

2017 Women's College World Series

Sunday, June 4, 2017
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma



Patty Gasso
Nicole Pendley
Lea Wodach
Shay Knighten
Paige Lowary
Paige Parker
Oklahoma

PATTY GASSO: Proud of this group. That was a tough game. When we look at Oregon on video, we look at their numbers. We're very, very similar. So at times it felt like we were playing ourselves. Their pitcher did a great job. We had some opportunities early, but to see these guys come in clutch late in the game when we were down shows that this is a setting that they love. They're not intimidated by it. They're not playing afraid to lose. They're playing to win. And that's really been our difference for probably the last two months. Thrilled to be back in the championship game. Proud of this group, and hats off to Oregon because, again, they're a team that made us better and they made us have to prepare very hard to get ready for them in a short turnaround, and I think they're a fantastic team.

Q. Shay, on the single that scored two, you kind of dropped it in there to right field. Is that kind of what you were trying to do on that?

SHAY KNIGHTEN: Not really, but I mean, I'll take it. It worked. All I wanted to do was just put the ball in play, come into the right side, and just give my team a chance to score.

Q. Patty, take us through the sequence where Reagan Rogers beat the throw home. Talk about the aggressive play.

PATTY GASSO: It's a play we've been doing all year long, and if we get a ground ball, we are extremely aggressive to go forward. I know that Oregon does the same thing. In big settings like this, you have to be perfect, and the throw has to be on, and Reagan has speed and can create a little bit of havoc. For us it was -- we had -- I said from the start, you've just got to go for it. You've got to go for it when you're here, and

that's our game plan going in.

Q. Patty, what is it about your team that's so relentless? They scored the two runs and you immediately come back with the four right after that.

PATTY GASSO: That's probably a good question for these guys up here. They really are getting into their groove. We've wasted about eight weeks of trying to figure this out, and I think we're making up for lost time, and they are relaxed, they're playing their best softball, they're having a blast. They don't want it to end.

Q. Lea, on that bunt, it appeared, at least from our angle, that the umpire might have signaled foul ball at first and yet you kept running, the play went on and you ended up at second base. What went through your mind as all that was going on?

LEA WODACH: I was just trying to get some momentum for my team. I knew I had a pretty not great at-bat my first at-bat, and I wanted to make something happen, started out the inning strong and just rolled it right up over, got the bat into it. I was just trying to do something for my team, kind of got to go for it as Coach said, you've got to go for it here, so just doing whatever I can, and then if anyone hit the ball by first base I'm going for two.

Q. Paige and Shay, you guys faced four elimination games in the regionals and you never trailed against Auburn in the super regionals. This is the first time you've trailed since then. Does it make you appreciate the journey of just how hard it is to get back to this point?

PAIGE PARKER: I definitely think it does. You know, I think our regional taught us a lot, and I think it was good for us to be put in the position we were because with our backs against the wall, I think we play our best softball. I think just having that regional, it really does make you appreciate the experience of the World Series, and just to cherish every moment that we're here, and we just don't want it to end.

SHAY KNIGHTEN: Just having our backs against the wall, I feel like that's when we just kind of look to each other to kind of step up. Being behind 2-0 going into the fifth was something that we were like, okay, like it's time to step up, they're here to play. What we were doing before we knew wasn't working, so we tried to

figure out any way that we could just to get back and score, get runners on base, and going back to our regional, I think that did help us because we realized that any game could be our last game, so just go for it.

Q. First, was that a call between you and Patty, the bunt with two strikes, and then did you think it was foul off the bat because it seemed like you didn't get it down where you wanted it get it done.

Lea Wodach: Yeah, it was supposed to be a little more out, but at that point with two strikes, I'm trying to, I don't know, do what I can, I guess. You're not really thinking about it because it doesn't really matter. If it goes foul, I'm out, so I'm running down the line as hard as I can, and no, Coach (Gasso) did not call that.

PATTY GASSO: Yes, you were safe. I did call it. If you're out, I don't.

Q. For both of the Paiges, I just want to know about playing in this stadium, your experience level. Did you guys get to play in this stadium before college and how much of an advantage is it to have a home crowd here in Oklahoma City?

PAIGE LOWARY: I've played in it with no people in it really, like 100 people tops really, so there's a lot more people in there. I just tried to have the same mindset going affect me, just stay focused on the pitch I'm throwing.

PAIGE PARKER: I also played here whenever I was younger, but again, not like this crowd, and kind of the same thing as Paige (Lowary), it's just focusing in on every pitch, and it is great that we have so much fan support because it really helps us get momentum and really fires us up.

Q. Nicole, you're hitting everything so hard right now. Does that ball look as big as a group fruit or basketball or something?

