

2021-22 Mississippi State Men's Basketball
Mississippi State vs. No. 9 Tennessee – March 11, 2022 [SEC Tournament]

Mississippi State Head Coach Ben Howland
Opening Statement

BH: "I thought that we came out really strong tonight and had a very good first half. We were really good particularly offensively other than the turnovers. If we hadn't turned the ball over 11 times, we probably would have had the lead. So, I was really proud of how we played in the first half. In the second half, they came out and jumped on us at both ends of the floor. Obviously, Josiah-Jordan Jones hit four three's I think in the first five minutes of the half. The second half, they were huge. That was a problem because James is such a good shooter, and we knew that. I mean, he is shooting great. He shot 50 percent in the last four games going into tonight, and he is 4 for 6 from three. We made a couple of mistakes not going with the body on him. He read it well and faded for wide-open looks. He doesn't need a lot of time. They're a very good shooting team as a club. I think they shoot 37 percent from three as a team in conference games."

"I thought that we got tired. I thought that was evident tonight in that in the second half you could see that some of the guys that are playing a lot of minutes, like these two [Tolu Smith and Iverson Molinar] were really getting worn because when you play back-to-back nights. It's just hard especially when you're playing against a team. That's one of the top 10 teams in the country that is fresh, and that didn't play yesterday. That's the advantage of the double bye is having that opportunity to play a team that's already had to play the night before and getting them. So, credit to Tennessee. I think they've got a really good team. I wouldn't be surprised if they go deep, deep into this NCAA Tournament. They've got a very, very deep team with a lot of size and excellent guard play that can really shoot."

Q: Ben, Tolu kind of touched on it there with the adversity the team has overcome. Him specifically, today wasn't his best performance, but he started to find that groove late in the year after everything he has overcome. What does it mean for you to reflect on everything Tolu has done this season to get to this point and whatever his career holds moving forward?

BH: "He really went through a lot. You think about four different things he had to battle through – a broken foot, a broken toe, COVID where he was out for two games and about two weeks. Then, he had the knee dislocation. He has had a lot of adversity. I'm so proud of him with the way he continued to fight through it all and be positive. We had a lot of guys that had to step up and play bigger roles and different positions."

"Like I've said before, Garrison [Brooks] ended up playing a lot of minutes at the five where we planned on him playing almost all his minutes at the four this year. That affected us when he went back to the four defensively because he is not getting the reps in practice or in games guarding power forwards that space the floor, and that was an effect on our team as well. There was a lot of adversity especially surrounding the fact that one of our top two players missed a ton of games, but I'm just proud of the way the guys handled it and continued to battle and support each other."

Q: Coach, a tricky question. I hope I word this correctly. Was this a game where Tennessee just was a little bit better than you, or is it stuff you didn't do?

BH: "You know what, Tennessee is really good. I mean, we had them down one with five minutes to go at home, and we were playing really well. I thought that tonight fatigue was an issue for us. We actually didn't really do anything today in preparation to try to win tonight by not going three days in a row before we even played our first game on Thursday."

"I thought that that was going to help us, but their depth and their physicality makes them really good. I think that Rick [Barnes] is one of the best coaches in the country, not just our league. They have tremendous players, high-character kids. So, you have to give your hat off to them. They played really well, and they could easily win this tournament."

Q: I know 2020 was an odd year, but three straight seasons without an NCAA tournament appearance, what's kind of the message you kind of try to send into the locker room as you stomach the results of this?

BH: "Unfortunately, three years ago after we went year four, year five, that was the one year we've had a double bye going into this tournament. I remember crying in front of my team coming back learning that. First of all, we weren't going to be able to play in the SEC tournament and having to tell my team. Tell Tyson Carter, who was a senior, that it's over. We don't even get a chance because we were probably going to get Florida, which was going to be another quality win. We felt like we would have beat them and had a chance to play Kentucky. If we win, we were in. We were about where I think the second four out or first four out. I can't remember which, but we were right there. We were really playing well. We won 11 of our last 15 conference games that year. So when you talk about three years in a row, one of them was that year."

"Last year was, obviously, a tough year for us because -- and this has happened two years in a row, and it's no fault of anybody's, but we lost Robert Woodard [II], which I didn't anticipate having a player that would be able to jump right to the NBA, not even being an all-league player in the SEC. Then this year, obviously, again the same thing happened with D.J. Stewart [Jr.]."

