

## **2022-23 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Quotes**

### **NCAA First Four Media Session – March 13, 2023**

#### **Head Coach Chris Jans**

##### ***Opening Statement***

**CJ:** “Obviously, we're happy to be here. Being a participant in the greatest show on earth is what everybody dreams of, either as a player or as a coach. Just thrilled that these young men, all but one, have never experienced March Madness are able to. Like I said, play in these games and be a part of it, they'll have memories of a lifetime. That's something we've talked about all year long. Actually, since we've arrived on the job, is that was going to be a major goal for us. Now, that we're here, just grateful for that. Hopeful that they will enjoy however long we're in the tournament, but they'll enjoy the time that they're in it.”

##### ***Q: When you look at Pitt, when you watch the tape on them, what stands out to you, and what kind of challenge do they present tomorrow on the surface level?***

**CJ:** “Well, they present a lot of challenges. Obviously, they've had a great year. They won a bunch of games in the ACC. They got just a great combination of guards and wings that can really shoot and score the ball. Then, they've got three seven-footers that provide great length around the basket. But, at the same time, two of the three can stretch the floor and roll to the basket.”

“They've got a lot of different pieces, and they certainly present a lot of problems because of it. But it starts, for us, just trying to defend the three-point line. They've got so many guys that shoot at such a high level, and they shoot a lot of threes, as well. It'll be a tall task to slow that down.”

“Then, you add the great pick-and-roll games that they have. They've got a lot of individual players that are really good in the pick-and-roll. And their 5s get behind the defense, and they've got the option to throw it up to them. For us, it's trying to figure out how we're going to defend them and try to slow them down.”

“Then, on the other end, we're still a work in progress offensively. We've got to figure out a way to try to score at the rim against all that length that they have out there on the floor.”

##### ***Q: Playing in the SEC, one of the best conferences in basketball, how does that set you guys up for -- set you up and also your players for tomorrow and the excitement of March?***

**CJ:** “Obviously, it's my first go-around in the SEC. So, when people asked me prior to the season, I'm like I have no idea. I've never played in an SEC conference game, and you'll have to ask me after the season. Here, we are.”

“You know, it's a high-level league with great coaches and great programs, great individual talent and great teams. It's just every given night you'd better be ready to play, and that was the case this year. But it's a fun league. It's a talked-about league. It's an athletic league. We've got a bunch of schools that are represented here in March Madness. So, feel good to be a part of that, as well.”

##### ***Q: What would you say is a defining moment of the season? What did you learn from that that you can use to your advantage in this next game and in the future?***

**CJ:** “Yeah, big picture, we got off to a great start. We were 11-1 out of the chute. Probably raised expectations a little too high locally, but that's okay. That's the goal, right, to win every game.”

"Then, we got into SEC play, and we struggled. We found ourselves 1-7 and behind the 8-ball. I don't think anybody outside of a few folks in our room believed that we would have a chance to be sitting here when you're staring at 1-7."

"But we kept with it. We actually went to Alabama and lost by 3 at their place. Certainly, weren't happy with the results, but as I looked back over the course of the season. I felt like that gave our team more confidence. Like I felt like we changed a little bit going forward, and that we could compete with anybody anywhere."

"Then, not too long after that, we went to Arkansas and beat them on the road. It's one thing to win games at home. It's not as difficult. But when you're going into places like that where it's so loud and there's 15,000, 18,000 people there. It's that kind of environment, and you're able to play well. Like I said, in Tuscaloosa. Then, beat an Arkansas team, that really was a big shot in the arm for us. And basically that's kind of where we took off and we kind of got back in the conversation of being a part of March Madness."

Then in the end, we were able to win enough games to be sitting here today."

***Q: Jamarius Burton made All-ACC for Pitt. What stands out about him when you watch his film, and does he compare to a player that you've seen throughout the SEC this year?***

**CJ:** "Well, I don't know him personally, but I've been a fan of his. And I've actually watched him play a number of times prior to Pitt because of relationships with other coaches that I have. I've always been a big fan of his. He's just a big-bodied guard that is a little throwback in that he's not all about the 3 ball. He's certainly capable of making three's."

