

Mississippi State Men's Basketball Postgame Quotes

Mississippi State vs. Minnesota – December 5, 2021

Mississippi State Head Coach Ben Howland

Opening Statement

BH: "I thought that the start of the game was obviously not what we wanted. We didn't want to be down 14-0. We came in really amped up and took some quick shots early in the shot clock against a team that is very patient. We talked about how patient they would be and how they would grind it out offensively."

"After getting down by 14, we did a great job of coming back and being down by three going into the half [35-32]. [Jamison] Battle really killed us at the beginning of the second half when he had 10 straight points to build their lead back to 14 [66-52]. We did a nice job of battling back to have it tied at 76 with less than a minute to go."

"The crowd was great today. They really gave us some energy, and I appreciate all of the folks who came out to support us today. Give Minnesota credit, they have a lot of older kids that have all played a lot of college basketball. Every one of their guys has already played in 100 games or more in their career. A lot of them have already graduated with four years under their belt and are playing for a fifth year. Their backcourt [Payton] Willis and [Luke] Loewe are both fifth-year guys that know how to play at a high level. Battle is a really tough matchup as he really plays small forward but can step out and shoot. Battle and Willis were both 4-for-8 from three. Two guys who combined for 8-for-16 from the three-point line. [E.J.] Stephens was 3-for-8 from three as well. Those three guys really hurt us from the three-point line today. They shot 41 percent from three today. That is a big number. We only had 11 turnovers as a team which has been good for us, but they only had 4. That really stands out where there is a seven-possession differential. We out boarded them [42-27] which is good. I credit Minnesota, they have a really good team."

Q: After a slow start getting down by 14, how were you able to get your team back in the game?

BH: "We were shell shocked as they were scoring at a high rate. Then, we started taking quick shots and not scoring. Tolu [Smith] finally broke the ice with a fadeaway on the baseline to make it 14-2. We have to be better on both ends of the floor. We were failing offensively and defensively. I thought our defense at times was very boorish at the beginning of the game. I have great respect for this team. I was very nervous watching them because I knew coming into today that [Jamison] Battle and [Payton] Willis are great basketball players. They proved it here today."

Q: Was there a play call on Iverson Molinar's last shot?

BH: "No, we did not have any timeouts left. When we were down three, I thought the shot there was a little quick. They had just scored a three, and he [Molinar] was trying to match it. I would have rather gone to the basket or set something up. It was hard though. He pushed the ball quickly. That was the only thing Iverson did poorly was shoot from three as he shot 2-for-11."

"Iverson is a much better shooter than that, and I probably had to play him too many minutes. I thought that Rocket [Watts] gave us some great minutes off the bench early in this game. As the half went on, Watts got tired as he is trying to get back into game shape. Tolu [Smith] is in that same vein. Those kids are still battling back from the injuries and the surgeries that they had."

Q: How much do you emphasize for Iverson Molinar to get to the rim?

BH: "I just want him to read what the defense is giving him. I want him to shoot open three's. Minnesota was giving him open three's to begin the game. The defense was going under the flare screens and letting him shoot the three. He was flat on a lot of them and just has to keep shooting."

Q: How much depth do you have this year?

BH: "We have more depth this year for sure. I thought the first half, our reserves that came into the game at the five-minute mark really got us back into the game with their toughness. I thought that Javian Davis, Andersson Garcia and Rocket [Watts] did a great job of lifting us back into the game."

Forward Garrison Brooks

Q: What was the issue in the first five minutes of the game, when Minnesota went up 14-0?

GB: "We came out sluggish and nonchalant. It's unlike us, we are a better team than that. We made a mistake by digging ourselves in a hole."

Q: What was the message at halftime?

GB: "We fought all the way back. We are still a really good team and were close. We had a chance in the end. Payton Willis made a tough shot, he is a really good player. That's credit to him. We came in and knew we had to pick it up on defense. That was the only way we were going to be able to win."

Q: What was Minnesota doing offensively in the first half?

GB: "They are a veteran team. They have a lot of older guys on their team. I think it shows because they didn't turn the ball over that much. They turned the ball over four times for the whole game, which is terrific. It really shows how well they played together and how much of a veteran team they are."

Q: Those two shots Iverson Molinar made in the final minute, what does that say about his capability to lead this team?

GB: "He is a great player. It shows how much hard work he puts in. He was prepared for the moment, and he took advantage of it."

Minnesota Head Coach Ben Johnson

Q: There were some situations in the game where someone needed to make a play and Payton [Willis] obviously did.

BJ: "Payton did, but I think the whole game it was multiple guys. You look at the stat sheet, and everybody that played contributed. My biggest thing is that we only had four turnovers. When you shoot well from the floor, you shoot well from three. You only have 4 turnovers, you put yourself in position to win a game. This is a very good Mississippi State team. Our guys are battle-tested. They found a way to rise up and do it again."

Q: How do you choose who's going to have the ball in those late moments?

BJ: "We kind of go with the hot hand, and I trust those guys. We didn't really call too much for guys in this game. Jamison [Battle] got going. So, we dialed up a couple of things for him, but for the most part, guys just play within our system. That's part of the reason I like our system because with five guys that can dribble, pass, shoot and score, you play in our flow and our rhythm. Our guys are unselfish. They make the right play because it's the right play."

Q: Defensively, you shut down their best big man, Tolu Smith. Can you just talk about what you had to do to battle with them inside?

BJ: "We just had to be tough. We talked about how the Jacksonville game was kind of a preview, last game [at Pittsburgh] was a real showing and today was the prime time. All the games that led up to this, I think contributed to our toughness, and our guarding in the post. All of our guys did an incredible job. It takes multiple guys. They just showed toughness and grit. They found a way to get it done."

Q: You guys are 7-0, and you had multiple guys out this game. You didn't have much on the bench to have guys miss this game so what was the key to success playing shorthanded?

BJ: "We just don't dwell on it. Hopefully, we get those guys back. It's going to be a game-to-game type deal. Our guys, again, they're so locked in right now. We know that whoever's in the game is going to find a way to contribute. The fun part about this group is that we don't really bat an eye. We hope those guys are back soon, but if not, the guys that are in the game and the guys on this team are going to find a way to figure it out."

Minnesota Guard Payton Willis

Q: You guys are undefeated, 7-0, but not a lot of people predicted that. What has that been like for you guys?

PW: "Like I said before the season started, we're a group of guys that have chips on our shoulders. We're going to continue to be aggressive and be eager to win more games."

Q: What does it take to keep playing like this?

PW: "It takes everybody to do their job each night, and it's only going to get harder from here. We've got Michigan State in a few days. So, we're going to be prepared. We're going to be a team that plays together each and every night."

Q: What was it like to have your family here today?

PW: "It's kind of like a reunion. It's come full circle with my dad. This [Mississippi State] actually was my first offer. So, to be able to win here is special."