

Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament

Wednesday, May 20, 2026

Hoover, Alabama, USA

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Coach Brian O'Connor

Tomas Valincius

Vytas Valincius

Postgame Press Conference



Q. Vito, have you guys ever had a chance to get in a press conference setting together?

VYTAS VALINCIUS: No.

TOMAS VALINCIUS: This is our first time.

Q. Going back to that last inning for you, you come up in both at-bats, lead off the inning with a home run and then you have a big swing there with the two guys on base, a chance to break it out. What were you seeing from both of those guys that inning that allowed you to have that success?

VYTAS VALINCIUS: From the pitchers? I think it was just more of a "me" standpoint. The first two at-bats, I was just not on time. I was just getting on time, being early, and then adjustments on whatever they throw. So it was just an adjustment I made.

Q. Tomas, you take the mound with a dirty uniform already, and then you make a diving attempt into the gravel in front of their dugout. It's clear you were here to work, but also to party. Just take us through your mindset. It's not often you see a future first-round draft pick driving for a ball and getting a strawberry on his elbow.

TOMAS VALINCIUS: I forget Ace was shifted over, and I saw the pop-up happen. I looked at our catcher, Chone, and I was, like, he's not really going for it. I think I could have caught the ball easier. But I was late going for it.

I mean, I just wanted to get the out. It's baseball. I pitched to get outs. If I have to make that, I'll try my best to do that.

Q. It's well documented that this is kind the first time in a while that you guys have played on the same team. To win the first game in Hoover, and you two arguably one of the two guys that led the way the most, as brothers, how does that feel to lead your guys to victory in the first one for the conference tournament?

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THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Mississippi State head coach Brian O'Connor and student-athletes Vytas Valincius and Tomas Valincius.

BRIAN O'CONNOR: I'd say it's great to be here. For the three of us, it's our first experience in Hoover at the SEC Tournament. And you can see why everybody raves about how this is the best college baseball tournament in the country. The SEC does a great job running this event, and the caliber of the teams and the coaches, second to none.

Excited to be here. Proud of our team. Today, obviously Tico got us off to a great six innings. He was on a pitch count. That pitch count was 80. He was very, very efficient. And Vito here is a great example of, I talk to the players all the time about, it's not how the game starts, it's how you finish.

And I know he had two tough at-bats his first two at-bats, but he hung in there, and, certainly in the sixth inning, put two huge swings on the ball and made a difference for us.

Q. Tomas, you pitched on a day shorter rest this week. How did you feel going into it and how do you feel like you performed today?

TOMAS VALINCIUS: I felt great. I think I did a great job recovering this week and back to it, working with Coach Parker, fixing some stuff up from last outing.

I mean, going into that, I thought it was good. I just put a lot of pressure on the hitters, attacked them with everything I had. And that was kind of the story of it.



VYTAS VALINCIUS: I mean, I thought it was it was a full team effort. I mean look at it, they scored first and we came back in the next inning respond and score three. I mean we did our part of just keeping us in the game. I think it's a big part of pitching.

And Vito did a great job flushing his first two at-bats and putting good swings on the ball.

You look at it, it's like it's all connected. One guy gets a walk, another guy gets a walk and then it takes a lot of pressure off the other guy hitting.

Q. Vito, Coach mentioned the two home runs, and I'm sure somebody's looking up whether there's been two home runs in an inning here at Hoover before. When is the last time that you hit two home runs in an inning?

VYTAS VALINCIUS: I don't think I ever have. I've seen someone else do it, but I don't think I've ever done it. So I mean my last at-bat, I was just trying to see the ball early and then I put a good swing on it. Yeah, it worked out.

Q. Tomas, 78 pitches today. You kept them at bay, eight strikeouts, nine in-play outs. What does it mean to have James behind the dish? And what were your mechanics to work with around with him from the fall that has helped you improve to get your 10th win today?