NICOLE PENDLEY: I think a lot of it is just preparation that we do before games, watching film, creating a plan that we stick to, so we go in the box really confident with ourselves, I think, so I think preparation is the biggest thing right now.

Q. Coach, just your thoughts on playing Florida, two programs won the last four national championships and you have an opportunity to maybe go ahead in the count here. Just your thoughts on their program and this opportunity.

PATTY GASSO: We're very familiar with them. Jen Rocha played -- she's an OU alum, so is Tim, played baseball there. There's roots between both programs. They're good, well-coached, very complete team. Again, we're going to have to play really, really well,

give all we've got, and we're looking forward to it.

Q. Does that make that kind of matchup more fun for you because there are such close ties and you know Walton so well?

PATTY GASSO: No, it does not make it fun. You know, we're competitors, and so I think we both kind of know each other's style some, although we haven't played them since he's been at Florida. It's intriguing that we're facing each other in this setting for a national championship. I'm looking forward to it. They're well-coached pitching staff. They're all just -- they're a very complete team. But at the same time, I think we are, too. We just do it in different ways. I think it'll be a great matchup and great for television and great for the fans.

Q. They said on the broadcast that you showed your ladies the documentary of the UConn women's basketball team last night. Why did you feel the need to do that last night, and just what was the reason behind that?

PATTY GASSO: I didn't show it last night. No, I did not. What ladies are saying that? We watched it throughout the season, because I think they -- I was, I guess, trying to find the right way to lead this team. UConn women's basketball has won it so many times in a row, and we were still in that place where we weren't getting our championship mindset bracelets. We were still wearing black cleats instead of our white cleats, and I thought to see another female sport play at the highest level, what is it that makes them so good and afraid of nothing. You know, everyone is talking about their streak and so forth, so we wanted to learn, I wanted to learn -- and actually Sherri Cole really helped me out with actually getting a personal shoutout from Coach Auriemma to this team, and it meant a lot to them because we felt connected as we watched that team go through their journey, and we learned a lot. We learned a lot about competition.

So wherever we can learn it, whether it's from a female sport, a male sport, pro, whatever, kids, it doesn't matter, we're always trying to learn lessons and get better. We learned it from North Dakota State right on our own field. We learn it all over the place. I think that's the beauty of this journey is watching the learning and hills and valleys, but now we're on top of that hill right now, and it's been amazing to watch.

Q. Paige Lowary, one of your pitches was clocked at 75 miles per hour. Have you ever thrown that fast? And do you feel like you had an extra pep in your pitches today?

PAIGE LOWARY: I think I know one other time in Palm Springs this year. But I think adrenaline just kicks in and just trying to hit my spot. I wasn't really concerned

with speed, but happened to be that fast, I guess.

Q. Coach, you guys are the defending national champs and playing in your backyard, yet Florida is No. 1. Do you go into this with the mindset as a favorite or an underdog? I know you said you're playing to win and not to lose.

PATTY GASSO: We're a 10 seed playing a 1 seed, so I think that kind of tells it all, and that's exactly where we like to be. We're the David of this battle, and we're going to give everything we have.

Q. Paige Lowary, I think you're the only one up here that's played Florida before but you were a different pitcher then. What are your thoughts now? Do you feel like you're a secret weapon at this point?

PAIGE LOWARY: I don't know about secret weapon, but I'm not really nervous. Like you said, I'm completely different and I'm in a different role. I just really trust everyone around me, so if I get the shot to pitch against them, I know I have confidence. I'm just a different person.

Q. Coach, for the last two consecutive games, you've moved (Sydney) Romero from 4 to 6, Fale (Aviu) from 5 to 4 and Nicole (Pendley) from 5 to 6. It seems at least to me a little bit almost counterproductive to put Pendley in the middle when you have Romero and Fale who can both get on base. How do you think it's working?

PATTY GASSO: I'm sitting in front of you right now, so I think it's working okay. Sometimes you've got to go with what's hot. I don't know. I mean, it's worked. I like -- when I see them come up, I feel confident. I like where they're at. You look at what they've been doing the last seven, eight, nine games, and you know, sometimes a good mix-up works. We're talking about the middle of the lineup, but an unsung hero is Kelsey Arnold. She just does her thing and makes things happen. I like what she's doing down in the 9 right now, so I might move her, too.

Q. We talked all year about the staff, but it's pretty cool that you have a legitimate closer that has -- when we think of a closer, she's it, throws hard, throws strikes. It's that kind of thing. But you have a dominant starting staff, too, and a starting All-Star pitcher. As the game goes on, I'm curious what you're thinking; how closely are you watching just so you can -- you have a real good feel when you bring Paige Lowary in.