"But like I said, he's got an old-school game where he gets to his spots. He can bully ball you and back you down. He'd be a fun player to coach. He's very competitive. He's got a lot of positive emotion."

"He gives their team a different element. In this day and age, most people are three's and get to the charge circle for the most part. That's not how his game is made. He's got more to his game. He's got a different game, and he provides a lot of problems for the opponent for sure."

***Q: Tolu was up here, he had mentioned a conversation that you had when you took the job and sort of your vision and not necessarily a rebuild but a win-now mentality. What did you see from this group that gave you the belief to have success here in your first year?***

**CJ:** "You know, there's a lot of coach-speak when you get a job, right. The goals and we're going to do this and that and the other; I understand that's the way it is, and it'll be that way forever, I'd imagine."

"What we talked about even in the press conference, and I don't think some of the people in the room probably loved to hear it, but I just -- my thing with our team and even with the community was the days of building a program are gone. There will be some people that will continue to do it that way."

"But most of us will probably try to build teams each and every year to be competitive and to win right now with the landscape of college basketball and the way it is. That's kind of the approach that we had, and that's what we told everybody in the room that was still there. That's what we told our recruits that joined us or didn't join us for that matter."

"And that's what we're going to be talking about now and in the near future of hey, this year was great, however it ends up, we made the tournament, but next year we've got to start from scratch almost because that's just the nature of college basketball."

"We sold them on that we knew how to do that. I've got a junior college background, I'm used to coaching new guys. I'm used to having big new classes each and every year. The old-school way of having kids for four or five years and watching them grow and develop, not that that's not going to happen anymore, but that's going to be the exception rather than the rule at most places."

"And I think my staff and I are comfortable in that space, and that's one of the things that we sold the guys that were returning, that we didn't have to wait. We weren't talking about year two or year three and building something. We wanted to win right now. Fortunately, we were right."

***Q: Earlier you had mentioned the confidence your group was able to get in playing with Alabama in that close game. For you as a coach, what's the proudest moment for this group in being able to play here in the NCAA Tournament?***

**CJ:** "Like I said earlier, I tell kids in college, it's just a shame that every college basketball player doesn't get to participate in March Madness because it's just different. You've got to go through it to understand it. Even when you sit down in here for the press conference and the lights are brighter, the stage is bigger, it's raised, it's just a different feel than it is anywhere else. No matter where you're playing in the regular season and how you're treated by everybody at the hotel and the practice facilities that are set up for you, it's just a culmination of all their hard work."

"For me, it's not a moment, it's just knowing that they're going to get these memories and have these experiences and they're going to be able to share them with their kids one day and have all these pictures and mementos, et cetera, and I think that's a big deal."

"We talked about it all year long, and we only have one kid in our program that's ever participated in March Madness, and I'm just really happy for all these kids and their families that they're here. And certainly we're going to try to win as many games as we can, but at the end of the day, that's what I'm most proud of and excited about for this year's team."

***Q: You talked about defending Pitt in transition. They have forwards that like to run the floor back and forth and they're all pretty quick. What are the challenges for guys like Tolu and the rest of your forwards to contend with that kind of speed going up and down the floor?***

**CJ:** "Yeah, it'll be a problem. We're going to have to really be mindful of that. We like to rebound the ball offensively. It's something that we've been fairly decent at most of the year, and that's the game within the game. How active are you on the offensive glass knowing that the other team is really good in transition and they can space the floor. And they've got multiple guys -- sometimes five guys on the court that can all shoot the three. Always four, sometimes five."

"That'll be something that we're going to monitor as the game unfolds and see how it's going, and we may have to change our philosophy of crashing as many people as we do. But that'll unfold the way it does."

***Q: You talked about your team and having only one player being able to play on this stage. You obviously have been here multiple times. What's sort of the message in trying to prepare your guys for the big stage?***

**CJ:** "Have fun. I learned the lesson the hard way. Everybody wants to win. Everybody gets to this stage and you don't want it to end. You want to play. That's what I tell them, it's really good, but if

you go to the next round, it's even better and then if you get to the next weekend, well, you can't imagine that. I've been fortunate to do that as an assistant and as a head coach at different places. But that's what I'm already telling them is this is fun, but it's going to get better."

