's a battle every time you play one of his teams. Obviously, this is cutthroat single elimination too, so it's always going to be a challenge to get the final out of the game for either team.

But our guys were -- the energy and the vibe was good all day long, even after we made some mistakes. Obviously, we made a bunch. There's a couple that stand out more than others, but if you're watching the game as a coach, or probably as a Vol fan, too, you saw a bunch. But the way our guys you reacted and handled those mistakes, was better than we've done in the past, and I think it was a key to victory among other things.

But I know the end wasn't what you'd paint if it was a picture or a Picasso, but I'm just telling you, we get enough criticism, so I'll be criticized for this on, too, but I'm telling you, it was better. We got to get Krenzler in that game. We got a couple other freshmen, still Lawless got in there. He didn't necessarily get it done. He hit the ball hard. Colby out there on defense, Jay. To be able to get some of those guys in this setting is key because this is a big deal, as you saw with the fan base and everybody else.

Good vibes by our guys. Rambling on, but the one thing I'll say is unselfishness was a key, too. AJ Russell could have moped. He got, arguably, their best hitter out in a huge situation. Him don't help him out and he kind of laced up a little bit tighter and got after it.

Same thing from Arvidson. He took the ball and got one of the biggest outs of the game and had no -- well, he wanted to stay out there, but he hands the ball off to AJ, and same



thing out of everybody else.

**Q. AJ, that was the mound that you last pitched on before you had Tommy John, and if I believe correctly, that was kind of the moment you realized that something needed to get fixed. What was it like coming back pitching on the mound? What was going through your head as you were trotting in from the bullpen?**

AJ RUSSELL: Yeah, it was awesome. It was really good to be out there. I think that's something you think about before the game and all that, but once you get on the mound, it's time to compete and there's no time to be thinking about stuff like that.

I was happy that I was able to settle in after that kind of first half of the inning and have a good outing after that.

**Q. AJ, those one, two, three innings, sixth and seventh, how big were those to settle things down and what went so well for you over the course of the outing?**

AJ RUSSELL: Yeah, they were massive. We've been talking a lot just with the pitching coaches about every time the offense scores, we need to be able to put up some more zeros. And to be able to do that, it felt really good, and gave me some more momentum as the game went on, and also gave our team more momentum. So I'm really happy that I was able to do that and execute.

**Q. AJ, what's it like to have a guy like Phillips that can eat innings efficiently and just having a catcher like Peebles working east to west, north to south in the strike zone, how do you feel like you utilized your pitches more efficiently with your command and your catching quarter?**

AJ RUSSELL: Yeah, Marcus is a dog. I love him. He's going to go out there and give us everything he's got every single time. I'm more than confident in him to be able to go out there and get the job done.

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And then with Peebs, it's been really good. Me and him have kind of been working through things, working on the changeup, working on the slider, how to set up or where my focal point of where I'm looking at, just kind of little cues to help me. He knows the game more than just about anybody here, maybe besides the coaches, but it's great to have him back there, and it's really fun to throw to him.

**Q. AJ, Coach Vaughn was really complimentary of your changeup right-handed batters. How important was that to success?**

AJ RUSSELL: Yeah, I threw that way more than I normally do. I used to never throw it, and that's kind of something that's new. Gaining more confidence the more I get out there and the more I throw it, and it was really a big deal to my success today.

**Q. Levi, it's your first taste of SEC tournament play. What did you feel, and how do you think you performed today?**

LEVI CLARK: Walking up, you think about it, but once you get in the box, it kind of goes quiet. You don't really have time to think about it and just got to think about your task.

**Q. Levi, what was the offensive approach coming in today? What was working so well for the offense as a whole today?**

LEVI CLARK: I don't know. I think for the most part, it was just getting the job done early, and I felt like we had a lot of big at-bats, like one by Rees Chapman where he just grinded the pitcher down and helped the guys behind him get to him early in the count.

**Q. Levi, how would you say the team responded after giving up the 5-spot in the fifth?**

LEVI CLARK: The motto lately has just been move on to the next. So when that happened, no one was really worried. We were ready for whatever.

**Q. Tony, what do you think about your team's response to after the fifth inning and Dean's error to not allow things to continue to spiral and kind of instead put the foot on the pedal even more?**

TONY VITELLO: I thought it was incredible. That's not good. It's a punch in the gut. It was a little bit of a miscue, but even the older guys, they're still young, other than Hunter Ensley. You're going to make mistakes, but I think the way we've handled mistakes, there's been some overreaction from a variety of sources, and over the course of the season, especially in this league, there's so many

ups and downs.

So that's the one thing this league will prepare you for, why the league has done so well once the NCAA postseason starts. Here, we're all also beating up on each other. You'd better learn to take a punch. And I think this team has slowly gotten better as the season has gone on.

We do have some older pieces. It's a little top heavy if you're going by age, but Marcus Phillips is kind of parallel to how this team is. There's been progress in a bunch of different areas. It is late in the year and there is still more to make progress, but for now, we're the group we are. It's a fun group to hang around. They seem to all have each other's back, and they're crazy if they don't enjoy that environment here. It's pretty special.

**Q. You already talked about the 20 hits. I think 16 of them were singles, though, and it felt like a majority of those were just straight back up the middle. From the dugout, what did you see from your perspective that allowed that kind of success on offense?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, the park will play big on you here sometimes. I know the wind was going to right field and LaViolette doesn't count. He can hit into outer space at any park. But that might be kind of what you've got to do here, and we don't bunt that often but we really executed. Manny did a great job with the bunt and ended up helping us a bunch. Somewhere just two strike, getting balls by guys.

