

## 2021-22 Mississippi State Basketball Quotes Mississippi State vs. Arkansas – December 29, 2021

### Mississippi State Head Coach Ben Howland

#### ***Q: Opening Statement***

**BH:** “Obviously, I’m really happy and grateful for the win. I thought that our guys did a really good job today battling and really competed hard. I thought Tolu [Smith’s] minutes were spectacular considering he’s only practiced maybe 10 times in the last four months. He had five steals and made his foul shots at 8-for-10. He was our leading scorer, and he was really good.

I thought that Shakeel Moore had a really good game today looking at his numbers. [He had] Five assists, four steals, 3-for-4 from three, 5-for-8 overall and played excellent defense. Four steals were huge. We had 12 steals as a team and forced them to 17 turnovers which was big. I thought Andersson Garcia’s minutes were huge off the bench. What he does in terms of how hard he plays and how hard he competes.”

“I thought Rocket Watts gave us great minutes today and earned more minutes because of his performance today as well as in practice since we got back. That’s big for us because he’s a guy that we know can perform and has experience. I thought Garrison Brooks, even though he didn’t score from the field, was good. He gave us 10 rebounds and led us in rebounding.”

“Iverson [Molinar] is asked to do so much. And again, he does a wonderful job for us leading us out there. He really was unselfish today. He found a lot of guys open for baskets. J.D. [Javian Davis] gave us great minutes. His minutes off the bench were critical. So, our depth really helped us today.”

#### ***Q: How beneficial was it for Tolu Smith to sit out rather than play through his injury as far as him coming back and having this game today?***

**BH:** “Well, I’m sure he answered that already, but obviously the way he played today was huge. We need him. To be our best, we have to have Tolu Smith in the lineup because he’s one of our top players without question. I’m just excited for him because he’s gone through so much adversity. To be able to be rewarded today with this first big win in the league opener was huge. He had a big part of it.”

#### ***Q: How important was it to get this win knowing you have two away games coming up?***

**BH:** Huge, you want to hold serve whenever you’re at home. Arkansas is a really good team. In fairness to Arkansas, they didn’t have their best player. J.D. Notae was not available today. They said he has an illness ... We’ll for sure see him when we return to this game down in Fayetteville later in the season.”

“With that being said, they had other guys step up. Stanley Umude was a really good player for them. He was really good today. He had 19 points and really hurt us. but we knew he was a good player because he put up incredible numbers against South Dakota State and shot high percentages.”

“I thought our defense in the second half got better. We were down at the half in the rebound margin, and they shot a pretty good percentage from the three in the first half. [In the second half] They were only 3-for-14 from the three, and we outboarded them I think by 11. So, that was huge.”

***Q: What have been the biggest trends in the last four games out of your team that's impressed you?***

**BH:** "I'd have to say we're doing a good job of staying together when we have adversity in a game. We're staying positive and really helping each other. I think our offense has improved. I think we're executing better offensively. We're taking better care of the ball than we were. We have a good rotation right now with Tolu [Smith] back. He's helping us a lot being back in the lineup with this first game today. It adds another really good player to our lineup. He's one of our top-two guys returning from last year. He led the league in rebounding. He's really a force around the basket. I think this is a really good sign for us moving forward."

***Q: How was it being back at home?***

**BH:** "I know how important this game was to start off the right way in the conference against a very good team, a team in Arkansas that will be in the NCAA Tournament ... That's huge for us in terms of our [NCAA] NET [ranking]."

"I was so excited about the crowd today. As you know, we switched it because the Ole Miss versus Florida game was cancelled. I really wanted it to be at 4 p.m. because I thought it was better for our fans. We had a really good crowd today considering there's no students in town. So, I was really excited about our fans tonight."

"I was the lead cheerleader there, and they responded. They were awesome. I was motioning with my hands, and they were great. So, I'm so thankful for those fans out there today that came to support their team."

**Forward Tolu Smith**

***Q: You had to sit out four games and now you are here. How did you mentally deal with that?***

**TS:** "Mentally it was tough to sit out. We expected things that we wanted to come from this season. Being able to come back is all God's glory. I'm thankful for my coaching staff and teammates for allowing me to come back with open arms. It's great to be back."

***Q: The first time you maybe lost energy down the stretch in the second half. Did you feel that this time or did you feel strong?***

**TS:** "I felt like I was strong the whole time. I think Coach [Howland] did a great job with substitutions. We did four-minute increments. It was great. I thought Javian Davis played great too."

***Q: What was the message going into the game knowing that it is the SEC opener?***

**TS:** "Coach [Howland] was emphasizing defense on [every] possession. I know that they did not have their best player [J.D. Notae], but we still had to lock-in. It was the SEC. Like I said, we had to lock in on each possession and push them outside."

