

2023-24 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Postgame Quotes

Mississippi State vs. No. 5 Tennessee – January 10, 2024

Mississippi State Head Coach Chris Jans

Q: Not to bring up some bad memories, but last year you guys were in that situation a lot and kind of let it get away from you at the end. What was said in the last 2-3 minutes, and what was different this time?

CJ: “Yeah, I’m not sure what was different. We just stuck together, and we made some plays. The game changed quickly in the second half. Out of the gates, they came out – we have a nice lead, and they made some baskets. They made us call an early timeout. Then, they played with great intensity and passion. We obviously struggled with the press. They’re not a huge pressing team. They found a little bit of a hole, and we struggled with it. I’m obviously disappointed in that, but I was glad that we stuck together.”

“Like you said, we’ve been in this situation before and just used that experience. We just had some guys step up. They [the players] were just determined to win this game, and they made some plays.”

Q: I know you’re awfully proud of the effort coming off Saturday. I know you feel like they could play better, and they did.

CJ: “Yeah, I’m proud of them. We talked about sustained effort. I thought in the South Carolina game, we had spurts where we looked really, really good especially on the defensive end. Certainly, we talked too much about the rebounding difference that game.”

“Then, the first half [tonight], we were behind again, but they [the players] shored that up pretty nicely in the second half. You never know what to expect, right? You never know how the game’s going to unfold and how the kids are going to react, but I was proud of their might, their toughness, their strength and how physical they played. That was a very physical basketball game on both ends of the floor, and they stuck with it.”

Q: Shortly after the handshakes, I saw you embracing the staff pretty emphatically. How much did that mean to you guys?

CJ: “Well, the goals that we have, we felt like this was a huge opportunity for us. You know, we needed to get this win for our team this year and for our program. We didn’t want to have that feeling again like we did last year where we’re playing uphill from the jump with the conference season unfolding.”

“Those guys [our staff] did a terrific job. [Associate Head Coach] James Miller led the scout this game. Like usual, he was on-point with [our team] giving up 22 in the first half. It would’ve been 20 if they wouldn’t have got that last loose ball.”

“Certainly, in the second half, the scouting becomes less effective because they make adjustments. We have to adjust on the fly like that too. He did a great job of the game plan. It was a big win for us. It was a big win for us and this particular team.”

Q: Josh Hubbard goes for 25 tonight in his home conference debut. Talk about his impact on this offense in this particular environment.

CJ: “He can score the ball, pretty obvious statement. The guys have learned to trust him and understand that he’s a weapon for us. When a kid comes in like that and scores in bunches, you have the potential of having issues amongst your team. I think that our kids deserve the credit for not having those issues and realizing that he can make everybody better including themselves.”

"But, he [Hubbard] just gets in those zones, if you will. He's a tough guard. We see it in practice sometimes. He's got such a stoic demeanor. He never gets too high or too low, and he handles himself way beyond his years."

Q: When Cameron Matthews came back in the game, it seemed like that took the edge off Tennessee's press and got your offense back in sync. Things just seemed to flow better with him on the floor.

CJ: "You're exactly right. He's our emotional leader, our vocal leader. He does so much for our basketball team. Obviously, we really struggled in the second half against their press. It was like, 'What are we doing?' I'll have to watch the film to really understand how we were throwing that ball away. I think it was a combination of poor decisions. But, at the same time, I'm not sure that the guards were working as hard as they needed to be to get leads and to get open. When we did, it's like we panicked. Any sort of pressure or trap, we just threw it away. That's certainly something we can fix."

"But, Cam came in like you said and settles us down. He's big, and he's strong. We put him up to the top so he could get his lead, handle his situation and get a catch. He even had a couple of plays where I'm like, 'What are you doing?'"

"He's also just got to get better at silly fouls. He's putting himself in a bad spot. They're not lack of effort fouls. They're over aggression fouls, overhelping and putting himself in harm's way ... We're a better basketball team when he's on the floor."

Q: First top five win for this program since 2002. What does that mean for you and for this program? How much confidence does that give you moving forward?

CJ: "Yeah, we talked about it. I didn't realize that until one of the staff members made me aware of it. We talked about it with our team. It's not like that's all we talked about, but they knew the situation. We wanted to be a team to break that streak, if you will. Certainly, when nothing's been done for a long, long time you want your team to do it."

"It was a rallying point for us. It was something that we've tried to use as motivation. When we celebrated, there was a lot of talk about that. I'm really happy for them. I'm really glad for them. We celebrated. I told them, 'If people don't understand that, then they've never been through what a program like this goes through in terms of the daily grind, our effort and what we ask of them.' We put so much into it. When we win games like that, we're going to enjoy them."

