

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Thursday, May 22, 2025

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Tennessee Volunteers

Tony Vitello

Brandon Arvidson

Gavin Kilen

Postgame Press Conference



you today and what was working so well for you?

BRANDON ARVIDSON: Yeah, it's definitely an incentive to pitch better, but I was excited to go out there no matter who we were facing. But the curveball was really working today. Felt like I could throw it anywhere, and the fastball command was good, as well. Yeah, that was about it.

Q. That's one of the toughest bullpens in the SEC. What did you see there late to get those two clutch hits for you guys?

GAVIN KILEN: Just doing a great job of reading the reports. All our analytics guys and Elander do a great job giving us, you know, preparing us as best as well to do good when we get an opportunity, and I just got a good pitch to do that on a couple times, and fought some good counts, got deep for the home run and just did my job to help us win.

Q. Gavin, what makes Brandon's breaking ball so difficult as a hitter?

GAVIN KILEN: Because he's 6'5" and throws it over the top of his head from the moon. I've never been able to hit it. That's all I've got. Simple as that.

Q. Kind of playing off of that, as well, when facing a guy like Dylan Volantis, who comes up as a unique and intriguing matchup that he is, how he delivers super downhill sink, what's the mindset and approach going into facing an arm like that, that you don't see every day, and how consistently dominant he's been. Obviously, SEC Freshman of the Year. In that moment, what are you looking forward to that you're able to hit and do damage with?

GAVIN KILEN: I think for me personally, having a little bit of struggles against lefties right now, I think for me, it's just making sure to see breaking balls up. Especially a guy with a little bit of sink and run, it's going to come in on my hands, so I need to make sure it's over the plate. And I just got in a good count 2-0 and hit a good pitch.

Tennessee 7, Texas 5 (12)

TONY VITELLO: For me, I don't want to mess it up. It was too good of a game to say too much. It was an ESPN Classic. I'll recycle an answer I talked about with the guys up there. One of my favorite periods of MLB playoff baseball was when Kenny Rogers, at a much older age than Brandon Arvidson, went on a tear, and him being out there left-handed, just kind of reminded me of that, and enjoyed it. It would have been unfair for it to work out against his favor, especially if he was on the mound. But it's not fair, it's chaotic, and it's postseason baseball.

And the fact we beat them, were able to beat them, I think just playing this game will help both teams, but I guess the point I was going to make is, I don't want to speak for them, but I think the reason they won the league or the number one reason is they're bullpen is so good.

So for the reason that we were able to get it done against their bullpen, I think our guys should take great confidence in that.

Q. Your last four outings now, I think you had, like, a 45 percent strike out rate and just walked one batter. What's been so key for you to get going and to have that success?

BRANDON ARVIDSON: Just getting ahead. I mean, that's kind of been the focus all year, and why I faced some struggles earlier in the year is just falling behind hitters and clawing my way back into counts. So just getting ahead has been big for me.

Q. Brandon, being a Texan and having history with both schools, what did it that performance mean to

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Q. Gavin, what was going through your head as you were watching Brandon do what he did out there on the mound and what do you think that does for your team and the bullpen?

GAVIN KILEN: I think it just adds another vital piece to our bullpen, just another guy that personally being his roommate I see all the hard work he does on a day in, day out basis so I think just being able to pitch as well as he did was very exciting for me because I know all of our teammates and all of us see how great he can be and his potential, and he showed really well tonight.

Q. Tony, obviously, we talked with AJ yesterday and what he gave you guys. What does it mean for this bullpen as a whole when you got AJ doing what he did yesterday and Brandon doing what he did today?

TONY VITELLO: I think it means you're making progress. The play that stands out to me as I was sitting here listening to their answers, is Ariel had that exact same play and tried to go a little too fast, and we didn't get a double play. That was a more difficult play than the one that occurred earlier, a week ago, whatever it was. You had to be super quick to do that.

That's just one occasion, but I think whether it's Arv or Russell or Peeble's defense, guys coming off the bench, I think there's consistent progress. None of us know how long the season is for any of us when we go out there and play, but I think the more days we have around each other, the closer this group gets, the more fun they get. And we are making progress, which as a coach, makes you feel good.

