

2017 Women's College World Series

Tuesday, June 6, 2017
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma



Patty Gasso
Paige Parker
Paige Lowary
Kelsey Arnold
Shay Knighten
Nicole Mendes
Oklahoma

Oklahoma - 5, Florida - 4

PATTY GASSO: Well, first and foremost, whether we win or lose, we give the glory to God. Had the power of three throughout this entire postseason, and it was powerful for this group. Proud of them.

I also want to thank everybody who worked this tournament. It was so well-run, better than we've ever seen it, and I congratulate Florida. What a great, great team, well-coached. They're tough.

The battle that we had last night was unbelievable, and I think we still feel a little adrenaline from last night, as well. But it was a challenge.

Words cannot express -- I still cannot believe that this happened, with where we started and where we finished. There's so many stories. The journey was unbelievable. I think if you looked at us in February and March, even parts of April, you would never imagine us sitting here right now with trophies in front of us.

So proud of this group, their effort. It was team. We had 17 players on our roster, 17 players. Everybody had to contribute in some way or the other, and they did, and they bought in, and they just went for it. They weren't afraid. They didn't panic. They were fearless. I'm still speechless. It was incredible. It was incredible.

Q. Patty, one of your greatest assets is your ability to decipher a game and go with your gut off a game plan what you've got. Tell us about this pitching rotation you went with today because it won you a

national title today.

PATTY GASSO: Well, we started with Paige (Parker), and she wanted the ball. I think Paige probably could tell you she didn't have her best stuff, but she is the reason why we're sitting here right now, and she knows that. I know she knows that.

To be able to give Mariah (Lopez) the ball, a freshman who's been waiting patiently, and for her to step up and do what we asked her to do in that setting was another reason why we're sitting here with a trophy. It's another reason why we're here, period.

Then we bring in Nicole Mendes, thinking this would be a good matchup. She can keep the ball down. She can mix her pitches. We can keep them off balance. So everybody had a game plan and needed to execute it, even if it was for one inning. Nicole Mendes did exactly what we asked her to do to set it up for Paige Lowary, and Paige Lowary came in, and she was hot. She was ready. She was really -- you could see her -- I don't know how hard she was throwing, but it looked like 100 miles an hour. The adrenaline was there and she was hitting her spots just so confident.

To see four pitchers pull this off is a dream come true for a coach because every one of them had a piece of this.

Q. Patty, you guys lost your first regional game to North Dakota State and were three outs away from elimination against Tulsa. How much did that change the course of your postseason, that comeback in those situations?

PATTY GASSO: It was everything. I want to send them a thank you card for waking us up, and they did. And that scare is almost what we needed to step forward and say we're not going home, not on our field. We're not going home.

We've had some magical moments in this postseason, and what Syd (Sydney Romero) and CC (Caleigh Clifton) and those guys coming with home runs and keeping us alive, that magic that happened at our field with our fans is something we grabbed on to and we just kept going.

Q. Paige Parker, last night you said that you were with Paige Lowary on every pitch. Today there

were a couple of others. Just curious on if you feel the same connection with the other two.

PAIGE PARKER: Absolutely. I think the bond that our whole pitching staff has is something that is very, very special. I wanted to be with them every single pitch, and I wanted them to know that no matter what happened, I had your back. I'm just so proud of this pitching staff. We've come a long way this year, and we worked so, so hard, and huge credit to Coach Lombardi because she's the best pitching coach in the country, and she works harder than anyone I've ever seen, and I'm just so blessed to have her as my pitching coach.

Q. Kelsey, you were the captain on this team this year. You kind of led by example all year, and the other day Patty said you're kind of like the unsung hero of the team. Is that kind of how you led all year, just kind of leading by example?

KELSEY ARNOLD: I mean, it's a blessing. It's an indescribable feeling to win another national championship. I just want to let you all know that my teammates are leaders along with me. It's not just me by myself, and I believe that when we all came together, power of three, that's what you saw.

Q. Patty, you talked at times this year about you not having fun, that this team wasn't having fun playing together and that it was difficult at times. What made it fun out there? What changed to make it fun?