Q: You were talking about the fouls drawn by Tolu [Smith III] and the physicality that he was having to face throughout the game going down to the last possession. For a guy that's been banged up and working his way back, what do you think of the way raised to the challenge today?

CJ: "Just off the top of my head, I asked a couple of the coaches about it in the coach's locker room. I'm sure he had some, but I don't remember a game where he played any better. If he did, it wasn't much. I thought he was determined to get that ball as close to the rim as he could. He missed a couple of them that he probably should've made, but he just put a lot of pressure on their defense."

"They had to make decisions. Then, he made really good decisions on if there was another defender near him of just making simple plays. Getting a shot, getting a hockey assist or a potential hockey assist. He had a look about him tonight. He wanted to win this game. He wanted to be a big part of it, and I'm just happy for him. I'm just happy for him."

Guard Josh Hubbard, Forward D.J. Jeffries and Center Tolu Smith III

Q: You guys ran into that position a lot last year and let leads get away from you. What was said in the huddle when they had tied it cut the lead down?

TS III: "Like you said, last year, we went through a lot of adversity. It's a blessing to have the same team come back and add pieces like Hubb (Josh Hubbard), Trey [Fort], Jimmy [Bell Jr.] and all the guys. I think the main thing we focused on in the huddle was not going too high, not going too low just staying consistent, stay in the path."

Q: Tolu, what was your mentality with knowing you were going to face a team like that tonight?

TS III: "I have great players like Cameron Mathews, who loves to get the ball to the side. It's like a feeling, it's hard to explain. When I see him, when he sees me, we just make plays happen."

Q: You guys last year went through that 1-7 start in conference play. How much did going through that and understanding that help in this situation coming off that loss against South Carolina?

DJJ: "I mean going 1-7 was a tough time for us, we remember that feeling. Every day, every practice, we practice hard. We go through adversity each and every day. We try to fight through. We try to get better each and every day so we don't feel that feeling again."

Q: Tolu, do you feel more confidence going in there making plays on the paint within those last five minutes after Jonas Aidoo fouled out for them?

TS III: "Yeah, I think that's part of the game plan – go at them, go at both of them [Aidoo and Tobe Awaka]. I think they did a great job, I think Coach Barnes had a great game plan for us. I think Coach Jans was really strategic with our game plan, and it came out with a win."

Q: Josh first home SEC game, you come out of the gate with 25, just talk about what's going through your head when you're started to feel it there in the second half?

JH: "It was unbelievable, the environment was crazy. That was my first time experiencing the SEC feeling. I couldn't have done it without the team, to get this win. We all stayed positive through adversity."

Q: You're new to this league Josh, what was it like going up against a player like Zakai Zeigler? What makes him so tough out there to guard?

JH: "Oh man, he doesn't get tired. He's running 100 miles per hour every possession. He's a good player for sure."

Q: Tolu, you talked about getting a win like this. The first win over a top 5 team in over 20 years, how was that locker room celebration after?

TS III: "Surreal. it's history in the making. To be a part of something like that is legendary. To be a part of it with these guys, and Coach Jans is even more of a blessing. It's a surreal feeling, I'm happy that we did it. Now, it's onto the next one."

Q: D.J., you've been here the last few years playing alongside Tolu. What does it mean for you guys who have been around him for so long to see him get back on the court and have moments like the one you had tonight?

DJJ: "Tolu is our leader. He goes in there, and we see him work hard each and every day. He busts his tail every day. He leads us. To see him go out there and do what he does, I couldn't be more proud of him."

Q: Josh, coming in as a Freshman, what does it mean to have a guy like Tolu on the team with such experience who's played in this league before?

JH: "It's unbelievable. To see it actually on the court and to be his teammate, I grew up a Mississippi kid. I used to watch him on T.V. – him and D.J. for a long time. To come to this program and see him succeed and work hard and see the behind the scenes is a blessing for sure."

Tennessee Head Coach Rick Barnes

Q: How frustrating was the first half?

RB: "The most disappointing thing is we're so inconsistent. You think you're getting there. You take a couple steps forward. Now, we took a step backwards. I don't want to take anything away from Mississippi State. Coach Jans had his guys ready to play. Early in the first half, we had some good looks at [the basket] and did not make them. We started taking some shots where our feet weren't set, 'hope shots,' are what I call them."

