

2026 HATTIESBURG REGIONAL
Postgame Press Conference – Game Three
(2) Virginia 15, (1) Southern Miss 11

Coach Pollard Opening Statement:

Yeah, I will start today with an apology to the Southern Miss program, to their fans, to the administration. Great baseball fans, the administration has run an awesome event. I have a world of respect for Coach Ostrander. I'm embarrassed that we had two players kicked out of the game for losing their composure. I haven't had two players kicked out of a game or even period over the last 25 years. We talked about in our pregame meeting at the hotel that this would be an emotionally charged atmosphere and we needed to not play with emotion, not get caught up in the emotion. There are two great young men. I've known both of them for a really long time. I've coached both of them now for multiple years. I know their families. They're good people, but they did get caught up in the emotion of the moment. And Coach Ostrander and his guys do everything first class. They didn't deserve that. That said, I didn't think we were very tough yesterday. I didn't think we were very prepared, candidly, and that's on me. I challenged our guys this morning. I thought we had a great team meeting and our guys came out and really answered the bell. I thought there was a ton of resilience out of this group after really getting embarrassed yesterday to come out and play in this atmosphere, which is truly, I've been doing this longer than a lot of you have been alive, truly one of the best atmospheres I've ever been in 33 years of college baseball. I've been in Morgantown regionals and Lubbock Super Regionals and a lot of places that are considered hostile environments to play in. And I thought today was as good of atmosphere as I've ever been in in college baseball. Just great fans really willing their team to stay in the ball game. I'm proud of these two. You know, AJ Gracia, I've known him since he was in the eighth grade. He's going to go down as the best player I've ever coached. And that's quite a statement. I've got a lot of guys in the big leagues right now, but I've never coached anybody like him. I've never coached somebody so consistent with their approach. The ability to be the same guy every day, something we really value in our program. And then, sort of on the opposite end of the spectrum, and I mean this as a compliment to Zach, you have a guy that's really learning on the fly how to play our sport. A guy that's been a two-sport athlete and was a recruited college football player, but has been a part time baseball player his whole life. And now is dedicating himself to it fully and just growing by the day and had some tough moments earlier in that game. Came over after one inning and I really challenged him because he threw to the wrong base in a cut situation that could have cost us, right? And then had a couple of tough at-bats. But we talk about being tough enough to stay in the fight. And that's what you do, you overcome those moments. And you get yourself back to neutral and you compete like crazy in the moment that you're in. And that was obviously, it goes without saying, but arguably the biggest at bat of the year for us to this point. So proud of these guys in different ways, but both guys that have a terrific future ahead of them and are going to play this game for a long time.

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Q: Zach, when you come to the plate, Southern Miss had just turned that double play, which really seemed to shift the momentum their way. What's going through your mind at that point, and what did Coach Tyler say to you?

Zach Jackson: I mean, it was just another at bat. I wasn't really nervous. And then ET came up to me, really calmed me down a lot, got me more level headed. Just told me, just see it deep and stick to my approach, and that's what I did.

Q: Chris, how did the ejection was dealing at that point? Did that impact what you did in the back half?

Coach Pollard: I mean, it affected our pitching, right? I mean, that's just honest because John was going to go back out there. He's throwing great. He's built out as a starter. He's capable of going 100 pitches. He's on extra rest because of throwing on Thursday of last week. So it impacted us and it put Tyler Kapa in there in a tough spot, right? Only wanted him to really have to cover four outs, right? Maybe come in and get us off the field in the eighth and cover the ninth. And now you put him in a situation where he's gotta create some length and I think it affected him a little bit. And he'll be good at dusting it off and being ready to go later in the tournament. But yeah, it impacted us and it will be, something that we learn from, like young guys make mistakes, young guys get caught up in the emotion, right? And if there was ever going to be a situation that you get caught up in the emotion, it could be today. Cuz for a lot of these guys, they've just never been in an atmosphere like this. You play this sport a long time and not be in an atmosphere this good and those guys got caught up in it. But yeah, it affected our pitching today, Bradley.

Q: AJ, did the players say anything to themselves apart from the coach's message heading into this game? If so, what was it?

AJ Gracia: Yeah, I mean, I think coach gave us a good message yesterday. We're not going to be ones to beat a dead horse. I think he gave us a good talking to. Obviously, we weren't ready to go yesterday, but I think we responded well. There was nothing aside from that, that we really had to do. I feel like it was a pretty simple ask of us to be more prepared than we were yesterday.

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Q: You're the first player in program history to have five hits in a NCAA tournament game. Did it occur to you before this game that you were at the stage of your career where any game could be your last as a college player? And if so, does that inspire you a little more?

AJ Gracia: Yeah, I mean, it's pretty hard to ignore that. I think the last two years, I'm just obviously playing with a lot of really good older players. I think you kind of see that at the end of the year is like, I think I mentioned to you coach a couple weeks ago, Zach Morris, my freshman year, he was playing the best baseball I'd ever seen the last, you know, two weeks of the season. And I think there's something to be said about, you're kind of looking the end right in the face, playing college baseball and you don't want it to end. I think we've kind of talked last couple weeks about just fighting for another day together. So that's kind of where I'm at with that.

Q: Chris, Crabtree out of the pen for them was really dealing at the back end of that and then it just seemed like the switch flipped in the end, what are the sort of discussions in the dugout where you're trying to get a reliever like that out of the game?

Coach Pollard: Yeah, I think at a point you have to hunt that split finger, right? I mean, it's a really, really good pitch. And sometimes when a guy's got a really elite breaking ball or a really elite off-speed pitch, you just got to go up there and say, I'm going to sell out to try to hit that pitch and that's what Kyle Johnson did. I thought it was a great – and, you know, he's got – that's what makes Crabtree so tough. It's enough fastball. If you do that, he can beat you with the fastball. But at some point, you've got to say that's his best pitch and he's going to look to get me out with that pitch and I'm just going to sell out to try to hit that one.

Q: Chris, you've got another elimination game tomorrow. You've used a lot of pitchers so far. Who do you go with tomorrow?

Coach Pollard: Yeah, I mean, it'll be a whole staff approach. And some of it, if we're going to have to get back to the hotel and just take an assessment of how guys feel, I mean, that took a lot out of everybody. And I think if everybody in the stands knew what some of these guys were playing through right now, like – We've got hamstrings and quads and sore shoulders and guys just out there gut checking it in this ballgame. And, you know, we've got to see who feels okay, but it'll be all hands on deck. It'll be a one-game season. We'll try to fight like crazy to get through that one. And we won't worry about the next one until that one's over with.

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Q: What do the ejections of those players mean for their availability?

Coach Pollard: Yeah, well, neither one of them will play in that first game tomorrow. Obviously, with Paone, that doesn't impact him. He's not going to throw again until the Super Regional. It takes Kyle Johnson's ability to hit out of the mix, and that's big.