PATTY GASSO: I think once we figured out how to connect with each other -- there was some disconnect within the team. We were feeling like we needed to repeat. That word was used a lot. We felt the pressure of being better, and that's not fun. That wasn't fun.

We finally got to a point where we said, enough is enough. We need to stop this right now because we're really not even close to being as good as we can. These guys figured it out about the end of March, early April, right when we were starting Big 12 play, and it just kept growing. Our win streak was moving. It was starting to move, and you could see we had lost to Baylor, and that loss made us better, and that's what I love about this team is they take losses and they learn and they make themselves better from it.

Q. Patty, is it safe to say this is your deepest staff in 23 seasons, and can you take us back to the day you found out Paige Lowary was headed your way?

PATTY GASSO: Well, it's the first time I heard about Uber; I remember that. I didn't know what Uber was. She was working at the Hall of Fame Stadium with the U.S. team, and we had set up a visit, and she took an Uber. She was broken. She was broken. And hearing her story, I'm going to tell you guys, you want to listen

to this story because it is unbelievable that this kid right here is on the bottom of this dog pile. She was broken and didn't love softball, didn't want to pitch, and wanted a change. To see her growth as a pitcher and as a person has been so rewarding, and I'm telling you, to see her on the bottom of that dog pile and then -- this pitching staff is so tight, the battery, (Lea) Wodach, Hannah (Sparks), they work very hard together. I'm glad we got her, and I'm glad she's loving pitching again. I don't know how much sweeter it could be than it is right now.

Q. Deepest staff ever?

PATTY GASSO: Deepest staff ever, yeah.

Q. Shay, you were nodding your head when Coach was talking about the team needed to wake up? Talk about why that needed to happen?

SHAY KNIGHTEN: I think at that point we kind of were settling, and we thought, OK, well, regionals, we can just roll through our regionals, roll through supers and get to the World Series. We thought it was that easy, and losing to North Dakota State was huge for us because we all had the wide eyes at that point. We were like, what just happened? And the fact that we all put our heads together, coaching staff, support staff, everyone, we knew that something had to change, and we figured it out, and we just went from there.

Q. Coach, just your thoughts on the offense being able to break through against what statistically was the nation's best pitching staff.

PATTY GASSO: If you could watch the connection that JT (Gasso) had with our hitters, they had plans. It was fun to watch all of it come together.

What I like about this team and our staff is we work as one. The pitching staff is right in the middle of the game plan. The hitters are right in the middle of the game plan. There's certain hitters that talk more than others, but they all are learning. This group right here will be great coaches because they're learning and they're contributing, and they had this plan, and they executed it. I'm proud of JT as well. My coaching staff is phenomenal. They work, and they connect. His plan and the execution of these hitters is another reason why we pulled this off.

Q. What you've done tonight, what you did tonight and what you did the last five years might make you -- give you a right to say that Oklahoma is sort of now the center of the softball universe, at least the University of Oklahoma in college softball can be called that. Can you reflect on that or do you buy into that after the run that you're on?

PATTY GASSO: All I try to do is be the best coach I can for these players. When they commit to OU, I

commit back to them. Our goal is to make them as great as I can. I don't buy into -- we just want to win. If we're winning each year, that's great, and if we're not, we're going to try to win the next year. But we don't stake claim in being an elite program. We just play hard and we want to win. We won't own it. I know you want us to, but we won't own it. We're just going to keep working.

Q. Back-to-back nights with the game changing hit. Can you talk about being in that moment, and also is there a routine? How do you deliver in the clutch on back-to-back nights on the biggest stage?

SHAY KNIGHTEN: Being in those moments, I've just got to keep myself calm, just stay relaxed and just kind of not think about what if, just kind of go for it. And it paid off, but I just wanted to do everything for my team, and to finish this way is really cool.

Q. Paige Lowary, Coach Gasso says this time last year you were a broken pitcher. Can you even sum up all of the emotions that you're probably feeling right now compared to where you were a year ago?