TOMAS VALINCIUS: It just comes to the level of trust. It's not really like working on catching stuff or anything. But I mean, he was my roommate last year at Virginia. So he's one of my best friends on the team. And having him behind there, it was truly special.

I've never thrown to him in games. So today was the first time. It was fun. It was fun to be with him, compete with him.

Q. Coach mentioned how special this tournament was, how well ran it is. From the student-athlete's perspective, what makes this Hoover experience different from any other conference tournament you've played in?

VYTAS VALINCIUS: I mean for me it was just getting on the bus and the police escort. That was sick. And then, yeah, I mean everything is bigger in the SEC. It's awesome. I think just the biggest part was the police escort.

Q. Tomas, what was it like watching that sixth inning when your brother hits two home runs?

TOMAS VALINCIUS: I was fired up. I didn't realize it was in the same inning. He hit the first one early and I got fired up. They told me to stop jumping because I didn't realize how low the dugout was, but I was fired up for it.

The second one, I was not as fired up because I used a lot of energy for the first one. It was cool. It was an awesome moment. I've never seen that before from him.

Q. A lot of discussion about starting Tomas, and it paid off. You get six innings from him, strong start. He's been really good on short rest this year. His other short rest starts were against Georgia and Auburn, two of his better games. What makes him so effective coming off the short rest that he's been able to go out there and give you length in the ball game, but also be pretty dominant?

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Well, first, where's all the talk?

Q. Social media.

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Oh, okay. So we obviously didn't know who we would play this morning, after the weekend at Texas A&M. Coach Parker and I debrief after every weekend, talk about the pitchers and where they're at and everything.

There was really no decision on what we were going to do not knowing your opponent, that Tico was the right guy to get this tournament off to a good start. He was going to be on a 80-pitch limit, because obviously we need him next weekend.

But I've just always believed, in tournament time, that win the game in front of you. Next weekend, there's a little bit that goes into scouting and things like that on who you're going to pitch on what day.

But today, it was simple, that we need to get in championship mode and compete. And I just thought about also, too, from Tico, if we pitch somebody else and say we didn't win, and him not having a chance to compete for two weeks, that's not good either, right?

So there's benefits to it. There can be negatives to it. But we were going to limit him and get us off to a great start in this tournament.

How do you know you're going to end out scoring 12 runs? There we are, going into the bottom of the sixth inning and it's a tight ball game.

So win the one in front of you and deal with next week



tomorrow tomorrow. And deal with next weekend next weekend.

Q. Offensively, it's a grind to face this lineup. It's like Novocain, eventually it's like they're going to get you. That's kind of what happened today. When you kind of grounded some guys out. But it's up and down the lineup. And specifically, what did you see offensively today that maybe encouraged you about the rest of the postseason?

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Well, certainly I was really encouraged by what I saw in the back part of the game. I thought our two-strike approach in the first three or four innings wasn't what it needed to be.

It seemed like to me a few of the players were trying to do too much. They weren't on time. Vito addressed that. He wasn't on time to hit in his first two at-bats. He made an adjustment. That was great to see. And other guys were the same.

I talked to the team in the dugout after the win and I said, listen, I know a lot of you haven't been in championships before. Whether it's this week or next weekend or the weekends after, you have to take a deep breath and be loose.

So hopefully some of those guys today that weren't at their best will be at their best tomorrow. But the depth of the lineup is really good.

I just think that you think about Ace Reese had two walks today. Noah Sullivan had three strikeouts and that misplayed fly ball in right field. Your 2- and 3-hole hitters today didn't do too much, but still had 12 runs on the board.

That sixth inning was what we're about, not the two home runs Vito hit. The 3-2 walk Bryce chance had. The walk by Ryder Woodson. Chone James, the backside 4-hole hit.

That sixth inning, it's easy to say it because of the two home runs and what we did and scored that many runs. But it was more about what the approach was. We started getting back to what we do and that's grind out at-bats and take what the game gives you. And we were rewarded with a beginning.