Q. Brandon's last four outings have been really good. Why has he been able to be so effective in those outings?

TONY VITELLO: I think he just needed reps. I think it's accumulated. It's kind of like Levi; I think he just needed some SEC reps and figure out, yeah, it's arguably the best college baseball, but it's just college baseball and therefore it's just baseball.

That's one example, again, of a guy just needing reps, and I think we've had guys playing positions they don't normally play, and anytime we make an adjustment with our guy at first, he adjusts, so with him I think he just needed reps.

Earlier in the year we made the decision, in particular me, to go reps or times out appearances as opposed to length, but today was a day where you kind of tell kids all the time, make me take you out of the lineup or make me travel you, make me play you, make me rip the ball out of your hand,

and I would have got probably not just thrown out of our dugout but probably hurt if I would have taken him out before some damage was done.

Again, I'm glad that he was able to leave the park with a smile today because it was an epic effort.

Q. Another game where kind of resiliency is the theme, especially after those first couple of innings and then getting to their bullpen like you talked about. What did you see from your team today and what was the difference in the offense first half compared to second half?

TONY VITELLO: We played tremendous defense. Helped keep us in the game all game long. Our pitchers obviously did a good job. We've been talking about Arv, but he had a huge out yesterday, which was crazy to look back on. And then D-Lloyd did that today. That was massive, and then Snead has got to come in, in a big-time pressure situation. But by now, he's done that a million times. Sometimes it goes your way, sometimes it doesn't.

So I think the offensive thing was a byproduct of just the team effort. The dugout was good. The pitching was good. The defense was good. So the hitting eventually kind of had to catch up. But it was a depressing first four innings. I won't lie. I think in Liam's defense, I think he just tried to make up for last weekend. He wanted to throw two shutouts in one game, which is impossible. He kind of even made some comments about that. So it'll be a good lesson learned to be under control the next time he's out.

But Texas, Arkansas, these are great lineups. But I think our hitting kind of caught up with the rest of what was going on, and you've got to give Walker some credit. He was called upon and took advantage of it.

Q. What's it like to have a guy like Peebles be such catalyst to your offense, especially having that two run single in the top fifth to get you guys on the board, and also just helping the pitching staff over 200 pitches today 12 innings behind the dish?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, he's another example. I mean, we got Stone, a pinch-hit at-bat, but Coach Elander, who works with the catchers, is dying to see Stone out there. And then really push comes to shove, we're all dying to see Levi get reps so he gets better, but Cannon's our guy, he's older, he's got experience. He does a good job in all areas and has really improved defensively. But offensively, as you mentioned, he's another example. As the reps have piled up, there's less try too hard, less trying to dominate or anything crazy, and he's just kind of in there fighting a little bit.

When you do that, you can call it luck if you want. You can call it karma. He gets that Q-shot hit, you know, on the center field with two strikes, it's so huge as a byproduct of that competitiveness.

Q. What went into the decision to go with three straight lefties and what makes each of their looks different?

TONY VITELLO: Well, I think in the one situation, if I'm not mistaken, they call him A-Rod, so D-Lloyd came in with the potential of them bunting. Really good fielder. Obviously he's a strike thrower for us, and wanted to see the whole thing through with Arv, but the game wouldn't stop. So that was just kind of a situational matchup. Liam was our guy. We had adjusted the pitching for a particular reason.

To me, it didn't work out at Arkansas, but it worked out overall because we were able to get him a little rest. He'd been a catalyst for us, and obviously he's got a big outing coming up. But in the middle there was -- he didn't mention it, but I was a little nervous coming to the ballpark today. He was signed to go there, and there were some changes, so we were able to have Brandon come to Tennessee.

We had a pact that he was guaranteed to pitch in this game. I'm kind of glad Liam didn't throw a no-hitter or anything like that. Once he was in the game, he did the rest. The competitiveness was off the charts, and again, like a lot of guys, more reps, there seems to be some improvement.

