

2023-24 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Postgame Quotes

Mississippi State vs. Ole Miss – February 21, 2024

Mississippi State Head Coach Chris Jans

Q: Coach Beard was just in here praising the physicality of your team. What did you feel like your team was able to do defensively to slow them down, especially when you pulled away in the second half?

CJ: “Yeah, obviously, we had too many turnovers at halftime. That was not good. I think they scored 14 of their points, if I’m not mistaken, off our turnovers [in the first half]. They had a bunch of offensive rebounds. I think our defensive rebounding percentage was somewhere around 53 percent [in the first half]. So, they were getting almost half the rebounds back. We were too. It was very similar that way, but we just didn’t feel like we were finishing the job that way.”

“They were scoring off our turnovers. We had some decent possessions for a shot, but they got too many second-chance opportunities. I don’t know how many they scored on it, but it just deflates you. It takes the air out of the defense a little bit when that happens. Certainly, we try to play physical, and we try to get at the backboards. Offensively, we were 44 percent tonight, which is a big number. That was a big part of our game plan.”

Q: I think it was a season-low for Josh [Hubbard], but it seemed like everybody else on the team picked him up and played well in the second half, especially defensively. What did you think of that second group that came in there?

CJ: “Yeah, I mean, they made a commitment to not let Josh get a bunch of clean looks. They did an excellent job on him. He didn’t get many. He just didn’t get many. Then, certainly the foul trouble, didn’t help him either. But our bench was tremendous. That’s why we won the game. We had so many productive guys come off the bench and do a lot of things that don’t even show up in the stat sheet. I thought that was a big difference in the game.”

Q: This was kind of a shootout in the first three halves that you guys have played against Ole Miss. What was the difference there in the second half today that kind of played your team’s game and dictate the pace how you wanted to?

CJ: “That’s what I was talking about at halftime with our staff. We can’t guard these guys. They had 39 in the first half up there and then 47. They had 44 at home, and I’m like, ‘We’re struggling to defend them.’ It was frustrating. That’s what we pride ourselves on.”

“The second half, I thought a few things happened. I thought Cam [Cameron Matthews] set the tone defensively with some big plays, some hustle plays. People talk about 50/50 balls. Well, he got a ball that was 20/80. I didn’t think he had any chance of getting that ball, and I really thought that gave us a boost. Then, the crowd got into the game. Our kids fed off the crowd. It was loud, and they were into the game. Certainly, you want your guys to play hard all the time, but it’s no secret that that urges them on even more.”

“I thought Rams [Dashawn] Davis was unbelievable defensively with his hands and his activity. A lot of guys were, but the biggest difference, like I said, was Cam setting the tone. We just really locked down, got into stances and defended them. We didn’t make any major changes with our structure. They just got some stops and got more confident.”

Q: Do you think there was a little extra satisfaction from your guys postgame, considering that not only it's a rivalry game but the fact that they won the last meeting in Oxford?

CJ: "Sure. I mean, no one wants to get swept by your rival. Our only chance was to split this year after getting beat at their place, and it's something we talked about."

"Three things that we talked about from a program's perspective was that it was a rivalry game. Everybody talks about it. I've been here long enough to really understand how meaningful it is to both fanbases. It's a big deal. Certainly, I've coached long enough to be in a bunch of rivalries, and I get all that. It was important, and we have a bunch of Mississippi kids on our roster. For them, to be able to have that for the rest of their lives is a big deal. Certainly, that was important."

"But the other parts were, 'Hey, we've got to move up in the SEC standings.' We've got to try to improve our seeding every chance we get [for the SEC Tournament]. The third thing, and right now it may not be as meaningful but in March it's going to be, is keep improving our resume. We don't have that many opportunities left, and we've got to take advantage of them because they'll be gone here soon. Depending on who you talk to, you'll have disagreements on which one was more important."

Q: Last time you two faced off, you didn't have as much success in the paint. Tonight, it was a completely different story. What did you see in Ole Miss's defense to incentivize your guys to go down low and attack the basket?

CJ: "One, they were playing small ball a little bit more. So, whenever they played the small ball lineup, we were committed to running everything we had to just go right at the rim. Every time they were in that lineup, that was kind of our deal. Even when we started feeling confident that way, we even attacked the big guys a little bit more than we did there. People that are watching us know we talk about paint touches all the time around here. So many good things happen when you get the ball in the paint. Draw fouls more, obviously, you get closer to the basket. You draw the defense. You can get inside out three's, get them in closeouts, etcetera. We've been talking about it all year long, but the guys have been doing a better job of staying committed to it throughout the game."