"But the big picture is really to have fun, to enjoy it. Everyone is going to compete when that ball is thrown up. There's not going to be a game in the tournament that people are going to walk away from and say that team over there, they didn't compete very hard. That's not going to be the case. Just not squeezing them too hard, not getting so caught up in the scout and the meetings and the video and lose sight of keeping them fresh and keeping them loose mentally and physically."

"I had to learn that maybe the hard way the first time or two that I was in the tournament as a head coach, and hopefully that experience is going to help us this year."

***Q: What's the best trait for your basketball team?***

**CJ:** "I'd say they're resilient. When you're 1-7 in the SEC and you're looking at your schedule and you've got some major teams you have to still go play or you have to host, like I said, I just can't imagine that many people at that point thought we'd be sitting here talking about getting ready to play Pittsburgh."

"I just think their togetherness, their resiliency, their ability to stay the course and trust the process is probably what I'll remember the most about this team."

**Forward DJ Jeffries, Guard Eric Reed Jr, Forward Tolu Smith and Forward Tyler Stevenson**

***Q: D.J., if you could start, just talk about the season that you guys have had and then the excitement of being able to play here in the NCAA Tournament?***

**DJJ:** "You know, we're all excited. Because this is my first time actually being here for this tournament, so it's been a long four years. So I'm excited to finally be here on this stage and get to play on the big stage. We're all ready. We've worked so hard since July to get here to this opportunity, so we're going to go out there tomorrow and showcase and show the world what we've been working hard for."

***Q: Obviously it's a big accomplishment just getting here. Do you have any advice for your younger self just being here and taking it all in?***

**DJJ:** "You said advice for my younger self? I guess I would just say that just keep believing in your dreams, keep pushing, keep working hard, and then anything is possible once you work hard and just do what you do."

**ERJ:** "Basically to piggy-back what he said, just keep pushing, keep believing. You never know what can come in on the other side. If you keep your head down and keep working, good things happen for you."

**TST:** "Yeah, I feel like they said it all. Just keep believing and just staying consistent day in and day out and that's what we've been doing, especially me and D.J. did. We were here last year with some former players with the Bulldogs. And we always had dreams and expectations of getting to the tournament, and we turned it into a reality, so it's just a blessing."

**TSM:** "I would just have to say some of the similar things that they said, like sticking with the process, no matter how hard it gets because there's going to be ups and downs. But as long as you work hard, keep God first, everything else is going to play out for itself, and you'll be able to reach your goals at the end."

***Q: The last 24 hours since the selection show has been kind of crazy. I was wondering if any of you could talk about that and talk about the emotions that come with that leading up to the game.***

**ERJ:** "It was an exciting feeling to see your name called on TV. It's like one of those things where a dream is accomplished, so it felt good. I know these guys felt good. Everybody in the locker room, everybody that supports State felt really good about that. So yeah."

**DJJ:** "Just like Eric said, it was a surreal feeling seeing your name being called on the screen. We was all kind of anxious, we didn't know if we was going to be called or not. Seeing our name up there was a big relief and everybody was happy. We went home smiling and happy because we got the opportunity to go and play basketball, so we've got the opportunity to do it on the biggest stage."

**TSM:** "I would say the same thing. We saw our name get called and we was just happy, thrilled. Before the season started, that was a goal of ours. Coach said it was a goal of his. He wasn't planning to build a team, he was planning to build a team for that year to go to the tournament, and that's what he did. We put so many hours into the gym, so many hours into ourselves and to our bodies and it's paying off, just paying dividends for us. So just blessings?"

***Q: Tyler, the excitement of seeing your name last night?***

**TST:** "It was a really big excitement for me and my teammates. Growing up as a kid, watching college basketball, a lot of the big games that were being played in March Madness, it's something we all dreamed about. And we were just really excited, and like Tolu said, it's a blessing to be here."

***Q: Tyler, do you have a memory in particular of March Madness that you go back to?***

**TST:** "I think one of the ones I really remember vividly watching was when -- I think it was Kris Jenkins for Villanova, when he hit that game-winning shot. I know I remember that really vividly."

