

2021-22 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Postgame Quotes

Mississippi State vs. No. 18 Tennessee – February 9, 2022

Mississippi State Head Coach Ben Howland

Opening Statement:

BH: “Obviously, a really tough loss tonight. We had a one-point lead going in to the last five minutes. We ended giving up a wide open three on an out-of-bounds play that we didn’t switch out on. Then, they called the timeout I thought they started face guarding Iverson [Molinar] the rest of the game. That’s taking him out of the game completely, which was a good move. [Zakai] Zeigler had five steals. No question about all of the steals. They just over played the passing lanes, really getting the ball well. I thought that Zeigler and [Kennedy] Chandler were really good defensively tonight at just creating a lot of havoc with their hands and feet.”

“We started out the game; they shot 8-for-9 the first seven minutes of the game. From that point forward, they were only 6-for-25 the rest of the half. I thought we played really hard and got ourselves back in the game and had a chance. We could just never build on any of the leads that we started to get. They shot 60-percent the second half. You’re just not going to beat good teams and allow them to shoot that high of a percentage shot.”

“I thought that when you look at their team, [Josiah-Jordan] James is really coming on for them right now. Again, he was a huge factor tonight when you look at the overall stat sheet of what he did. They had a couple of plays late in the first half where he looked like he was going to screen. We call it a blur to get out of the way, but it makes the defender on the ball kind of hesitate for a second. He just got to the rim twice when we should’ve been helping on that where the guy whose man was blur-screening. They had a lot of good, little actions for those guards to get to the rim. They outscored us in the paint, 30-22, which was a big difference, and they outscored us 20-14 off of the turnovers.”

Q: When you look at the free throw numbers, does that kind of stand out to you as a difference?

BH: “It would’ve been because instead of being up one [point] with five minutes to go, if you make 75 or 80-percent of them, you’re up four or five. Beating good teams, really good teams like Tennessee is, we needed to be 19-for-23 not 14-for-23.”

Q: What do you think the difference is of guys playing late in the game before things start to derail a little bit?

BH: “I thought what they did [at the end of the game] with Iverson [Molinar] really threw us off. Credit to them because he got worn down. I had to play him too many minutes. We were struggling. We had six points off the bench tonight. We’ve got to get more out of our bench than six points to be able to win. So, I was playing him more than I wanted to. I planned on him playing 32 or 33 [minutes] tonight, and those extra four minutes are tough.”

Q: How hard is it to find with the next step to finish with only eight or nine games to go?

BH: “We’ve just got to do it. I thought Garrison [Brooks] said it best. We’ve got to be tougher, and we’ve got to be able to finish. That’s what good teams do, and that’s what we’ve got to learn to do here as we move forward with a tough road game at LSU.”

Forward Garrison Brooks

Q: Take us through those last three minutes and what went wrong for you guys.

GB: “Just execution down the stretch. As a team, we didn’t execute; that’s pretty much all it comes down to. A couple turnovers cost us. That’s pretty much it, but we didn’t do what we needed to down the stretch.”

Q: Were there any similarities down the stretch with the way you guys played against Arkansas and tonight down the stretch?

GB: “We just didn’t make the plays we needed to, that’s as simple as I can put it. We’ve got to find a way to be tough and make big plays down the stretch. That’s the difference in us winning games like Florida, Kentucky, tonight and Arkansas. That’s just huge for us. We as a collective have to find a way to finish games.”

Q: Obviously you guys knew how important this game was coming into tonight. What’s the mood like in the locker room, and what do you guys have to tell yourself after you let an opportunity like that slip away?

GB: “It’s tough because this was a great chance for us. This was a resume-building game. We’ve got to have them, especially at home. You’ve to have games like this where you come down, finish the game and get a tough win. I think that’s something we haven’t done, but we’re going to figure it out. We will figure it out.”

Q: Obviously, you guys have struggles on the road this season, and are right back on the road after this one. What’s the tone going to be like in practice, trying to get over the hump on the road?

GB: “We’ve got to finish. That should be our motto for the next week, finish. Finish games, finish practice, finish drills, finish layups, finish free throws. We have to finish more, as a team, as a collective unit.”

Q: Tennessee had thirteen steals on defense tonight, what do they do defensively that kind of make things so difficult?

GB: “They’re really tough, they do a great job of blowing stuff up and making it tough for you to get catches. I think they’re just collectively a great team on defense. We know that, and I think everybody in the SEC knows that.”

Tennessee Head Coach Rick Barnes

Q: What went into the decision to start Brandon [Huntley-Hatfield]?

