

2021-22 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Postgame Quotes

Mississippi State vs. No. 5 Auburn – March 2, 2022

Mississippi State Head Coach Ben Howland

Opening Statement

BH: “Well that was an excruciating, tough loss on our behalf. We’ve said that too many times this year. We had five-point lead in the second half. We started out so boring, and they started out great. They had six three’s early in the game against us. They ended up making four the rest of the game. I think they had six in the first 10 minutes. I thought we did a good job in the last four minutes of the first half to cut it from 19 [points] to 12 [points].

“Then, we came out and really played good defense to start the second half. Our offensive rebounding, and our defense were really good today. We out boarded them by 18 today. We had too many turnovers. I thought that Tolu [Smith] and Andy [Andersson Garcia] were both terrific tonight and gave us a fighting chance. I blame myself for the calls down the stretch because we didn’t get the kind of looks we needed to get. Actually, we did with the wide-open three. But the play before that Iverson [Molinar] pulled up for a jumper against [Walker] Kessler. The play was designed to get to the rim or kick it out, and he kicked it out. The second time, we had an open three and just air-balled it.”

“Obviously, our three-point shooting is really impacting us because we are now 1-for-33 in the last three games. We spent a ton of time on shooting. We shot a lot better in practice than we did in the game over the last week and half. Jabari Smith is really tough. Too many times he got switched on one of our guards, and we can’t let that happen if we end up playing them in the tournament. We just can’t match up with him, we’re too short. He was shooting over us. He’s really something special. You can see why he’s the number one pick in the draft based on his performance all season long.”

Q: What contradicted Iverson Molinar getting shots tonight?

BH: “I thought they did a good job defensively. They really tried to force him one way. He took a couple of really tough shots in the last five minutes at the rim that were probably ill-advised. He showed a lot of heart and gave us the lead when he drove to the basket and finished. He’s a great competitor. He’ll bounce back.”

Q: What did you say to the guys at halftime, or was there anything that you changed in the second half?

BH: “We started Andy [Andersson Garcia] instead of Shak [Shakeel Moore] to start the second half. So, that made us bigger and better rebounding. That was something that we did that may have helped in that area. I thought our guys seized the moment. They realized that ‘We played so bad and we’re only down by 12 [points] at half.’ At the end of the day, we’ve got to be able to close those games that we’ve struggled to do.”

Q: How do you rally the team to finish the season on a high note?

BH: “We’re going to play a really good team [Texas A&M] that just won at Alabama by 16 tonight. They’re really an unorthodox team that presses. They play four guards and one big. They’re trapping all the time. They’re all over the help side. The whole team is on one side of the floor whenever the ball is on a wing. It’s going to be a very tough game, but we’ve got to bounce back and play our best against Texas A&M to have a chance to win on the road there.”

"In terms of the NCAA Tournament, it's clear that we're going to have to win the conference tournament to get in. It would help us to be seeded a little higher. We want to get our 18th win. We want to get to 9-9 in our league and not 8-10."

Forward Andersson Garcia

Q: How did you guys battle back down the stretch, and what were the emotions going down the stretch?

AG: "I think that we're just trying to play hard for 40 minutes. That was our mentality before the game. At that point, we just reminded each other that we've got to stay strong. That was our mindset."

Q: What happened in overtime there? Was it a case of Auburn getting on a roll, and you guys just having trouble stopping them?

AG: "They were just playing good offense. At that point, we were having miscommunications on defense. I think that's why they got a few shots in overtime."

Q: Andersson, obviously you guys have been through this before. How tough is it to stay mentally focused to finish up the season with so many collapses in the second half and overtime this year?

AG: "It's really tough. We just have got to keep playing tough no matter what."

Q: You guys really dominated the offensive glass; how much was that influential in you guys having a chance in this game?

AG: "As you know, we're a really good rebounding team. We were just doing the thing we do well."

Q: When you mention the need to regroup, what are you trying to take away from this and bring it to Texas A&M?

AG: "We just have got to learn. "It's like Coach [Howland] says, 'It's not over yet', we have got to just finish strong"

Forward Tolu Smith

Q: Tolu, what do you think was the difference defensively moving from the second half to overtime, the defense really kinda allowed you guys to get back in the game in the second half, and then Auburn shot well in the overtime, what was the difference there?

TS: "I think KD Johnson came out and exploded. He had a great overtime, and we didn't do a great job of containing him. We know how streaky he is, how he can get it going and how explosive he is. Like I said, he did a great job coming out in overtime and bringing them up."

Q: Is it especially painful because it seems like a trend, maybe for this team you know with close games down the stretch that don't go your way?

TS: "I'm just trying to give it all I've got. God knows my boys are trying to give it everything they've got. It's just how the cards fall sometimes. You've just got to keep your head high, keep playing and never quit. Coach [Howland] tells us to never give up. So, that's what we're going to keep doing. We're not going to quit."

Q: Obviously, a ferocious effort to come back in the second half for you guys. Was there anything specific that coach Howland said at the half?