PATTY GASSO: I don't know, just looking at how Paige Parker is doing, do we need a momentum swing, Paige Lowary is just such a different pitcher, just throwing hard like it's a good differential between the two. But if you could see what I'm watching in the dugout between these two, it is awesome to watch because Paige

Parker is making the call right along with us, and when Paige Lowary comes into the dugout ready to take the ball, ready to go out on the field, they are right in each other's face. It's like a cool little sisterhood that's going on here, a great tag team, and it works.

So I think they kind of know before we even tell them. We've done it enough that they kind of have it figured out.

Q. Coach Gasso, I know you haven't played Florida, but just your thoughts on what (Kelly) Barnhill has been able to accomplish over the course of the season.

PATTY GASSO: Tremendous pitcher, throws hard, moves the ball around, mixes well. You've just got to be extremely disciplined. You're going to have to be short with your swings. She throws the ball hard. She's done a fantastic job and very worthy of the Player of the Year award. She led her team, although they have a great pitching staff. She's led her team here. We're going to have to be really good and very disciplined when we face her.

Q. Paige Lowary, this team won this last year but you weren't here. Now you guys go into this Championship Series again. How do you prepare for this since you weren't in this position before?

PAIGE LOWARY: I'm just very grateful for the opportunity. In the past I've come up short with the team I was on, so I'm just very grateful to be in this position. I'm really excited.

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Mike White
Danica Mercado
Megan Kleist
Nikki Udria
Gwen Svekis
Oregon

MIKE WHITE: Well, obviously this is always the toughest conference to hold is the one after you're eliminated. There's only going to be one team that's going to be happy at the end, of course, and that's going to be a great matchup between those two clubs, Oklahoma and Florida. Oklahoma has got a great team. They played well today. I'd like to thank the NCAA, USA softball, all the grounds crews. I thought the field was immaculate. Did a great job with that, and the setup. As I said, this tournament keeps getting better and better.

Obviously one thing I'd like to see going forward, and I think this tournament has really illustrated it, is the need for an instant replay, a need for the ability to make a challenge.

There's been so many games decided by some calls that could have gone -- I think were incorrect calls to be quite frank, and that made a big difference. This game is played at a high speed. Umpires are human. You should have the ability to challenge a call. I think the two losses we've had, they were both questionable calls that were made that led to those two losses.

Obviously we were -- we didn't help ourselves, don't get me wrong, but I think the need for a challenge is sorely needed, and hopefully we will look at that, and we have the ability now with a lot of games to be able to do that.

I want to thank my team. They left everything out on the field. Obviously yesterday was a big day for us, was hard to come back again today, but we got ourselves in that position. We know that. We had a two-run lead. It was fun. It didn't last too long. But you know, hopefully being back here, we've learnt a lot of things about our club, about our players. I know that

I'm so proud of these players for how hard they've fought. I'm very sad to see the three seniors leave. They've been a huge part of this club and the building of the club.

But you know, it goes on. Hopefully the experience that our underclassmen learnt from this tournament will help us become a better team in the future. I want to thank Lisa Peterson, Rob Mellons, and all our support staff. There's so many people I just can't continue to name them all off. But student managers, equipment managers, everybody, incredible, and we're so humbled and pleased to be back at this tournament and competing against some excellent teams. I think you can see that the field was great this year as far as 1 to 16 and some outside the 16 as I've said before, and the growth of softball is going to continue to get better as we go forward. Thank you.

Q. Coach, could you elaborate more on the play -- I assume you're talking about the bunt that looked like it had gone foul, what you saw, what you were told by the umpires?

MIKE WHITE: Well, you tell me. Was it foul? There you go, you answered your own question. I don't need to tell you anything.

Q. What explanation were you given by the umpires?

MIKE WHITE: They said it was fair.

Q. Just talk about -- two questions: First on your three seniors, how much they were a part of moving the program where it was before and getting them to this point. And my second question was about how the growth of pitchers on this level have grown in the last several years, what's been the development process of getting to that point.

MIKE WHITE: Yeah, well, obviously Nikki Udria, she came in as a shortstop and played four years of shortstop. Was a four-time Pac-12 champion -- a three-time Pac-12 champion, sorry, and three times World Series. It all goes so quick. It all blends together. But with Danica (Mercado), as well, actually a four-time Pac-12 champion. She was a red shirt. Obviously they've had a big part in our success. What happens is that as you bring young underclassmen in, they help to build, they help to coach, they help to

reinforce what we say as a team to those players, and you know, I'm proud of what they're doing.

I'm sure right now they wish they could probably have another couple years, but it doesn't happen that way. But I'm so proud of them.

As far as our pitching goes, obviously we have three very good pitchers, Meghan Kleist, Maggie Balint and Miranda Elish and hopefully they'll continue to lead us as we go forward.