Q. Vito having two home runs in one inning in the bottom of the sixth frame, just also about Woodson being such a player for your offense, how do you feel how Woodson has helped you guys structure the second half of the year, let alone in what lies ahead even for the (indiscernible) tomorrow?

BRIAN O'CONNOR: About Ryder Woodson, you know, hey, listen, I know he's got 10 errors or something like that. It's his first time ever in college baseball playing every day as a shortstop. But his defense and his range is getting better and better. Ryder went through a lull in the middle third part of the season. That's because he's a long, wiry guy that hasn't lined up every day.

His swing got a little bit long, some length to it. And I'll tell you, last weekend -- I've seen this about the last 10 days, I've seen him tighten some things up with his hands and his swing. Down at Texas A&M, he made some phenomenal defensive plays at shortstop.

And I think the young man has a flare for the moment. Why do I say that? Last year, in the NCAA Regional that he played for NC State, he hit a couple home runs at the most important times of the year for them, having just had a handful of at-bats going into that for them.

So I like the young man. He comes ready to play every day. And his team is being rewarded for what he's done recently.

Q. You mentioned about this being a different tournament and being a well-run tournament. From your perspective, Coach, I know you've been around a long time, but what makes this tournament so different from the other tournaments you've been in?

BRIAN O'CONNOR: First of all, the administration of it. And this conference is buttoned up and it's first class. You don't wonder as a coach what is going on. The communication is elite. That's what you ask for, right? Because you want to prepare your team the right way. So that's on the conference office, and they do a phenomenal job.

The second thing I'd say is the fan bases. Brought our team just for a few innings, at the beginning of the Tennessee game last night, and to see the Tennessee fans that have come here, to see the Mississippi State fans that come here, LSU -- right on down the line, the passionate fan bases that come here to Hoover, that's what makes it.

Obviously, there's an extreme amount of talent on the field. What conference tournament is there more talent than the SEC? It's not even a discussion. That's fun because you have to be at your best, just like you do 30 nights a year over 10 weekends in this league.

And so the combination of those things make it a special experience for the players.

Q. Going back to the transfer portal in the summer, obviously you were very familiar with Tico, coaching him a year ago. But with Vytas, what was it about him that you saw that you thought he could be an impact player on this team and not just, hey, let's bring in his brother too sort of situation?

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Well, there's an evaluation process of somebody swinging and their ability and things like that. That's a factor in anybody that you bring in. Knowing that he was the leading hitter last year at Illinois, playing in a good conference.

But what it comes down to -- Tico was easy. I got to stand in the dugout for 15 of his starts, whatever, last year, see that young man compete. And I've known this family since Tico was 15 years old.

Actually, Tico's senior year in high school, I made two trips to Chicago to do home visits with him and his family, one in December and then one in late June prior to the draft.

So with regards to Vito, there's the ability part, but I know how those two young men grew up. They're tough. They are absolute warriors, the two of them. So, there's the ability piece, but there's the competitive part that you have to have to win in this league. So that family and how those two young men grew up is a separator, and you don't see it that much anymore.

A lot of these kids grow up now, mom and dad hand them everything, rub their back when things don't go well. These two young men grew up, and the way they grew up, they're tough kids. And I'll take those kind of guys any day.

Q. I know you're only just now turning the page, but looking at this Georgia team, another chance to get a shot at them after a tough home series. Looking back on some of those games, what's your impression of this team and what needs to happen tomorrow?

BRIAN O'CONNOR: Whew! They're good. Right? They clearly won the toughest league in the country, and they're obviously incredibly offensive and have a good pitching staff as well.

The three ball games in Starkville were all great games. Unfortunately, State came out on the wrong end of all of them. But they were great baseball games and two really great teams, and I expect the same thing tomorrow.

We're going to have to pitch really good, and certainly, we're going to have to drive runs in because they clearly have an offensive ballclub that is extremely talented.

But these guys, they'll be ready. They'll turn the page. They'll be ready, and we'll look forward to that opportunity.

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