

2025 Women's College World Series

Wednesday, May 28, 2025
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Tennessee Lady Volunteers Coach Karen Weekly

Karlyn Pickens McKenna Gibson

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Coach Weekly, if you have an opening statement, feel free. If not, we'll go to questions.

KAREN WEEKLY: It's great to be here. Really proud of the young women on our team. They've worked really hard, and they've earned this. We know we have an incredible opponent on Thursday, and we just want to put our best foot forward out here.

Q. Karen, you guys obviously won a road series at Oklahoma end of March, but they kind of took off end of the season, completely different team. Just how different are they now, and how much more of a challenge will they be tomorrow?

KAREN WEEKLY: I think everybody is a whole lot different from March, and I don't think that series means anything for this week. Winning at Oklahoma, I think the thing it did for our team was gave them the confidence, and we kind of came together and solidified some things in our lineup.

But other than that, it means absolutely nothing for Thursday. It's a brand-new season. At every stage of the post-season, that's kind of what we have talked about: This is a brand new season, everybody is 0-0. You have some experiences that you can draw from, but it's a brand-new ball game.

Q. Karen, with Karlyn, so much gets made about how hard she throws and the records, but in terms of being a complete pitcher, I'm curious what's impressed you where you have seen her grow from freshman year to now or just this spring being a completely dominant pitcher.

KAREN WEEKLY: How long do you have?

Q. As long as they'll give me here.

KAREN WEEKLY: It's remarkable when you look at Karlyn from freshman to now. The CliffsNote version, the velo was there, maybe a little bit wild, but she bought into developing all the other pitches, her rise ball, drop ball, her change-up, and not just, okay, I need them, but really embracing it and diving all in.

I remember coming into this year, she said: My goal isn't to just throw them. My goal is to love them as much as I love throwing my fastball.

That's why you see her doing what she's doing now. You see her numbers getting better every year. Ton of credit to Karlyn, obviously, and then a lot of credit to our pitching coach, Megan Smith, and the work that she does with her.

You've also seen tremendous growth in her mental game. And that's, I think, the beauty of Karlyn, how mentally tough she is. But it's because she's so honest and self-aware and accountable, and she's just going to problem-solve. She's not going to get lost in dwelling on anything -- drama, emotion. She just wants to go out there and figure it out and get better tomorrow.

Q. Karen, and Karlyn as well, do you think at times Megan, what she does with the staff, goes under-appreciated, going back and looking at Payton and Ashley as well?

KAREN WEEKLY: I think she's one of the most underrated pitching coaches in the country. And a lot of that is because Megan is a family person. When she's not pouring into Tennessee softball, she's spending time with her family. So she's probably not out there as much as other coaches are, doing things away from our team, but that's okay. She's fantastic at what she does. And the numbers speak for themselves. We have had an All-American pitcher for quite a few years running now, and Megan has been with us only five short years.

KARLYN PICKENS: Yeah, Megan has devoted so much time into me and all of our pitching staff this year and



previous years, like Karen said, Ashley Rogers, Payton Gottshall. We really love her, and she helps build us up both on the field and off the field mentally. So really underrated for sure.

Q. If all three of you guys can talk about this, the poker chips that you guys have in your pocket every game, I know it has your punch to kill, keep throwing punches on it, but can you talk about where the idea came from to have them in the pocket during games and what you guys have liked about that this season.

KAREN WEEKLY: Okay. I think we got to post-season and we talked about now you're playing with house money, right? And they kind of looked at me funny because they probably haven't gambled as much as I have, and I said house money means you go and you win some money and it's not yours, it's the house's, so you just get to go for it. You can take that chunk of money and go for it.

The idea was no holding back, go all in. I said, for example, you can put all in on 25 red -- and, of course, had to explain roulette. So then two of our staff members next week, they ordered those orange chips and put 25 strong on one side and KTP, PTK on the other side. And we gave them to them before regionals, I think it was... yeah. Just to exemplify we are 25 strong and we are all in on everything we do.

I think that's the big thing, we are 25 strong. These guys and a couple other people get a lot of attention, but our dugout makes us. Our dugout is absolutely incredible. Every lady in that dugout is team first.

KARLYN PICKENS: Yeah, everything Karen said, and having one of those physical reminders in your back pocket. I think it's cool to know that's there and kind of a reminder to play free and it's something we all share as a team. We have that one little token we're going to take with us all the way through, just being able to share that with everybody and have that reminder to play free, play present, and play with joy.

McKENNA GIBSON: Ditto to everything they said. At least for me, too, as a senior it's really cool because each chip -- I think we passed some more out during supers, and they have different sayings on it: Whatever it takes, KTP, PTK. Just different things that will keep you locked in.

But like Karlyn said, we're 25 strong. It's just a reminder that we're all playing for each other. And at least for me, too, just a good way to look at our teammates and just lock in and play with joy, playing with them as our final moments come. But ultimately it's a good thing for us to

stay locked in and to play for each other.

Q. Coach, just wanted to ask about how you guys potentially would go about evaluating SEC teams that you haven't seen yet this season, like Florida, and just is the evaluation process any different than you guys facing a team outside the SEC, or is it a little different because you have so many common opponents? How would you go about that as the tournament goes on?