"That being said, it's very hard and very difficult because I thought we had a chance to really get there this year. We had so many close losses during the year, so many losses that would have made the difference. Whether it's Colorado State on the road or Florida on the road or Arkansas on the road or Alabama on the road, you can just keep going. All those games where you really felt like we had a great chance to win and just couldn't close the deal. That is probably the part that is most frustrating for me. When you look at what we've done this year, we're 18-15, probably the biggest thing that we didn't do as well was shoot the ball."

Q: If there's an NIT invitation, do you plan to accept that, and then what's next for you? Do you plan to be back next season?

BH: "We absolutely want to continue to play if we're invited to the NIT. Obviously, we wanted to be in the NCAA tournament, but it would be an honor to continue to play for our players and for our coaches. I hope that happens for us. In terms of me next year, that will all be determined after the season is over as it is every year when I sit down with my boss, John Cohen, and discuss the program and the future."

Guard Iverson Molinar

Q: Iverson, I know teams have been doing this all season, but is there anything in the second half there particularly from Tennessee that you saw them done defensively to try to slow you down a bit?

IM: "I feel like when they were trying to pressure the ball in full court, they tried a lot of face-guarding me. They face-guarded me a lot, and we had Shak [Shakeel Moore] bring up the ball, which is not the plan. The plan was for me to bring the ball down and make him plays for others, make plays for him so he could shoot. In the second half, they came out strong. They came out strong on defense. They tied it up a lot more than in the first half and they executed."

Q: Obviously the expectations you guys talk about coming into the season and now being eliminated and likely not making the NCAA tournament, what's the tone like in the locker room, and how do you try to stomach what the result is this season?

IM: "You know, like Tolu [Smith] said, we're a team that we're never going to quit. We have a lot of players that have high character on the team, so we feel like out there, we've just got to keep pushing, keep being positive. With both of us being the leaders of the team, we are going to tell them that we have got to keep pushing. There's a lot of games left. There's a lot of games left to prove to people that we're a good team. The mentality is going to be the same coming out of the SEC tournament as it's always been. We're just about to talk to them"

Forward Tolu Smith

Q: Same question to you Tolu.

TS: "Obviously, our chin is up high. We don't quit. I feel like this season we had a lot of adversity, and I think the coaching staff and Coach Howland did a great job of handling it. Knowing we had adversity, we still had to push through and show that fight and grit even though we didn't convert on those games. Just having all those obstacles, we had to go through, I know it made us a better team."

Q: What makes Tennessee's guards so tough defensively in both of your opportunities to go up against them this season?

TS: "They're very quick, very small, very crafty. I know all of them are very good shooters. [Santiago] Vescovi is a great shooter, very poised. They have a young core of guards that's really active on both ends of the ball. They're a really good team, and they're a good set of guards."

Q: At what point did you sort of start to feel the legs and the fatigue of the two straight games? Is it more of a second half thing, or was it not much of a problem at all?

TS: "I would say it was the second half. Probably around the first media timeout I felt it, but we just had to keep pushing. I think that's the great thing about Mississippi State and our team, we never quit. We saw that tonight even though the results aren't what we wanted. I have a lot of pride in our team. I have a great thanks in our coaching staff and our team to show the fight that we have."

Tennessee Head Coach Rick Barnes

Opening Statement

RB: "We're proud of our guys. You know, we waited until last night to know who we're going to have to play. Obviously, and they were able to come over and watch a little bit of the game. Even though we play each other throughout the year, I thought with a one-day late prep and what we had to do today, our guys were locked in. We have so much respect for Ben Howland, his team and the way he does things. They're a hard team to defend, and we knew they were going to go at us inside. First half, both teams shot the ball well. Second half, I think a little fatigue affected them from playing last night, and we kept trying to push the pace. It was a good win for us, and there are obviously some things we have to continue to do better."

Q: Coach, two quick questions. 21 assists on 29 made field goals today. Is that the best you have shared the ball all year?

RB: "We do a good job normally. We're not dribbling the air out of the ball, and we're moving the ball and cutting. They made us dribble a little more than we probably wanted to tonight because, again, they're an extremely well-coached team. They were putting some pressure on us. When we're moving the ball and we have player movement, that's when we play our best basketball. We don't have one guy on the team that's selfish. So, that's how we normally like to play."

Q: Coach, five players in double figures, a sixth player with eight. Is that kind of a dream to have that kind of balance in a game?