PAIGE LOWARY: I can't believe it. I'm still very speechless, and it hasn't really set in yet, but I'm just forever grateful that I got the opportunity to come here, and I can't believe how close and tight this team is. I'm just so blessed and humbled and thankful and grateful. I don't have enough words to describe how I feel.

Q. Nicole, you jump started the game with your first at-bat. Talk about that and what you hit. Also, when you came in to pitch, you pitched well this year, but did you have an idea after last night that you might be out there today in the circle?

NICOLE MENDES: During my first at-bat, I just knew that I really wanted to get the momentum going, and whatever way it was, with a bunt, with a slap, with a hit, it didn't matter, but I just wanted to show my team that I was there for them and that I knew that they had my back. It just so happened to go over. And with pitching, it wasn't really, oh, I'm going to pitch this game, it was just kind of I'm going to warm up however I can and if they call me in, I'm going to do my best to fill that role.

Q. What was it about Oklahoma that you said, okay, I want to visit there?

PAIGE LOWARY: Everything seemed very real. What I saw was what I got. I trusted what they were saying, and I believed that they could change me, and I saw before my eyes. I just really can't believe it. I'm just so happy that they gave me a shot.

Q. Coach, you talked about it a little bit, but you guys started the regional losing to North Dakota State and you won four straight elimination games,

then swept Auburn, then fight your way back to the national title game and played maybe the greatest game ever and then swept Florida. Is this the greatest postseason run you've ever been a part of?

PATTY GASSO: You know my phone will blow up from Lauren Chamberlain if I say. (Laughter).

I think it was probably the most unlikely from how we got started and what we were dealing with, and some tough things going on throughout. I make mention to the Nalepa family, Nicole Myers was a former player of mine who lost her child in a car accident, so you see our stickers since April just lifting up that family, and we really bought into that. That little Kelsey was our angel through this.

Through all of this, what we're doing is not focusing so much on trying to win games as much as just trying to lift others up, and when you're doing things like that, you're just not nervous. You just feel like you have a duty to do it. So we take on a lot of this platform to change lives, and I know that sounds cliché, but it's true. I think any one of these guys would tell you that this platform they're using to change lives, and softball just happens to be how we get to do it.

Q. Coach, you have had a lot of dominant left-handed pitchers. What is it about the left-handed pitcher that helps make Oklahoma so dominant?

PATTY GASSO: Any program in the country wants lefties on their staff. We've started it way back with Jill Most when I first got here, and it just kept growing and growing, and we became kind of like Lefty University. I think that is what attracted Paige and this Paige and Nicole and so forth and so forth. It's a lot to do with Coach Lombardi calling a great game and knowing how to manipulate or work the lefties in the strike zone, and she called a great game. Not that she can't deal with the righties because she can, but there's something about her magic with lefty pitchers that has won us championships.

Q. You talked a lot about kind of the ups and downs of the season, and I'm trying to understand, was it ever a matter of a lack of effort that you were saying? Was it a matter of a lack of focus? What were the actual challenges they were trying to overcome?

PATTY GASSO: At times there was a little lack of effort and we would fix that immediately. I think more than anything, it was just kind of an identity problem, like who are we, where are we going. We weren't real connected, and that's where Kelsey Arnold, even Paige Parker, Lea Wodach, Nicole Pendley, these guys stepped forward and said, let's figure this out. Let's really get this team on the same page. So we started

doing more things together, but specifically Kelsey Arnold from what I know went out of her way to have dinner with everybody on the team, and she understood to be a good leader you have to have good relationships with those that you're leading. Kelsey Arnold wants to go to practice, go eat at Red Lobster and then go home and go to bed. That's her life.

And so for her to step away from that and spend time with teammates and make dinner for them and so forth, she is the glue. She was a big part of the glue that brought this team together.

Q. Coach, you talked about pressure this year, but you've got one senior in your lineup and you've got all your pitching back --

PATTY GASSO: Are you going to do that right now? Can I just tell you how much we hated that, and you're going to do that? We're not -- we learned a lesson. We are good at learning lessons. We're not going to let this get in our way.