KAREN WEEKLY: Yeah, I don't think it's any different. And the beauty of it is, for example, when we go to play a team, they might have played Florida the week before in SEC. So we might have seen Florida, even though that wasn't who we were really diving into, as a coaching staff, we got some looks at them. We got to deal with first things first on Thursday, you got to play that game. Whatever happens after that, you dive into that. But I guess because they're in the SEC, there's probably a better chance we might have seen some video just by circumstance.

Q. McKenna and Karlyn first, and then, Karen, if you would like to chime in on this as well. I'm curious what the player's perspective of the current pro landscape is. It's something that's gone up and down over your lifetimes, really, but with Athletes Unlimited right now in particular, seems to be headed in a direction that's much needed for the sport. I'm curious what your thoughts are.

McKENNA GIBSON: Yeah, I think it's awesome. It's a really cool opportunity for female athletes, obviously softball players, but just to kind of get a little perspective on what life after college is going to be like.

And I think it's a great opportunity to continue playing. We have someone on our staff that's been playing for a while, Aubrey Leach, and you've got some amazing players that's played college in previous years playing for Athletes Unlimited now.

And I think it's just a cool opportunity to grow the sport and grow views. And just I can't wait to see the viewage in future years, because it's still a little bit underrated now. But just a really cool way to continue the sport, grow revenue for players and different NIL opportunities. So I think it's really awesome.

KARLYN PICKENS: Yeah, I agree. I think it's amazing to see where the sport has grown from when I was younger watching college softball. There wasn't Athletes Unlimited or anything like that.

So it's a privilege to be a part of the generation now to where we get to go to that next level and really grow the

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

sport of softball, and it's exciting to see how much it's growing in such a short time and how it will continue to grow. I'm very honored to be a part of that.

KAREN WEEKLY: I think any women's league that's been successful has had significant financial backing, and not just ticket sales and merchandising and things like that.

Softball is going to need the same thing. I don't know that there's anything official yet, but we've heard that MLB is interested in getting involved. I think Kim Ng is going to make a huge difference being the commissioner of this league.

It's a long time coming. These young women deserve it. I'm just very hopeful that this is the one that's actually sustainable.

Q. McKenna, how have you seen this offense grow, especially with the youngsters like Ella and Gabby who have made a really big difference last weekend?

McKENNA GIBSON: Yeah, I'm super proud of this team, the way we have been able to grow this season. From early on you kind of get a glimpse of what we can do, but we have played some tough teams throughout this season. SEC is a very tough conference.

And I'm just really proud to see the growth because we do have a young lineup and a young staff. So especially Ella and Gabby, they're really playing into their roles. And this is a perfect time for them to step up and be big and be bold with what they're doing.

And we have had a lot of growth, both mentally and physically, throughout the lineup. So I'm just really proud of this team and really lucky to be here. And that's what's gotten us here too.

Q. Karlyn, we know your talent does go further than throwing hard, but obviously that does tend to garner a lot of national attention. Just hoping you can speak a little bit about what fuels those moments behind the record-breaking pitches and how it feels to be part of something that's so big for the sport.

KARLYN PICKENS: Yeah, immediate thought is my team. I would say my team fuels really all of my pitching, knowing that they're behind me, knowing that my goal is to, at the end of the day, win for my team.

So I think that is a big motivator for me to continue to push and grow as a pitcher and reach new heights. It's exciting to have that recognition, I would say, but at the end of the day, it's really just about winning for my team and moving

on to bigger things together.

Q. Karen and Karlyn, I wanted to ask you about Sophia. For Karlyn, how would you describe your relationship on the field? It seems like sometimes she knows when you need a little meeting, makes you laugh. How does she help you relax on the field?

And for Karen, I know you guys were one of the first power conference schools to recruit her out of high school. How cool is it to see her journey come full circle with you guys and help lead you back to the World Series?

KAREN WEEKLY: Yeah, we had Sophia on campus probably in the ninth grade. This was back when early recruiting was the thing. It came down to us and OU, and she chose OU.

And she was just a player that you build relationships when you recruit and build relationships with the families. And was really, really happy when I saw her name go in the portal and knew that we wanted to get her this time around. So fortunately for us, we did.

Sophia has grown so much in two years. I think her first year was wading in and figuring out how she fit and her place with the team and her personality, and this year it's been so cool to watch her get more passionate on the field, play with more fire, just communicate at such a high level.

And if you have watched our team, she gets better every single week. You don't always see that with a senior. Sometimes they kind of plateau, but she just keeps getting better and has bigger and bigger moments for us each week.

KARLYN PICKENS: Yeah, the battery, I always say it's a two-man job. Sophia does a great job of knowing what I need to hear in tough moments, knowing when to come out to the mound and speak and really just devote so much to making sure that I'm good. And before innings, if that's a little pep talk or just asking how I'm feeling, anything like that, she's always having great communication. And does so not only with me but the entire team, I think.

And, yeah, she's one of our most amazing players and amazing teammates, and I'm super happy and thankful for a catcher like her.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions? Okay. Wrap things up. Thank you, Tennessee.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

