

## **2023-24 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Postgame Quotes Mississippi State vs. Bethune-Cookman – December 31, 2023**

### **Mississippi State Head Coach Chris Jans**

***Q: What were your observations without watching film on how Tolu Smith was able to get in a rhythm today in his first game back?***

**CJ:** "It's good to have him back. We were all excited for him today. We certainly didn't know he long he would play. He got off to a great start. He didn't miss a shot from the field and maybe one free throw. I thought it was interesting as the game unfolded, with new guys and returners. It wasn't us telling them, but they knew to throw him the ball when he was open. They made a concerted effort to get him the ball."

"We're always trying to play inside out for the most part, but I thought we had some reposting today that we haven't been doing as much. That was strictly on their own. As the game progressed, they started giving him a little more attention. I thought he made some decent passes out of the doubles or the digs, whatever you want to call them."

"I'm just happy for him and his family. It's been a long road. Their whole family has handled it great, his Mom and Dad are great people. They've been very supportive of me and the team while he was on the mend. For him to come back and get off to such a great start has got to make him feel really, really good."

***Q: We saw a nice game from Trey Fort. He bounced back and knocked down 3 three pointers. What did you see from him that you liked, and what does that do for his confidence?***

**CJ:** "What I liked is he practiced very well since the return from Christmas. That's what I like. That's why he got into the game earlier than most. It's a coach's thought process. I just believe if you have the right mindset every day. When things aren't going your way and the work you're putting in to it is not off like you want to, your time is coming. If you keep your attitude the way it needs to be and you keep working, you'll get paid for it. You'll reek the dividends, and Trey did that this week."

"Since he's been back, he's had more focus. He's tried to defend and play the way we want him to play, not necessarily the way he thinks he should play. He's certainly got a lot of ability. You can certainly see it on the court, especially when he can just jump up there and knock it down. That's a big shot in the arm for us. It gives us more spacing on the court, but his court time is more determined by the other end. He can't be weak link for us. He's got to buy into it all the time. I can't imagine that this can't make him feel really good going forward, he knows what he needs to do now."

***Q: How well did the rotation with Tolu Smith and Jimmy Bell Jr. work today? How big is that consistent post presence going to be when you get into conference play?***

**CJ:** "That's a good question. I haven't figured it out yet. It's going to be a work in progress. We're going to have to figure it out in practice certainly in the early games. But certainly, it's a good problem to have. It's a good problem to have."

"People asked me, 'When Tolu is back, how's Jimmy going to handle it?' I didn't even think about it. He's such a great guy. He's been encouraging Tolu and excited for Tolu. I think his mindset is, 'Hey, when I'm not in there now, there's another guy that's going to keep wearing them down. He's going to keep pounding them like I do, and maybe that will soften them up a little bit.' But that's a great question, and it's something that we're going to have to figure out going forward."

***Q: Knowing Tolu was out of the first 12 games and sitting at 10-2, is the record what you thought it would be?***

**CJ:** “No, I thought we’d win every game, and that’s not lip service. We’ve got a lot of good players who are working on our culture every single day. We lost two of them [to Georgia Tech and Southern]. You don’t get do-overs, but those losses weren’t the expectation. It was ‘Let’s keep the train moving and win every game.’ That’s our approach as long as I’m the coach here. That’s the approach the staff, the coaches and the managers all have. Certainty, it’s a tall task, but I think that’s the approach you’ve got to have.”

***Q: With Tolu back, do you think you’re now able to rotate Cameron Matthews and KeShawn Murphy back at the four? Is that what you would like to do there?***

**CJ:** “I’m not sure yet. We’ve got some moveable parts. With Cam’s knowledge of the system and his skillset, he can play the three, four or five. D.J. [Jefferies] can play the two, three or four. Will there be a possibility of playing Tolu [Smith] and Jimmy [Bell Jr.] together? Yes, we’ve done it in practice. We’ve talked about it. It’s not a problem on offense, but defense if you have two fives on the court together at the same time. That’s what we’re trying to figure out, but I’m not sure. Those problems are good ones to have.”

**Guard Trey Fort and Forward Tolu Smith**

***Q: Tolu, what were the toughest parts of the last few months?***

**TS:** “I think the toughest part was probably the first two, three days [after the injury happened]. I cried, cried and cried again wondering ‘Why me?’ I’ve got a great coaching staff and great team to tell me that it was okay, and everything would be fine. Now I’m here, life moves fast. I’m playing basketball again. So, I’m blessed, and I’m excited for our team.”

***Q: Tolu, were there any butterflies or jitters when you got back on the court for the first time?***

**TS:** “So, I told myself that I was going to have any jitters. When I got in, there was a little roar when I walked on [the floor]. So, I kind of had a little chill [come over me]. Coach Jans made sure that I locked back in.”

***Q: Trey, how big of a confidence boost was your play today heading into SEC Play?***

**TF:** “Pretty good, especially just being able to know that I can help my team, just be there for them and just be a great teammate. They were great teammates to me as well by motivating me and making sure I still had a level head. They gave me the confidence to continue to make those shots and play on both ends of the court with them.”

***Q: Tolu, what did you notice about the best way you could help the team while you were sidelined?***

**TS:** “What I noticed the most was that energy is contagious. I’m not trying to be cocky, but I’m not used to being on the bench a lot. Me being on the bench a lot helped me learn that if I’m bringing the energy day in, day out, every day for 40 minutes, that it would be contagious. It helps the guys on the court. We always preach, and Coach Jans always preaches about the bench being up and being uplifting. That’s what I worked on the most. I think I got pretty good at it.”

***Q: Trey, what was it like for you and your teammates to have Tolu [Smith] back on the floor?***

**TF:** “Exciting. With me, I was able to play with Tolu and get some runs in [during practice] before we were able to be on the court this season. It was pretty good, especially to see him come out and do the things he did. We’re ready.”

**Q: Tolu, now that the first game is in the bag, how do you feel?**

**TS:** "I feel good. Obviously, I still have some knicks and knacks. I've just got to keep getting better and keep getting back into shape. There's a big difference between practice shape and game shape. The more games I play, obviously, the better I'll get back into shape."

**Q: Tolu, what were your thoughts on Jimmy Bell Jr. while you were out?**

**TS:** "It's great. It's been great to have someone like him side-by-side. We've had some discussions. When I'm out or when he's out, the other is in. There's no let up [in us], there's no let up for the other team. That's what we plan to do. The coaching staff has done an amazing job recruiting and bringing a great player like him in."

**Q: Tolu, how important was it to get this game under your belt before SEC play opens up?**

**TS:** "It was vital. Everyone needs a tune-up. I'm not trying to say Bethune-Cookman was a tune up. We played a great team that might win their conference. A game like that helped me get my rhythm and my flow back. Me being able to play with the team and just being on the court felt great."