***Q: Tolu, can you talk about the impact that Coach Jans has had? I know you mentioned to start the season that the message was win this year, that feeling, and I guess hearing the message. But then what you guys were able to do in performing and finally being here now and seeing the floor and being a part of March Madness?***

**TSM:** "Yeah, everybody knows Coach Jans is the winningest coach, one of the top in the nation, and we knew that going into it. I had a great opportunity to sit down and talk to him once our last coach resigned, and I had a great conversation with him, and he told me his goals, and I told him my goals, and they aligned."

"Once I heard that, I just ran with it. He had a blueprint, and we just went along with the blueprint. It worked out really well in our favor. I'm just happy for the team, all the work we've put in, I'm happy for the staff, all the work they've put in. We're just going to make a run at this thing."

***Q: D.J., what's the best trait of this basketball team?***

**DJJ:** "I'd just say our togetherness and our toughness. We never -- even when we was in that little spurt where we was losing games, on a losing streak, we stayed together and we stayed tough. And it just made us come closer together and it helped us build that little momentum to get to those winning streaks and get those big wins that we needed to get to where we are now. I would just say our togetherness and our toughness."

***Q: Eric, sort of following up those comments from D.J., just being resilient, talk a little bit about some of those tough times and losing games and what you were able to learn from that and more importantly how you were able to stay together.***

**ERJ:** "Yeah, so I remember our first loss was against Drake, and that was a heartbreaker. But we bounced back. We went on a break, came back, new energy, new vibe, and we knew we had to stick together if we wanted to accomplish the things that we wanted to accomplish. That's what we did. We set out a goal and we went and attacked it."

***Q: Knowing your personal strengths of the team and yourselves overall and obviously with a hopeful goal of making it to The Finals and winning it all, even beyond just this First Four, how do you think those strengths will be useful overall compared to others, and how you can take advantage of those skills and such?***

**DJJ:** "I would say our strengths are just like we know who we are as a basketball team. We don't try to get out of character. We all just know our role. We all do our role perfectly. We're all together. Whatever Coach Jans wants us to do, we're going to do it. We're all willing to run through a wall for each other. I feel like that itself is going to take us a long way because we're together, we're hungry, we haven't been here before. So everybody wants to win. We're going to do whatever it takes to keep advancing."

***Q: Tyler, was there a moment in this season where you really felt things click and you had that belief that this was going to be a really good year for Mississippi State basketball?***

**TST:** "Yeah, I do. Like what E-Reed was talking about the Drake game, we took that loss, went home after the break, kind of regrouped, got our minds right, and we came back and we were just -- it was like we had a whole different vibe. Even though we were going through the whole little spurts and we were losing, we found a way to pull together and pull things off to where we can get here right now. I just feel like our togetherness and stuff has really helped out a lot."

***Q: Tolu, for the game tomorrow night against your opponent, Pitt, have you been able to really see anything from the Panthers? And more importantly, where do you think you guys will be able to excel to be up on this stage tomorrow and advance on into the NCAA Tournament?***

**TSM:** "Yeah, we watched Pitt a little bit. Not a little but a good bit. I'd say they've got a lot of great shooters, a couple guys that can really shoot the ball. They've got Sixth Man of the Year in the ACC. They've got a lot of pieces. I think our main thing is defense. Defense is our mantra. Regardless if shots are not falling or nothing's clicking, we always stick to defense. And I think that's what's going to get us the win in this game and most games if we want to make a big run in the tournament."

***Q: D.J., obviously the excitement of playing one of the first games, the second for March Madness, talk a little bit about the buildup, and then also trying to be in that moment where you've got work to do. Just really kind of the whirlwind it's been here for your group the last 24 hours.***

**DJJ:** "Man, you know, the buildup is going to be kind of be -- it's going to be a little jitters because all of our first time on this big stage, and all the world is going to be watching us at 8:00 (CT) tomorrow. Once we get the jitters out and all that, we got to get back to business, we got to get back to playing basketball how we've been playing basketball all year. Got to defend, shoot the ball with confidence, just play with confidence."

"It's just -- it's still basketball at the end of the day. You're just playing on the biggest stage, you're playing in March Madness, and that's what you've been working hard for your whole life. Just got to do those things, and when the nerves go away, keep playing hard, and go out there and have fun, and whoever wins wins."