RB: “We put a lot of thought in it. Josiah [Jordan James] and Santiago [Vescovi] told him he was starting. I thought he got himself ready to play early, and it kept us able to sub two post guys like we started out with. We started Brandon [Huntley-Hatfield] to get experience. Then, we went with [John] Fulkerson and Jonas [Aidoo] who seemed like he was starting to see what it’s about. I think both of them did a great job considering what’s on the line and playing against a front line like Mississippi State has. It was a great team win. We had talked about matchups. We were concerned about early foul trouble, but that’s what I like about this group. They’re starting to take ownership of the team. When they start talking and making suggestions like that, it gives you a nice feeling as a coach.”

Q: How pleased were you with the rebounding, only losing the deficit by two and being in zone against a good front court in the second half?

RB: "We knew they were going to pound it inside. We fouled too much early, but you have to give them credit for that. They put too much pressure on the inside. We knew when you get those shots on the glass that it is going to be a high-level physical game around the rim. In the end when we went zone, our biggest concern was rebounding out of it. For the most part, the zone was good because it took time off the clock and didn't allow them to score at the free throw line like they did in the beginning of the game. They're a hard team to defend. They pound the ball in the 10-foot area and go get it. Overall, our guys really battled especially in the last four minutes trying to come up with those loose ball rebounds."

Q: What is the team doing better to avoid the long scoring droughts after the small one early?

RB: "Ball movement, player movement and better passes. It all started with a guy taking a tough three, Brandon [Huntley-Hartfield] threw up a left handed shot, Kennedy shot an airball. That's what we did early in the year. We knew Mississippi State was going to make a run. Because we got off to a good start shooting the ball, we kind of lulled ourselves into thinking it was going to be easy and it wasn't. We came out three possessions, and State went out on an 8-2 run in that point in time. We've gotten more consistent in those lulls."

Q: Do you feel like there is something that is starting to click with this team recently?

RB: "I think we've just been more consistent offensively; defensively we've been solid all year. A lot of it goes back to accountability and leadership. I like watching them coach each other, that's a big part of it. I like that they're talking about what they see on the floor; we did not have any of that early in the year. Early in the year, players are so wrapped up in wanting to play. When the season starts off, that doesn't work for everybody. Then you go through a period of trying to keep everyone engaged, when everyone hasn't bought in. We have a group that has bought in, they are playing hard for each other. They're coaching each other and taking coaching from each other. It took us to this point in the season to get to it, but with young guys, I'm not surprised."

Q: You closed out 11-2. How proud of your guys are you especially with doing it with two freshmen as your primary ball handlers?

RB: "That's the team we have done it with most of time. When they are pressing like that and have three fouls to give, it's very hard. We wanted them to get and go with it. We kept telling [John] Fulkerson to go get the ball when they weren't guarding them. We did have a jump ball in our favor. When they have three fouls to give, they can go all out. It's hard because we've got to stop, and they can run through passes. We closed it out, Zakai [Zeigler]'s free throws were big. He sat for quite a while in the second half, but he came back and responded very well. Big minutes for those guys but we've played enough basketball that we should be able to handle it. "

Guard Josiah-Jordan James

Q: What was working well for you and Kennedy [Chandler]?

JJJ: "Shots were falling, so that's always good. We just try to get to our spots. We know that with Olivier [Nkamhoua] down, there is going to have to be people to be more aggressive at times, just because he meant so much to us on offense and defense. Offensively and defensively, I think we just have to stay aggressive. We played decently offensively in the first half, but we had to go on a run and try to get something going."

Q: First extended action for Jonas [Aidoo] this year, how challenging and physical of a game was it for him to be thrown into?

JJJ: "Mississippi State plays through the bigs and get a lot of points in the paint. What I saw him do out there, I see him do in practice every single day. He was rebounding and getting to his spot on offense to make moves he makes day in and day out. I'm happy for him that he was able to get a lot of minutes, and I feel he played very well. He stepped up big in a tough road environment, and Mississippi State plays really well through their bigs."

Q: Have you had this much confidence in your game, or so much fun in your game?

JJJ: "Winning is very fun, thankfully, we have been able to do that. As far as my game offensively, shots have just been falling. Like I said against South Carolina, I just give all glory to God. Without Him, it wouldn't be the case. I just trust in my work, my coaches and my teammates. I say it, but they don't let me put my head down when I get in a shooting slump or miss shots. Not just me, but everybody, because we just put in so much work. When you work so hard, and in 40 minutes when you miss a couple shots, you'll be down on yourself. You've got to bounce back and stay true to your work and what you believe in. I have been having a lot of fun winning, I'd be happy if I scored zero points, and we won. Winning cures all."

Q: Can tough things, like losing Olivier [Nkamhoua] bring the best out of the team?

JJJ: "Yeah, for sure. If we had it our way, he would still be here, but life happens. We've really rallied around him, and he's been an outstanding teammate the last couple of days since his surgery. At practice, he's been coaching guys up. He's still 100 percent part of this team, he just didn't make the road trip. We're playing for him. He works endlessly, and I was heartbroken for him when he got the news. As a team, we are rallying around that."