I just want to know from a coach what the pitching rules are going to be going forward. And I won't say any more on that because there's a big controversy on that, as well, why are some players allowed to cheat and why some aren't, and what am I supposed to teach my players and what am I supposed to teach other people. So we need to get that sorted out.

Q. Danica and Nikki, can you talk about how tough this was to get up? You looked like you had a chance to take it to a ninth game and then you see things fall apart a little bit there.

DANICA MERCADO: I think that obviously any loss is tough at this point in the season. But we knew that from the game in this tournament we put ourselves in a little bit of a hole offensively having played with our backs against the wall, so I think that my team came out there and they fought as hard as they can every pitch, and it came to a point where we did make a couple mistakes, and we weren't able to back it up with our bats. I think there's only so many times that you can put yourself in the bottom of the seventh, but I'm so proud of my team because we very well easily could have rolled over after losing the first game and we fought every inning until the very last one.

NIKKI UDRIA: Yeah, I have to agree with Danica. We never gave up even until that last out, and as tough as it is to swallow, I wouldn't change anything because everything happens for a reason. If it took us losing this game to build the program to learn something, for our teammates to learn to go forward, then that's what it took.

Q. Gwen, just to follow up, what was running through your mind on that play? Were you trying to make a play at first or were you trying to let it go foul? What went into that play?

GWEN SVEKIS: Obviously I was trying to make the play at first. I've made that play a thousand times in my life, and I'll probably make it a thousand more. But just wasn't meant to be today, and that's okay. I need to get better. I need to make that play next time. I know I can make that play. Fair or foul, I can make that play.

Yeah, I was trying to make the play. I didn't want to play umpire because I've hit a ball this year that was three feet foul and it was called fair. He had the best view of it. We both saw the same ball. I'm not going to comment on it because I tried making the play and I threw the ball away. That's all on me. But yeah, obviously I was trying to make the play, and it just didn't happen.

Q. Coach White, how much of an advantage is it, if any, for Oklahoma to play in the Women's College World Series here in Oklahoma City? And two, you mentioned off the top that the series will be a competitive one between Florida and Oklahoma. What will be the keys to a series like that between those two teams?

MIKE WHITE: Yeah, good question. Both have got very good pitching staffs. With Barnhill out there and Gourley, those two are very tough. They complement each other so well. So it's really going to be a low-scoring affair, so it's probably going to come down to whoever makes some mistakes, you know, like most good games, more lost than they are won, and I feel that's what happened to us a little bit today. We lost the game. Oklahoma put the pressure on us, you we lost it, and that's what's going to happen in that final, I think. It's going to be who's going to make the mistake and who's going to capitalize on it.

Q. Is it a big advantage for Oklahoma to play in Oklahoma City?

MIKE WHITE: Well, obviously it's an advantage because their fan base is here and they're close to this area, but the game is still played between the lines. It's 60 feet, turn left, 12-inch softball, all the stuff I tell our team. We go on the road and we play in some pretty competitive environments. Obviously it's not 10,000 people, 8,000 people, but it's still the same. It's still a lot of pressure when you've got to play a series at UCLA or go play at Arizona. I don't think that's a factor. As a coach I don't play that up. Yes, it's an advantage, but should it decide the game? I don't think so.

Q. Out of this whole tournament, only two pitchers are seniors. What do you think about the pitching overall? There's potential we see a lot of these girls back here again next year.

MIKE WHITE: Well, it's funny because I think two years ago we were all saying how hitting is dominating everything, and now it's time to see the pitchers dominate a little bit. I know in our conference we changed softballs. We changed from the Wilson ball to the Worth ball. It's not quite as lively, so the pitchers' numbers were dropped a little bit. The ERAs were under two. Last year they were over two. That had probably something to do with it. So now we're matching up more with the SEC. Everyone said the

SEC's numbers were better. Well, they're using a different ball. Trust me, when we hit the Wilson ball, it's a lot livelier than the Worth ball. That's kind of evened it out a little bit and one of the reasons why as a conference we changed to the Worth softball.

But going back to your point about the pitching, I think it's getting better. You know, obviously there's three in our club that are pretty exciting to watch, and there's a number throughout the country. So hopefully that continues to move forward because those games are very exciting.

Q. Megan, you guys have so much coming back. Just a sense for how valuable this experience is going to be and what you hope your teammates take from this week.

MEGAN KLEIST: I think that this was a really big learning experience for the underclassmen coming back. We can use this and kind of let it fire us to be better next year and just kind of know that we tasted the chance to actually get to the end. You know, just coming back next year stronger and working on our weaknesses that were shown in this last game, shown in this whole tournament, and just be better than we were this year.