Q: You've mentioned how this year's team is like last year's team in terms of an end of season run. What about this group of guys that, in back-to-back seasons with your backs against the wall, have got themselves of the mat?

CJ: "Yeah, I like where they're at. It's odd that it's similar in terms of our records back-to-back years with wherever we're at in the first few games. Even at the tournament, I think they were one game off and didn't want to be in that position, but we found ourselves in that position again."

"I think I've told you guys before, it doesn't mean it's going to happen again. That's the goal, but it doesn't mean because we did it last year that it's going to happen again. That's what I had to convince our guys that were here. Don't rely on that. We've got to do the things that got that done last year, and we're on our way. We've still got a bunch of games left against some great teams and opportunities. They've had that mindset that they needed to fight back."

Q: What has the team specifically done over these past four games to get better?

CJ: "Our defensive numbers have improved quite a bit in the last three or four games. The first half tonight wasn't great. Overall, we've adopted the mantra we've tried to establish since we've been here. We're going to defend, we're going to rebound, and we're going to be tougher than the team we're playing."

“At the end of the day, it’s something you can have in your back pocket all of the time. It travels more often than not. There have been times where we haven’t had that identity, and it hasn’t been as good as we’ve needed. At this point, in mid-February, everybody has seen what it can do for us if we can play that style of basketball. If we stay in character, we can win college basketball games.”

Q: How has Cameron Matthews evolved as a playmaker on offense?

CJ: “He’s really improved his playmaking ability, his handles and his decision-making. He’s almost a different player from when we arrived. The play he made to start the second half really set the tone. People talk about 50/50 balls, but that was more of a 20/80 ball. He had a 20 percent chance to get that ball, and the other kid had an 80 percent chance. I didn’t think he was going to get it. It was a heck of a play. It really felt like it set the tone. He did an excellent job coming out of the break.”

“Obviously, when he got the third foul, it made you a little worried. He’s our heartbeat, our leader, and our personality. The other guys on the bench stepped up and did a good job. He doesn’t get enough credit for as smart of a basketball player as he is. His IQ is off the charts. He understands what we’re doing out there as good as or better than some of our coaches sometimes. He has suggestions at this point of his career. He will question us on how we’re guarding certain things at practice. I love it. He’s so bought in. During the games, I will lean on him once in a while because he’s out there.”

Guard Shakeel Moore, Forwards Cameron Matthews and KeShawn Murphy

Q: How important was increasing this winning streak to four?

SM: “It was important. We know we’re at the last bit of our regular season games. We knew we had to get our get back. We knew we had to get revenge. It moves us up in the standings for sure.”

Q: Just like the game there, they got momentum going into halftime. What was the message in the locker room?

CM: “The message was to bottle them up the first 10 minutes in the first half and how we played defense and to try and implement that again – just trying to guard the ball, be real active and just be on attack mode. I just took what the defense gave me.”

Q: It was a different deal with Tolu [Smith III] coming off the bench tonight. With the bench out scoring Ole Miss 49-11, how big was that stretch where you all were able to stretch it to double digits with key starters on the bench?

KM: “Throughout the season, that’s what it’s really been. When guys are fouling, we need guys to step up on the bench. That really makes us down the stretch in the last few minutes of the game. Guys know they need to step up, and they get it done.”

Q: For you going to the bench and watching those guys get the lead and extend it, what did it mean for you guys to get that lead and do it with the bench?

CM: “We’ve got the upmost faith in all of our guys, top to bottom. How our season’s been, starting off a little rocky with injuries. So, it’s not an issue knowing we’ve guys that can go out and do it. We just have to get them to go out there and have the confidence to do it. It meant a lot especially against Ole Miss getting our win back. Shout out to the guys that were holding it down.”

Q: What have you noticed the most about this team throughout this four-game winning streak?

CM: “We’ve been playing with a little more confidence. I don’t know, we’re getting back to playing defense. Early in the beginning of the season, we were okay, but we weren’t to our full potential. So, I feel like we are getting back to that defense we were last year.”

Q: You've been around Tolu [Smith III] for a couple years now. How do you think he played coming off the bench?