Q. You mentioned your lone senior. Can you talk about the significance of Macey to the team, her leadership, and then also you gave it a great effort to avoid the Gatorade bath tonight. Who was it that finally caught you?

PATTY GASSO: Well, let's go to the first part. Macey, I could tell you that as a coach you always want your seniors to go out the way that they want to go out. How else can you go out? She really elevated her game. She committed more to staying in the lineup, and she worked. To see her get in the lineup is something she's been waiting for for four years, so to see her crack it and get in there and help us -- she made some great defensive plays. I think people just kind of take it for granted, but she's really saved our rear ends at times, and I'm really happy for her.

I don't know who got me. I started to see them surround me, so I just surrendered and took it, but it feels good. Feels great. It feels great.

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Tim Walton
Chelsea Herndon
Aleshia Ocasio
Amanda Lorenz
Florida

Oklahoma - 5, Florida - 4

TIM WALTON: First, congratulations to Oklahoma on a national championship, just a hard fought two games. Wish we could have pushed it to a third, and give us a chance. But I thought overall our players, really proud of our team. I thought they came out again, really good, really well. I thought we came in this morning, and I thought we really did everything we needed to do to prepare to get ready for tonight's game, and I thought we took care of ourselves and took care of each other. But overall just proud of our effort. Congratulations to Coach (Patty) Gasso on another national championship and to the University of Oklahoma. Just thanks to the NCAA, ESPN, OKC All-Sports, University of Oklahoma hosting this tournament. It's a great event. Just an awesome event when you get that many people in there cheering, and then the crowd, I thought the crowd was great and I give a lot of credit to the OU fans for being very respectful. They were cheering and chanting and doing their cheers and nothing was ever any negative tone toward us. They were just cheering the heck out of their team and I give them a lot of respect for competing the right way with a lot of class, so congratulations.

Q. Tim, your team fights so hard, and they're never out of a game. Even in the last at-bat they've got a chance. As they're throwing all that pitching at you, what are you thinking?

TIM WALTON: Yeah, I had an in-game interview and I mentioned to Holly (Rowe), we've got to find a way to get another run up there before we can get Paige Lowary coming in at the end and we knew what she was going to be able to do. Overall I thought we were prepared. We tried to do everything we could to get that run, runner at second base, I think, with one out in the sixth. We had a chance.

But I'm proud. I can't tell you -- again, I know our players -- we questioned their toughness breaking camp for the fall, and they all took notice and they worked hard and they put in the extra effort. They did all the things that they needed to do. We had a lot of kids that have really put in above and beyond what we ask of them because they all have high expectations for being great.

Our coaching staff works really hard, but again, I think to get to this point, it takes a special group of players that really has a drive for their own -- not perfection, but greatness. So I give not only these three but the rest of our team, the other 15 women, just a tip of my cap for how hard they work and just how much they really appreciate each other.

Q. Kind of a two-parter, I don't think you guys lost a game when you scored three runs or more playing in the best conference, historically, ever. What changed at the World Series, and can you explain why you went with the pitchers? You know their arms and their strengths better than us.

TIM WALTON: Yeah, I told (Jennifer) Rocha I was hoping we could get through one time with the lineup, just to change the look from what they're getting before we brought in Delanie (Gourley) and then before we came back with Kelly (Barnhill). It was more about matchups. You know, they get the home run early, get a couple nice infield hits to go along with that late, but I just felt like it was a good opportunity for us to try to piece together this game and stretch it out as long as we could. Other than really two bad pitches, I thought we pitched pretty well, played good defense, hit the ball well.

But you know, it just wasn't our tournament. You look at the statistics, it's eerie how close the games were statistically. So I think that you've got two even matched teams. One just found a way to hit the ball over the fence more than we did, and give them a lot of credit.

Q. I know that this has been a great site for the game, but when the games are this close, can the crowd make a difference, the momentum, the noise?

TIM WALTON: Yeah, I mean, I would assume that the crowd had a little bit to do with it, especially the last

three at-bats maybe, the crowd was in it. But it's hard for me to make an excuse that Oklahoma had more fans than we had and that's why they won. That would be taking a lot away from what they really did and accomplished.

