

2015 Women's College World Series

Sunday, May 31
Florida 3 - Auburn 2



Florida

An Interview With:
COACH TIM WALTON
LAUREN HAEGER
TAYLORE FULLER
NICOLE DEWITT

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. At this time we have University of Florida head coach Tim Walton, student-athlete Lauren Haeger, student-athlete Taylore Fuller, student-athlete Nicole DeWitt. At this time, Coach, general comments about the game, and then we'll open it up for questions.

COACH WALTON: First of all, I think I already said this on TV a second ago. What a tremendous season for Auburn softball. Great offense, great components. I'm sorry, great coaches, great competitors. Just a great game. Great softball game. They were tough to prepare for. They are so similar to us in their at-bats and you could see that with their third time through the lineup in the fourth inning. But there's, really, the main credit is going to go to Lauren (Haeger) and Jen Rocha. I really wanted to pull Lauren in the fifth just to change up the look. I felt they were starting to square it up and Lauren changed up the pitch, changed up the pitch call and changed up the approach. So again, give the two of them credit. Felt like she started to pitch a lot better and was a lot tougher to hit. And, again, I'll save you some time. We're not going to elaborate on what we did or how we did it, but just know we did change up some things and make some adjustments with her. But give -- I thought they got the momentum, Kirsti (Merritt) did a great job throwing the ball to the plate. We escaped, I think escaped is probably a good word, escaped a little bit. Nice defensive plays. Taylore Fuller getting us on the board with the answer with two, and we were able to get back with that one with Justine sliding into the plate, so I thought that was huge just keeping the momentum where we wanted to. Not our best game, a little bit, not a little bit, a lot goes to Auburn. They kind of took us out of our game a little bit by the number of left-handed at-bats and hitting the ball the other way and changing some things. It's really tough to defend. But overall just -- I can't be more happy just to be here. This is our tenth time. This is my tenth season. This is our seventh time here. Four times playing for a national championship. And you can't win it if you don't get there. And I'm really happy

to coach these players and competitors and tremendous athletes and again give them all the credit. I really think that they really stepped up, found a way to get it done.

Q. Nicole talk about your mentality going up to the plate and the final at-bat and how good did it feel to see the run come across?

NICOLE DEWITT: I was just trying keep it simple. I had a rough couple previous at-bats. I went to my slap and then I just tried to place the ball and fill a hole, and found the hole and Justine came around and scored.

Q. Lauren, do you feel like over the course of the game the strike zone wasn't as consistent as it was what you were accustomed to?

COACH WALTON: She can't answer that.

Q. Taylore, down 2-1 you have that clutch at-bat getting the home run, just talk about what happened there?

TAYLORE FULLER: Yeah, I was the lead-off in that inning, just trying to get on base for my team, turning the lineup over and get those top batters back up, seeing more pitches and making her throw more pitches and I just happened to square it up.

Q. Lauren, can you talk about gutting it out, you threw 160 pitches, most hits you've given all year. Seemed to be a battle for you out there where you had obviously been dominating so much?

LAUREN HAEGER: Yeah, I mean, they're a great hitting team. I haven't faced them yet, and they were a great hitting team. We just kind of made an adjustment to our pitch calling a little bit. But it was a battle. It was a dogfight, it was a nice clean softball game of just fighting each other and getting outs when we needed to. They did a great job. Their hitters are great and they're very well trained.

Q. How much did you have left? How far could you have gone?

LAUREN HAEGER: I mean, I'm all about adrenaline. I'm all about that, the pump-up, but I think I would have gone out there and done it as long as I could, for sure.

Q. Nicole, you had been lifted for a pinch-hitter, was it hard to stay mentally in the game, focused in

the game because you said you were frustrated with your first few at-bats?

NICOLE DEWITT: I was frustrated but I knew I had to get back in the dugout and cheer on Bri (Briana Little). I had to help out my teammate and root for her in any way possible and hope for her to get the hit.