CM: "Maybe, he needs to come off the bench all the time [laughter], 17 in the first half. He's a grown man. We've been here about 10 years now [laughter]. He has a good head on his shoulders. So, he knows he needs to come in here and produce, because he's one of those guys."

Q: Last game, Jaylen Murray lit you guys up pretty good, but in this game you held him down. I know Rams [Dashawn Davis] was on him a lot and the two of you switching off, but what was different about y'all's approach with him in this game?

SM: "GTB – Guard the ball. That's what we have been stressing, just to guard the ball in our practice and preparation. So, it wasn't anything too much that we changed. We just had a little more grit to us on defense."

Q: On a four-game winning streak going into the last few weeks of the regular season, do you feel like this team is playing its best basketball right now?

SM: "Definitely, definitely, right around the right time too. I think we've got a pretty good path ahead of us."

Ole Miss Head Coach Chris Beard

Q: What is the difference defensively when playing on the road?

CB: "Tonight was an interesting game. I've been coaching for 30 years, and nobody likes a crybaby. To be clear, congratulations to Mississippi State, the more physical team won the game. This game was really important for them to protect their home court. It was the second round in our series this year. They played well, they had 40-something points off the bench."

"Their best players produced. [Tolu] Smith [III] had a career-best type of game on both ends. They deserved to win the game. That's amazing to me that Smith and [Jimmy] Bell [Jr.], who play the five spot, had zero fouls in the game. I'm just reading what's on the stat sheet. I won't let my personal opinion be known. That's not how college basketball works. Two physical players, in an SEC game, late in February, they played 40 minutes in their five spot and had zero fouls in the game. To me, if this was a North Carolina versus Duke, or a Kansas versus Baylor this would get some national attention."

"Some basketball people might take a look at the film, not just the box score, not just the coaches comments but actually look at the game. Zero fouls for two guys who are really physical players. On the other end, we had multiple players foul out of the game. Give Mississippi State the credit. A lot of these possessions, the most aggressive person won the possession. In all my years of coaching, I haven't been involved in a game like that."

Q: What did Mississippi State do to force turnovers?

CB: "Give credit to the opponent. Coach Jans had these guys ready to play tonight. They gave us a different look with some ball pressure than they gave us in game one. Our high turnover game was impacted by their performance. We had some misfortune. We slipped on the floor five or six times. Some of our best players had some low-level moments. It was a combination of two things. We had some self-inflicted things that led to that high turnover game. Again, I would give Mississippi State credit. Their defense forced several of those turnovers."

Q: What specifically stuck out about Mississippi State's defense?

CB: "It was a very physical game. I can't speak for [Coach] Jans. But, in the second half, they set the tone. When you can play 40 minutes in the SEC in the paint and have two physical players that have zero fouls in the game, those guys did a great job of not fouling. From where I was standing, there were some plays that were frustrating from our standpoint. We're a no-excuse program. We'll watch this film. Hopefully, some other people will take a look as well."

Q: What did you think of the crowd?

CB: "It was a good SEC crowd. [Coach] Jans has worked hard to build this in year two for him here. It was a great college basketball atmosphere. It's a rivalry. This game means a lot to both fanbases. We didn't put the kind of performance out there that we wanted to for our fanbase. I give Mississippi State a lot of credit. They were the physical team. They played great defense without fouling."

Q: Do you feel Tolu Smith [III] coming off the bench change anything?

CB: "It's the same two teams playing, the same two coaches. In the first game, Smith [III] got a couple fouls. We had the same type of gameplan tonight and just didn't get the calls."

"When a player as talented as him gets to play as many minutes as his coach or conditioning or performance allows, that's a real challenge. It's a physical game. A part of everybody's gameplan in the SEC is to get to the free-throw line. You see the free throw discrepancy. It's a very unique game."

Q: What changed in the second half for your team that made your team fall flat?

CB: "I don't think we fell flat. I think we're playing against a team that was in desperation mode tonight. The importance of them protecting their home court. The game was equally important to us. We really wanted to try and win this game."

"Again, give Mississippi State a lot of credit. I think when you say that we fell flat it takes away from what they were doing. They were the aggressor, especially at the start of the second half. Some key plays during the game shifted momentum, no different than any other college basketball game. They had some great runs. They capitalized on some of our mistakes on those runs. Again, congratulate them on a great home win in late February in the SEC."