Q. As the defending champs, every team has been giving you their all season. How did it feel to go up against Texas, someone who clearly has something to prove making their statement this year for the first time this year in the SEC tournament?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, no, I'm glad you said that. Come to Knoxville and form some -- it's a big deal to play Texas. It's always been a big deal. I went to school at Missouri; it's always a big deal. Our history of baseball pales in comparison to them or Arkansas. Jackie Bradley, Jr., is here; South Carolina won back-to-back. So we're not in the mix, but there seems to be a lot of noise surrounding our program, and some of it we bring on ourselves, which is fine. We at least want to be in the party, so if you can hear us or see us, that's a good thing.

But every series, every play has been a big deal, and it's been a little bit of an adjustment for our guys. Some of the guys are new to that and don't understand it and you've got to navigate it.

So that's our story. Who we play each time out, I haven't seen a lot of difference out of this team, to be honest with you, with who we're playing. It's either the vibe is good or it's not, and it's been very, very -- there's been occasions, you guys know them, you can't blame it on the weather, either. There's been a couple times where we haven't been ourselves. But I think today they were just enjoying another chance to be themselves and come to the park. It just so happened we were playing a phenomenal team.

Q. We know how talented this team is top to bottom. We've seen the highs this year, we've seen the struggles throughout the course of the end of the year. But what is flipping the switch like from the regular season to the postseason with so much to play for, wanting to host at Lindsey Nelson, what that means for the Tennessee Volunteers, the players, the fans, everyone involved, and kind of getting hot at the right time throughout the postseason, how does that matter to you and the mindset going in?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, the words are appropriate, like defending. Neither of these two guys were here last year, and that now seems like an eternity ago. I think this team is not defending but pursuing. You mentioned some good things there, and there's good stuff going on here on the weekend and all that stuff. But I'm getting older, but I think I'm young enough and around these guys, I think pursuing is just, again, to get better and come to the park every day. We really have not played our best baseball. And again, if you were at the park the first four innings you probably wanted me fired.

So I don't know that we have found our best who goes where in the bullpen and some other things or just our best brand of baseball. They're making progress and the scoreboard may not always show that, but that's what their pursuit is and there has not been a lot of talk about other stuff. I think if anything, maybe it's because -- we don't have a ton of older guys compared to some other teams, but the ones that we do, I think if we kept these guys centered, and all the extracurricular stuff has kind of been left up to you fellas to write about, and gals.

Q. You talked about it a little bit, but you said yesterday how this team is learning how to take a punch. Seeing them go down 4-0 but bounce back the way they did, what has that showed you as a coach?

TONY VITELLO: I think that they've matured. That was the one thing about our team in '23, obviously, had their own story, which to me was a really good one, but '22 was a wild group, and '24 was, too. But there was an extra sense of maturity there. That's not to knock anybody else.

I think that's a key ingredient. You have to kind of ride out the storm I guess is the right way to say. We did that today. It was not a good storm. It was a no-hit storm, is what it was, but it's a nine inning ballgame. And I think this team has matured and has realized when you do get punched in the gut, you've got to kind of keep your composure.

We got some guys that play with a lot of emotion and a lot of competitiveness, and it's probably impossible to play nine innings and not have it be a blip on the radar screen, but for it to not be a whole chaotic mess is key for this team because we've had a couple games way back when that that's been the case. So the composure and the maturity has already improved.

Q. You may have just alluded to it, but yesterday you talked about this team needing to handle punches a little bit better. Why these last two games have they been able to handle or manage those blows a little bit better? Is it someone in the dugout or conversations in the outfield?

TONY VITELLO: Yeah, me in the dugout. (Smiling.) No, I think a fresh start. We kind of talked about it, like opening day in MLB baseball or opening day or just a fresh start is key.

It's kind of shown up a few times for our guys, when we took that trip to Houston and sometimes we take a road trip, it's kind of a fresh start and you see a little bit of new life out of our guys. I think it's important for them to realize that and kind of use that to their advantage that every day can be a fresh start even if you're in the middle of something. Again, it's not about a guy clicking or other words. I think it's just about approaching each day the way that we know best or the way that is our best version of ourselves.

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