TS: "I think Coach Howland did a great job in the second half picking up his intensity and raising our intensity level. Coach Howland is a great coach. Honestly, it all falls on us as players. We've got to learn to close out games, especially ones like that, when you're right there."

"In all honesty, you see that we can compete with the best of them. That's a top-five team, and nobody stopped us. We have just got to stop beating ourselves."

Auburn Head Coach Bruce Pearl

Opening Statement

BP: "I have been doing this a long time. That is probably one of the best regular season wins in my career. To win a championship on the road at a really good place against a really good team and coach. We played really well early. You could tell that we came to play. We did not have the same energy in the second half, and Mississippi State played great."

"Somehow, our guys sucked it up. I think it's because they are competitors. They wanted this championship. Mississippi State was not going to give it to us. So, we took it. If you look up and down the roster, everyone contributed. Everybody scored, rebounded, and we had 19 assists. It was a great, great win for Auburn basketball."

Q: What was the difference in the defense after Mississippi State got hot in the second half?

BP: "I believe that they were fatigued. [Iverson] Molinar and [Tolu] Smith both played 39 minutes. We just played our bench a little more. In the end, I think that was a factor. In the end, K.D. [Johnson] took the game over. I believe that is a function of his courage, and that he isn't afraid to fail. He had played the entire game, and he still had something left."

Q: When did you know that K.D. [Johnson] was taking over?

BP: "Overtime was K.D. time. I went with a small lineup throughout overtime, and that lineup hadn't played together all year. I felt like that group could get it done."

Q: Have you guys played with three small guards all year?

BP: "Nope, that was the first time all year. I wanted Zep [Jasper] out there because of his defense and because he doesn't turn it over. I wanted K.D. [Johnson] out there because he plays hard. I wanted Jabari [Smith] out there because he is the best player in college basketball. I wanted Walker [Kessler] out there because he got us some huge blocks and rebounds down the stretch. I wanted Wendell [Green Jr.] out there because I wanted the ball in his hands. I'm so proud and happy for these guys."

Q: What is it like to have that kind of support on the road from the fans?

BP: "This was God's plan from all along. In victory and defeat, we're going to give Him the glory. I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I feel like we owe it to our Auburn family with all of this support. People who take time from work and travel. They all have families, but they wanted to be here to see history be made. They wanted to see this championship. Kentucky is famous in our league for their fans traveling. I don't think any more teams traveled better than Auburn this year. I think you're going to see that in Tampa. I'm grateful."

Q: How do you explain this team?

BP: "I think they're great competitors. They really care. They're willing to fight. We fight each other and the opponents. It is a will to win and a desire to make history."

Q: Can you speak to how important the three-point line was tonight?

BP: "It was huge. I thought we had some go in-and-out. I think we got back to it in overtime. I loved the tempo in the first half. It was some pretty basketball. I would love to get back to that. Three balls were very important to us."

"Zep [Jasper] got off to a hot start. Jabari [Smith] was 9-of-13 from the floor, 3-of-5 for three and was 6-of-7 from the free-throw line, 10 rebounds, 2 assists, 0 turnovers. That is a clean line, holy cow."

Q: How proud of you for the defense on Molinar?

BP: "I think we did great in the first half. Not so much in the second half. Rebounding is an issue. Mississippi State is a great rebounding team, but they shouldn't out-rebound us by 18. Jabari [Smith] is just a freshman. Walker [Kessler] is physical, but he isn't going to move people out. Our guards must do a better job. They just do."

Guard K.D. Johnson

Q: What happened in overtime to flip things your way?

KDJ: "I was struggling in the first half. My coaches and my teammates were just picking me up. They were telling me it's March time. I decided to come through for my teammates, make plays and get a win."

Q: What is the dynamic like when you're playing so well on your own?

KDJ: "They just made faces at me to hype me up and turn me up even more,"

Q: How good does it feel to win a share of the regular season title?

KDJ: "It's a blessing. Coming from where I came from, then to Auburn, it felt good. I just wanted to do whatever I could to get the win for them."

Q: How did the defense change at the end to put you guys out in front?

KDJ: "We focused more on [what we scouted]. We made little adjustments to get it done. We tried to box out and not to foul. We just had to stay solid."

Forward Jabari Smith

Q: What can you say about K.D. Johnson, his attitude and how he likes the ball in close games?

JS: "That's just the type of player he is. He plays with a lot of confidence, and we have extreme confidence in him. He gives us a boost and those plays when we need him. He's been doing just what he's been doing, and we thank him for that."

Q: How did this win feel for you guys?

JS: "It felt good. It felt like all the work we have been putting in has paid off. We're just excited to see how much better we can get. We've got to finish the regular season on Saturday, then get to Tampa and be ready to be better than we've been before."

Q: What was your instant reaction after the win?

JS: "It just felt good to get a win on the road. It's been a while since we've done that. It felt good knowing that State has only lost one SEC home game before this. We just stayed together, battled back together and won."

Q: What is your take on the rebounding of your team?

JS: "I really have no answer for it. I just know we've got to fix it quick. We've got to get better at it. It's been an emphasis for us. I don't think it's effort or fight, it's just positioning. We definitely have got to clean it up. We take notice of it."