**Guard Shakeel Moore**

***Q: What was said at halftime about finishing this game out and finishing strong?***

**SM:** "We were told to finish out strong and come out first. Coach [Howland] stressed that the first few minutes of the second half was going to be important. He told us to come out, play hard and compete. That's what we did."

***Q: How does it help to have balance scoring around you like there was tonight?***

**SM:** "It helps a lot, and that just shows how special we are as a team. We bring guys off the bench that can score double digits on any night. It's special to have that type of talent coming off the bench."

***Q: What have you seen from this team in this four-game stretch that has turned the corner for the team?***

**SM:** "Strictly toughness. We're going to compete until the last whistle and to the buzzer. That's a big part to our game, and we're never going to back down. We're always going to be here. As Tolu Smith said, our leadership is working best for us right now. In our next game, leadership is going to be a big role for us."

**Arkansas Head Coach Eric Musselman**

***Q: How difficult was it to navigate this game without J.D. Notae?***

**EM:** "We knew coming right out of Christmas break [he would not be able to play]. We found out then and waited another day to be sure. He's +144 for the season. I think he's the leading scorer in the league. We got on the plane to compete and win the game. We were down bodies, but we're not excuse makers. We're not going to not go play. If we've enough bodies to play, I'm going to play. That's how I was raised. We're not going to figure out a way not to get on the plane. We're going to get on the plane and play as long as we have enough bodies, and they will let us go. That's our obligation, and that's what we did. We lost the game and got outplayed."

***Q: What changed in the second half that turned things around for you?***

**EM:** "We have to, as a group, figure out how to play extremely hard against good teams for 40 minutes. You have got to have a competitive nature about yourself. If another team makes a run, you need to be able to counter that run. I brought that up several times. So, as a coaching staff, we have to continue to teach. We had a free throw violation. There are a lot of little areas that we have got to get a lot better at. We have got to coach to the best of our abilities. We got outplayed tonight. I don't know what else to say."

***Q: Do you attribute the 17 turnovers to Mississippi State's defense or your offense?***

**EM:** "The extra possession game. When you look at 17 turnovers, their points off turnovers and our points off turnovers – Then, you add in the offensive rebounding. I thought we did a tremendous job in the first half rebounding the basketball and a not very good job in the second half. So, when you add the difference in the offensive rebounding, the turnovers we had. Then, you add in the fact they took 28 free throws to our 14. I'm surprised it was a 13-point game and not a larger margin."

***Q: What will you work on over the next six days until you next game?***

**EM:** "We have got to continue to coach, fight and scrap. We have a lot of work to do. We have got to improve in a lot of areas, not just one area. That is what we will do over the next six days."

***Q: How were you able to hold Mississippi State to a 29.7 percent three-point percentage?***

**EM:** I appreciate the positive outlook on it. We did good holding them to that. They're not a high volume three-point shooting team. Statistically, we did a good job defending the three-point line."

***Q: What made Tolu Smith so effective for Mississippi State?***

**EM:** "He had 10 free throw attempts. He establishes really good post position. He's an excellent offensive rebounder. He has been out for them. Sometimes, a guy gets his legs fresher than other guys who have played. He's a phenomenal interior player and an excellent offensive rebounder. He did a great job of sealing, ducking in and being physical. It's good for our guys to see that as well. He does a good job of eating up space on the interior whether it's the right block or the left block. I think he's one of the best back of the basket players in the SEC."

***Q: How did you feel about Stanley Umude's 19 points today?***

**EM:** "He really scored the ball. He shot the ball with great confidence."

***Q: What was the difference in rebounding the ball from the first to the second half?***

**EM:** "I thought Mississippi State was really physical. [Garrison] Brooks is 6-10, and he had 10 boards. You look at Tolu Smith's four [rebounds]. Their backup center came in and had five offensive rebounds, Javian Davis. He's one of the best offensive rebounders per minute."

"For us, on the interior, Trey Wade played 22 minutes and didn't have a rebound. Stanley had only two defensive rebounds. Both of those guys play the four spot for us. We have got to rebound better across the board, especially up front."

**Guard Stanley Umude**

***Q: What's the team's priority between now and your next game?***

**SU:** "We just have to figure out what is keeping us from getting consecutive stops. We haven't played a full 40-minute game well. We just have to figure out how to do that."

***Q: Have the defensive struggles this year been surprising?***

**SU:** "Collectively, I don't think we have been playing as good of defense as we should all year. We have to pick it up on that side of the ball. We have to lock in on that side of the ball."

***Q: How much of an impact did being down a couple players have?***

**SU:** "It's basketball. That is the world we live in now. Guys are going to be out. So, you have to step up. There's no excuse. We got outplayed today."