Q. In terms of just a balance of patience and power and speed pitching defense, how close is this roster to what your ideal would be?

COACH WALTON: That's a good question. I think that every team would probably like to have a little bit more left-handed players just because of what they can do, like you saw right there with Nicole (DeWitt). But I'll take this team, and I told them this in the middle of the year, we had a couple games we just didn't play our best. I told them I'd die for any one of these kids. They're such great people and great character and great competitors. I think sometimes you can have great athletes and they might not know what they're doing. These guys are fighters. We built this program because of them and they know how to win. I think that ingredient right there is probably the biggest component that I've taken from these players is they may not be the best in every skill, but they're really good at a lot of skills and they're really good at the winning skill. I'm really happy for that, that's for sure.

Q. Tim, you've got a team that's defending national champions, coming back to this stage. What does it mean to you have a freshman step up and really make the biggest hit of the game there at the end?

COACH WALTON: If it was Nicole (DeWitt) or if it was Kelsey Stewart or Bri (Briana Little), we're -- everybody is happy for everybody. I was happy for the way she responded. I went matchup. I don't know if you watched -- it wasn't that I was pinching, I went lefty, that left-handed pitcher is pretty tough on left-handed batters, so I knew by having my 9-1-2, all be left-handed in a row, I was going to have to pinch-hit for one of them at some point in time. We decided to bunt with Justine (McLean) and pinch hit for Nicole as opposed to pinch hitting for Justine and them maybe riding out that direction. It was a preplan that Bri was going to get the at-bat when the left-handed pitcher came in. That prompted them to make the pitching change back to (Lexi) Davis. The key was -- we just kept Bri out there for a little bit longer, and Justine, they just kind of rotated themselves through. This kid right here has hit some big walk-offs for us. She's done things already. She's a good one and we're happy she's only a freshman because she's only going to get better.

Q. Coach, what's the message in the locker room after a tough, dramatic, long win like that one?

COACH WALTON: The keyword you said there was a

long win. So it's a lot easier to have the tough, long win conversation than the tough long loss conversation. The biggest thing for us we had a walk-off win here to get to the championship series in 2009. It was very emotional. It was very draining and our team didn't respond very well to the next game we played on Monday night against Washington. So I've got that in my back pocket. We will definitely get them up tomorrow early in the morning. We'll do everything different than we've ever done before to prepare them so we can get rid of this emotional win to move forward for the championship series.

Q. Coach, you entered the championship series without using Delanie (Gourley) or Le-le (Aleshia Ocasio). Is that kind of a positive or is that like a backhand, like -- I lost my train of thought?

COACH WALTON: Is it a positive or is it a negative? I think that's probably the easiest way to say it. Is it a positive or negative? And for me personally, it's a positive because we were playing for a national championship. The negative is that I've got two pitchers that haven't had experience pitching here in three weeks. But we're going to use them. So whether we can get Lauren into the pool tonight, swimming getting her range of motion back and see where she's at tomorrow, it will more than likely be a game-time decision who we throw whether it be Aleshia, Lauren or Delanie. But at the end of the day it's a good problem to have I'd rather be in that situation I'm sure.

Q. Lauren and Taylor, can you both just expound a little bit on what you see out of Nicole that you think allows her to be able to come through in moments like this?

LAUREN HAEGER: I hit behind Nicole (DeWitt) a lot during the season, for most of the season I've hit behind her. And she just has so many tools. She can do everything. She can hit a home run. She can bunt for a hit. She can slap. She can swing away, like, she just has so many tools. And I mean I wish sometimes I was lefty for that reason. But no she's great. And she has a lot of heart and a lot of fight and she knows what she's doing up there. Great knowledge of the game.

TAYLORE FULLER: Lauren pretty much said it. Nicole (DeWitt) has been in that position before it's not her first rodeo here. She knows what to do in that position and she is usually successful.