But I think there's a little bit to that. But I thought our players really stepped up and rose to the challenge. So I'm not going to make that excuse today. I give them credit for finding a way to get more base runners on base and get the hits when they needed it.

Q. What made you question that toughness coming out of camp in the fall and what did you need to see from them?

TIM WALTON: Yeah, I think the main thing is really we lean heavily on our strength and conditioning staff and we've got times, we've got certain things that we want them to be able to measure up and hit on, and it's just being able to withstand the pressure that we put on them in the mornings, sometimes before 6 in the morning just to -- it's not a toughness thing, it's just about mind over what you have to do.

I think a lot of our players dreaded the workouts more than they actually dreaded them when they were working out, and so that's a mental toughness thing. You're going to have to be able to be at your best when your body is dying, and that'll never change, conditioning our athletes. You want them to be mentally tough. To be mentally tough they're going to have to push their bodies a little bit harder. So that was it. Again, that's not personal, that's just about -- that's just what it takes to be a national champion, that's what it takes to be a College World Series participant. That's what it takes to be a Florida Gator. You're going to have to push yourself really hard, and then the push comes from your teammates. You're going to have to push your teammates hard and use constructive criticism at 6 in the morning and learn how to get over those hard runs.

I thought, again, we questioned it breaking camp, they came back in good shape from Christmas break and really pushed and pushed other than a couple early injuries in January. I thought they really answered, they really understood that it was going to take a little bit more, and I think that came down from our upperclassmen. It came down from our leaders. I thought the leadership was very positive, and you see kids out there doing more. I think that was the differences that we've had players that are really good and what they were doing wasn't good enough to get them to this point, and they all bought in, and like I said, I would have questioned it later on. They really fought hard.

Q. For the players, your coach says any season

that ends in Oklahoma City is a tremendous success. You guys made it to the Championship Series. Can you take solace in that right now?

AMANDA LORENZ: Yeah, definitely. It feels better to end our season here instead of Gainesville like last year. Just really proud of the fight that we've shown and the growth that we've shown. Like Coach (Tim Walton) was saying, I didn't really know what our identity was coming in in the fall, and we just grew every single day. And every single day someone stepped up, and this team was so special because everybody contributed at any time, and everybody had the mindset that if they were put into the game they were going to get something done for their teammates. Just excited about the growth that we had, and proud that we ended our season here for sure. Wish we came out on top. But it happens.

ALESHIA OCASIO: I completely agree with Amanda. It's an honor to be here and blessed to have been here to battle with other girls on my team. You know, we came up shorthanded. They played a great game. We had a hard fight both games, and we just didn't come out on top. We're going to come back next year with a hard fight, as well.

CHELSEA HERNDON: I agree with that, too. Any time you end your season in OKC it's a great season. It's an honor to be one of the last two teams playing in the nation. You are the softball game to watch, and it's pretty awesome. Yeah, this team was amazing.

Q. Aleshia, coming into the game, you hadn't started a game since April 30th. How were you lined up for that mentally?

ALESHIA OCASIO: Well, first off, you know, coming in and pitching, you always want to give your team a chance no matter the situation. Delanie (Gourley) and Kelly (Barnhill) have been amazing all season with the stuff they have. It's really incredible. But Coach (Tim Walton) pitched the idea to me that I might possibly be pitching, and I was just trying to mentally prepare myself for today's game and just give my team a chance and trying to keep runs off the board. They got one early, but that didn't faze us at all. We still fought. But they came out on top, like I said before.

Q. Coach, the pitching has been so phenomenal and overwhelming all season; is there just that much film? Does this environment change things? I heard the commentators speculating that the air was heavier in Gainesville. What do we make of all the runs, going from a 0.66 to the explosion we saw from both teams?

TIM WALTON: I don't really know how to answer that. I don't listen to commentators or anybody else because they're not with our team to know what's going on, you

know? We struck out 26 batters last night. Pretty heavy air, I guess.