But to me, it all started at the beginning of the day. You could sense that a little bit. And I'll be honest, we've had days like that where if you miked up our coaches' locker room, it's like, man, don't say it too loud, but this is a good deal. And it hasn't always worked out on the scoreboard.

Again, it's the SEC. So all we can ask is our guys approach pregame wherever we go Hoover High School, and then you've got to hang out in the locker room and wait until the game is over. That game could have ended real early, it went long. That approach needs to be repeated. Then you just go out and you have fun and you play. And again, if you make a mistake, you just get back after it, and we'll see what the stat sheet or scoreboard says after the game.

**Q. Tony, end of the fifth with two outs, Levi and Camden had back-to-back singles to tie the game. How big were those hits, and then also Dalton's at-bat beginning after that two strike hit the opposite way?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, Dalton was just a little overeager to do things and really, literally just played pepper. That



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was one of those I was referring to with two strikes, just got it by a guy. But for Peebles to tie the game, I mean, he had as good a view as anybody. You know, looks like we're out of the inning.

Marcus was absolutely cruising. He led us into battle like no other and did it on short rest after we kind of moved some things around.

So for Peebles to get that knock in that situation might have been one of the biggest blows of the day in our favor. All in all, team effort. Levi did a really good job. He's talking about an at-bat where Rees didn't even get on base. I think he ended up striking out, but wore down that pitcher a little bit, and we ended up scoring after that. So teamwork. Teamwork.

**Q. You touched on it a little bit, but with Dean's error, where are you with from a confidence standpoint with him defensively, and how do you handle some of the issues he's had at this point in the year?**

TONY VITELLO: I'm plenty good with it, ride or die for anything, on or off the field for that guy. Obviously, I owe a lot. I owe a lot. You can talk about wallet, you can talk about all kinds of other stuff. So he's done a really good job for us adjusting at second like Fisher has done, like hey, just tell me where to play and I'll do it. Gavin has been similar, as well.

I think where he's really shown well there is range side to side. That was a play that was kind of a tricky one as far as the hop you get. And I think because of the way he fielded it, he thought he needed to get rid of it right away and we had Fish deep. It was an odd play. Should it happen? No, but again, these dudes will make mistakes, and if I'm not mistaken, to use that word too much, he had a pretty big knock for us later in the game, too.

When you do mess up, whether it's him or anybody else, you can't pout, you can't wear it on your sleeve. If anything, you relax and just play, or maybe it adds to the determination you've got. So I'm looking at these names on here and Stone could have ended the game, I'm good with that guy until kingdom come. Same with the rest of these games on this list. I was happy Marcus got to take the ball for us today, too.

**Q. How symbolic was just today's game and kind of the style in which it was big inning and coming back and responding so quickly in that and kind of pounding it on, keeping your foot on the gas and everything of what the postseason means to be a fresh start, and especially right after more struggles late in the season than how the beginning of the season**

**went?**

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, opening day is so great. Game 7 of the World Series in MLB baseball is probably better, but everyone loves opening day about this game so much and part of it is that clean slate, that fresh start. I talked about painting a picture earlier. You can kind of paint that blank canvas however you want, but it's not going to be real pretty, especially in playoff team. I think it's important for our guys to have a little confidence boost and a feel good after this, but it's also important that they kind of learn the lesson that you just move on and keep playing ball. I'm not reading it, and you guys are, especially our local guys, they work your butt off, but I'm sure at some point, I've been asked -- you shot yourself in the foot or you made a mistake. I've got news for you, it's college baseball.

Anyone who loses probably shot themselves in the foot at some point. Maybe they walked a guy or whatever, unless you've got one of the best games or an ESPN Classic. Again, whenever it happens, you need to get closer together as a team, and you've just got to play ball --

**Q. After an offensive explosion like this game, what's the message to this team for the quick turnaround to face an opponent like Texas?**

TONY VITELLO: You know, we pointed out -- we didn't even talk about tomorrow's game too much. We kind of talked more about managing the schedule here. The city does an incredible job, so there's a lot of free time, there's a lot going on and there's a lot of sitting. Part of the postseason, could be NCAA or this, it's just kind of managing your circumstances, whether it's hanging out with family or making sure you've got tickets all in order. We talked more about some of the unselfish things that went on today and applauded those guys. And then really just talked about having your affairs in order so that you're ready to rock and roll whenever you play. Because here, whether it's lightning or extra innings or rain, you really don't know when you're going to play. I've been a part of teams where we play at 1:00, 2:30 in the morning.

**Q. Towards the end of the regular season, you mentioned relying on guys like Hunter Ensley, especially when it comes to the plate presence, but how much has a guy like Andrew Fisher been a calming presence for this team or been a good teammate for the rest of the guys on the team?**

TONY VITELLO: He's always got something to say, he's from Jersey. It's funny, sometimes it might be overkill or might not even be the right time, but it's not going to be because he doesn't want the team to win, and he's not trying to be a good leader. More times than not, it is just

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that. He's a good leader.

It's interesting because he's got -- I think he kind of has -- at a time or two, maybe glared in the other dugout or looks like he's overly intense, but he's just a good vibe guy. He's always having fun playing the game. He believes in himself. He's so comfortable in his own skin, sometimes it can make you check yourself or be a little uncomfortable.

Each guy leads in their own way, Hunter does it his way. I think Andrew keeps the guys loose, keeps them very competitive. He's always communicating. And again, he's comfortable in his own skin, which is the way you've got to play this game, because we talked. One minute you might get embarrassed or it may not go well, and then there's going to be another pitch in the game, so you'd better be comfortable in your own skin that this is the guy, I'm here, I'm present, this is who I am in this particular moment.

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