Q. Tim, at the end of the eighth, Auburn made that great defensive play at home plate was there a miscommunication on the base pass on the tag?

COACH WALTON: I don't want to throw anybody under the bus. I don't think that's the way to go about coaching. I'll take the blame. It's easy for me. I'll just say it's my fault. Whether it is or not I'll just take the

blame. Again, I think she had a great slide at the plate. I think even -- you know what, I won't take the blame. I'll say it's easy. You get caught up in emotions and someone hits the ball that hard. Their player did it the same way. We did it back in return. It's an emotional play. The ball's hit stung like that and you're wanting to win. At the end of the day, yeah, we made a mistake. I should have had her closer to the bag a lot sooner.

Q. What was the momentum in the dugout after you're falling behind two to one?

TAYLORE FULLER: Obviously it's difficult to stay up but we proved all season we can come back, whether we're down by nine or we're down by one, we're going to come back and you better be ready for that. So the energy is always up in the dugout no matter what the score is.

Q. Coach, some sports we usually have a day off we can talk to you about going into the championships. I was wondering if you could shift focus here for us. Going to try to repeat, which is something that Billy Donovan did, of course, with the Gators basketball back then. If you could share with us, was it easier or harder being defending champions in this process? Did Coach Donovan or other people give you advice? There aren't many people that repeat in college sports particularly in a team sport. Could you give us a little insight on what that journey has been like and any advice you have got?

COACH WALTON: I probably won't give you too much. I don't want to take up too much time here but I did lean on Billy and Urban and some other friends I've been around who have been successful coaches. The key is this wasn't easier but it was a lot easier to understand mistakes because you understand what the finished product can look like. So I think that was the key. We were able to understand that. This team resembles a lot of what we did last year. We played good softball throughout the season. We had some ups. We had some downs. Got to the College World Series and kind of hit our stride a little bit. We had a good team. And I think when I look at what we do on paper, and we had three All-Americans this year. We only had two last season. And we, if you take a picture and put it in the dictionary what a team is supposed to look like I think this team would fill a lot of pages of what it's supposed to look like. We've got a lot of kids on our team that just do so many things to make coaching fun. We've got kids who pick signs. We've got kids who pick up bats. We've got kids who do so many things to help a team win. So it wasn't harder, but there's so many different challenges of actually coming back after winning a championship that you're afraid that you're going to make mistakes and you're going to think, oh, we're just going to rest upon that for

the season. These players did not. I think they took their practice levels to another level. Their practice skills to another level. But we didn't overdo it either. Billy and I are very similar. We want to work and push them and push them, and he said the biggest mistake he potentially could have made was push them too hard thinking everybody was going to give them their best shot. And he said he backed off from that and they really took off once he trusted what they did to prepare and I trust what these guys do to prepare. I think there's where the similarities are.

Q. Nicole, you said that coming on the field, when you first got here and people wanted to high five you over the railing was the best feeling ever. You said your home run was the best feeling ever. I'm just wondering if this is the best feeling ever?

NICOLE DEWITT: It might be. They just all add up. They're all great feelings. Like no one -- a bunch of people don't get to experience these things and to know that I'm one of them. It's really cool. It's a really cool feeling.

Q. Coach, also looking towards the championship series, you've gotten a chance to see both teams you could potentially play. Is there one you feel you match up against better?

COACH WALTON: No, I don't. I think both teams have a pretty good balance, and going through the Super Regionals and watching Michigan play Georgia and seeing LSU play Arizona and watching all of them play here at the College World Series. These are the four teams that I starred. I thought Oregon could have replaced us or somebody else depending on how the matchups went. But these four teams -- Auburn, Florida, LSU and Michigan -- were four teams. Any one of those four teams, really felt like the way they were playing coming down the stretch could win a national championship, and so I don't think we match up particularly well with either one of them. I just hope that they don't match up as well with us either. So I think that's our key.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.