

Mississippi State Head Coach Brian O'Connor

Opening Statement

BO: “I just want to start off by saying how proud I am of these guys. Not just these two players [Ace Reese and Noah Sullivan], but of our entire team. They’ve worked so hard through the fall, through the winter and throughout the entire season to be at this point. To play in the NCAA Tournament and then to play here in Starkville is a reward to these players, to everyone involved in this program. That’s something that this team absolutely earned. That’s what it’s about. That’s one of the things that our coaching staff has been preaching to them since day one, that you earn everything. You earn everything in your career; your team earns everything in life. One of the rewards of the job that they have done all year long as a team, is to have the opportunity to play here in Starkville in an NCAA Regional.

But that’s over with now, right? That was determined a few days ago, now let’s play baseball. I also really want to welcome the three other teams in the regional to Starkville and this Regional. Obviously, everybody that’s in the tournament field across the country has earned this right as well. We’re just excited to be in the NCAA Tournament, excited about the opportunity in front of us, and looking forward to it.”

What went into the decision behind Duke Stone starting at pitcher for Friday’s game against Lipscomb?

BO: “Listen, I made the decision to start Duke Stone because I believe he’s the right guy to be on the mound tomorrow to get us off to a great start. When the field is announced, you kind of take a deep dive into right-handed dominant lineups and left-handed dominant lineups. What do different teams do with style of play? Certainly, winning the first game is vitally important, and we’ve got a lot of confidence in Duke Stone that he’ll get us off to a great start, and we’ll do whatever we have to do to win the game. Then, we’ll figure out who our opponent is from there based on the outcome of the game. Listen, the guy’s been a starter for us all year long, other than the first couple of weekends. He’s battled, he’s hung in there, he’s got some really good stuff. We just believe that he’s the right matchup to get us off to a great start.”

You and your coaching staff are the only people involved with this team that have won an NCAA Regional. How do you use that experience to enjoy the experience but also take care of business?

BO: “Good point. I think the only other one might be Aidan Teel, early in his career as a player. One of the players asked me during BP, ‘Coach, how many regionals have you coached in?’. I don’t know what that number is, I guessed and said that it was probably 27 or 28. I’ve been in this situation a lot. I just really believe that the hay’s in the barn. You’ve played your season. Your team has a certain identity that puts them in a position to be successful, and that’s what we need to do, right? What’s really important, I think sometimes teams get to the NCAA Tournament and try to be something more than they are, right? The important part is to focus on what do we do? What makes us a great ball club? There’s a lot to unpack with that. I’ve shared that with the team and reminded them of what makes the 2026 Mississippi State Baseball Team great. That’s what you go out and do. You don’t try to do more than that, right? I’ve had a lot of experience of doing different things pitching-wise, but it comes down to managing the group and making sure that they’re ready and they stay within who they are as a ball club.

I’ve got to tell you that, early in my time as a head coach, going to the NCAA Regionals a handful of years and not being able to win one and advance on to the Super and onto Omaha, I think that probably happened my first four years at Virginia, and some of those were hosts. I remember as a 32-year-old first-time head coach in my first year at Virginia, we hosted a regional that year for the first time in the state of Virginia. I’m proud that the first year here at Mississippi State, we’re hosting. But that’s over. That’s just where we’re playing. We get to play on our own field; we get to play in front of our own fans. You’ve got to go out and earn the victories and the wins. Getting back to my first few years of being in Regionals but not being able to punch that ticket to get to Super Regionals and get to Omaha, part of that was on me. I was this young, super intense, yelling and screaming at the players if they didn’t get a bunt down within the game. It took some self-reflection after a number of years to say, okay. You’ve got to let them run. You’ve got to let them be loose and play the game aggressively with intent. It was more of a cultural mindset change in how you manage the group. So, they’ll be ready. They’ve been working all week. They’re excited about the opportunity in front of them.”

Mississippi State Infielder Ace Reese and Designated Hitter Noah Sullivan

You both had high aspirations of postseason play when you came to Starkville. But now that it's here, what does it feel like?

NS: “Yeah, it’s special. We’re excited to get going tomorrow. We’ve worked all year for the past two years, all the transfers, and everybody that’s on the team this year too, to play at home. That’s what this fan base and these facilities, that’s what they’re here for.”

AR: “I know for me, a big thing about coming back, in my talks with Coach O’Connor, I told him, ‘Let’s play postseason baseball here’. We’ve earned that, and we’ve worked hard to get here. I’m pumped.”

Ace, you got to play in your first NCAA Tournament last year, how do you think that experience can help you entering this year with the home atmosphere?

AR: “Yeah, that’s why I came here. At Houston, I didn’t get to go to a regional. So, coming here and getting to go last year, getting that under my belt and being ready for this one, I’m ready for it.”

What does it mean for the group that came back to try and host a regional for the first time in five years now that you’ve reached that goal?

NS: “Yeah, it means everything. We’re a good core and we’ve come together and played really well. What a journey it’s been. We’re excited to bring it back home.”