"Second half, we really fought hard to get back in the game. We all appreciate that effort. We had a big turnover in the end. A couple of turnovers really. [We allowed] An offensive rebound at the other end, when we had a chance to really come down, and maybe get a lead."

"Our full court pressure was good. Obviously, Zakai [Zeigler] and Dalton [Knecht] got it going. Zakai continues to do an incredible job with what we need him to do. Overall, we've got to have more team consistency. Tolu Smith [III] had his way with our post guys. He got his position where he wanted it and did what he wanted to do. We didn't make enough winning plays at the end. They deserve all the credit for this win."

Q: Did it surprise you how Tolu Smith [III] was able to succeed as well as he did?

RB: "Absolutely, I would've have thought that ours [Jonas Aidoo and Tobe Awaka] could limit him. We know he [Smith II] is an outstanding offensive player. He just took it where he wanted to go. Those guys can't allow him to do that. He put fouls on us. They did a good job of getting to the foul line. With the arm bar and the rules today, nobody should be backed down the way he backed us down. It shouldn't happen."

"From the end of the first half, we started having to go off and try to help [defense]. After we would fire down to help, they would kick out. The kick outs didn't really hurt us that much. He did a great job of facing the basket. He either scored or got fouled every time he faced the basket. We just gave up our defensive positioning."

Q: How concerning is it that opponents with good post players have been successful.

RB: "It's frustrating. We think our guys can do it. We love to help and score. We've got to guard other teams' post players. We're more than capable of doing it. We've to prove we can do it."

Q: What needs to change in how you defend the post?

RB: "Understanding that you're allowed to arm bar for one. If you are allowed to arm bar, nobody should be able to back you down. I really believe that. It's leverage. It's getting down low and holding your ground. If you do that, we can come and help. When a guy gets it deep in the lane, it's a long way to come down and longer way to get back out. It puts us into a really tough rotation. It becomes a three-man rotation. It's all about space – fighting for your space on the floor and getting the ball where you want it. He [Tolu Smith III] as good a job as anybody that we play."

Q: Was this game as physical as you expected it?

RB: “No doubt, we expected that. That’s fine. Again, we’ve got guys who can shoot the ball. We’ve got to do that. Tonight, defensively is what [hurt us]. We fouled a three-point shooter early in the game. We can’t do that.”

“In the second half, they outrebounded us by nine. Those plays hurt. We did a great job of getting ourselves back in it. It was a regular game in what you expect in terms of how much time and where the score was. We didn’t make enough winning plays at the end.”

Q: How hard is it to win on the road in the SEC with what you got from Josiah-Jordan James and Santiago Vescovi?

RB: “It’s really hard. We expect so much out of those guys. Defensively, they do a really good job. They’ve played in a lot of big games. We believe in them with our whole heart. It’s down to consistency. We’ve got to know what we’re going to get.”

Q: What woke up Dalton Knecht in the second half?

RB: “He got some looks. The more we play [together], the more he understands what’s going on. He’s going to get a feel for it. I thought he adjusted well. I thought Zakai [Zeigler] helped him do some things.”

“Once he [Knecht] got going, we’ve seen him do that. He got a little anxious. He took one that he didn’t get a great look ... He’s going to keep getting better every game. He is trying to make more of an effort to guard consistently for longer periods of time. He will do that. He can build on this.”

Tennessee Guard Zakai Ziegler

Q: What does the team have to do to start better on the road?

ZZ: “We can’t come out like we did in the first half. Shots didn’t drop, but we can’t let them play like that. If shots are not falling, we’ve got to pick up our defense like we did in the second half to get us back in the game. We’ve got to keep taking open shots. We can’t have another first half like we did.”

Q: What did you see from Dalton Knecht in the second half?

ZZ: “He finally clicked. I feel he was taking the same shots he did in the first half. The difference was they dropped [in the second half]. He was doing the exact same thing he was doing in the first half. Shots just started falling for him.”

Q: How frustrating was it to lose after digging yourselves out of a hole?

ZZ: “It is tough. Losses like this don’t break us, they make us. We have to learn from our mistakes.”

Q: What did you see from Tolu Smith III?

ZZ: “He just had a good day. I have my trust in Jonas [Aidoo] and Tobe [Awaka] no matter what. Tolu had a good game. Jonas and Tobe know what they’ve got to get better at. It’s not just from those two guys, but everybody on our team.”

Q: What made the full court press so effective?

ZZ: “We were being active. We weren’t playing wild. We knew what the scheme was and what we’re trying to get out of it. We’re not trying to get steals. We’re trying to play solid defense. That just helped us to come back in the second half.”