RB: "Well, we're at our best when we have that balance, but also I think our guys have learned tonight when a guy has it going, to get to him. I thought they did a really good job of that with Joe [Josiah-Jordan James]. We had a couple, and Mississippi State was pushing us into deeper possessions. We were going to have to continue to move, but we did. Tonight, I thought we did do a better job of putting the ball on time and right in the shooting pocket. That's something we talked about all year, delivering the ball when it needed to be delivered and letting guys get set up before we give it to them too soon. When we're playing our best, yeah, we're playing with great balance."

Q: John Fulkerson had eight points tonight, six rebounds. Going back to whenever you decided to put him on the bench, how do you feel like he has responded to this point and kind of finding his groove again?

RB: "On Senior Night, we asked if he wanted to start his last home game. He said, 'No, I don't. I want to stay in this role.' He feels like he is better coming off the bench. He feels like he can see the game and see where he needs to go in and be effective. I thought he passed the ball well tonight. We got him up there in the high -- we were going with some ball screen action where we're getting that short roll and letting him kind of see what he could do with it, and he is really good out there whether he dribbles, passes, whatever. He makes the right choices. He is happy in that way, so we're going to go that way with him."

Guard Josiah Jordan James

Q: Josiah, obviously you sat for a long period in the first half. It seems like it might have been tough to cool off and come back in, but you started so quick. Were you feeling it shooting at halftime? When did you kind of realize that, hey, I've got something going?

JJJ: "Nothing really felt different. Yeah, I was a little cold. I got stretched during halftime, but those are shots that I practice. So, I just trust my work, trust my teammates and credit to them. Uros [Plavsic] and Brandon [Huntley-Hatfield] were screening to get me open. [Zakai] Zakai, Kennedy [Chandler] and Santi [Santiago Vescovi] were passing and putting it on the money. All the shots felt good, but credit to my teammates."

Q: Is this game a testament to the back court depth with Kennedy Chandler dealing with an injury and y'all still scoring and finding ways to produce?

JJJ: "I would say, yeah, our mentality throughout the year is always next man up because you never know what's going to happen. We're thankful that Kennedy is doing well and that he is okay, but we had faith in whoever was going to come in. It just happened to be Zakai and J.P [Justin Powell]. They got a lot of the minutes, but we knew that there was going to be no production dropoff because we practice and play against each other each and every day, so we were prepared."

Q: "Brandon Huntley-Hatfield had 10 points. It seemed like he was a force in there with John Fulkerson. What is it about him? What does he bring to the game, especially this type of situation in the tournament?"

JJJ: "His mentality. When he wants to play physical and when he is playing at his best and imposing his will, I mean, it's really hard to stop him. I know firsthand because I have to guard him. I'm happy to see him grow throughout the year. The way he is playing right now is really what we need, and it's no surprise to us, but when he really puts his mind to it and tries to impose his will, those are the results that we get."

Q: Josiah, you have been shooting the ball well for the last three or four games, not just tonight. Is it just one of those things in a rhythm, superstition, eating the same thing for breakfast? Just what is it lately?

JJJ: "Just trusting my work, and my teammates and coaches having faith in me. They give me the utmost confidence. Those guys and everybody in the locker are always telling me to shoot. The next one is going in, and I truly believe that. I just say trusting in my teammates and trusting in my work because I put the time in. So, I think it's going to pay off."

Guard Zakai Zeigler

Q: Zakai, I'm sure you've become so accustomed to playing along side Kennedy and alternating with him. Did anything change for you when he was kind of out trying to work that ankle out a bit?

ZZ: "Honestly, no, because I already knew just like Josiah said, next man up. I'm just always prepared as well as my other teammates. So, I just always knew to be ready."

Q: Zakai, Iverson Molinar had 9 points for them in the first and only 1 on a 0 of 6 shooting in the second half. How much of a point of emphasis was he slowing him down and slowing the rest of the offense?

ZZ: "We knew if we contained him, it would make the game easier for all of us. So, my mindset was just take him out of the game. That's all I was thinking."

Q: Zakai, you guys talked a lot about how much faith you have in Josiah earlier in the season when his shots were not falling. What's it like seeing that run where he hits four straight three-pointers?

ZZ: "It was great. I was jumping all around, waving in the air. I felt like I was making the shots. I just love seeing all my teammates do that, and especially him. Once he is knocking all them down, I felt like I was doing all that, so that's all it was."