

2023-24 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Postgame Quotes Mississippi State vs. Vanderbilt – January 20, 2024

Mississippi State Head Coach Chris Jans

Q: You guys went on a 23-5 run in the first half and grabbed control. It was a little sloppy in the second half, but what are your thoughts on getting back on a winning track?

CJ: "I'm happy we won. I was looking forward to being back in the Hump and playing a home game after our last outing here [against Alabama]. We had a chance to play really well there."

"For a while, I thought we were really humming on both ends of the floor. We were sharing the basketball. We were playing a style that we've been trying to play lately, trying to play inside-out. Get a bunch of paint touches, and then try to get to the line. We were doing it. The defense was pretty locked in from the jump."

"Unfortunately, there in the second half, it started sputtering on the offensive end. Miss a free throw here, miss a finish there. It changes the vibe in the room. It gets in our heads a little bit, and they took advantage of it. They jumped on it and got back in the game. In the end, we were able to make enough plays to get the win."

Q: You held Vanderbilt to 55 points, and they are usually a pretty good three point shooting team. Talk a little about the defense and how your team was able to slow them down.

CJ: "If you follow us, you know we weren't really happy with our last two defensive outings with not just the raw number of points we were giving up but just our breakdowns. We just weren't grabbing the ball as effectively. Our rotations weren't on point. It's been a problem for us. We keep telling our guys if we lose, fine. But it can't be because our defense isn't up to snuff. It can't be because we're not rebounding at a high level. That's how this team is constructed. It's how we practice. It's how we talk about playing. We've got to have that each and every night for us to be successful."

Q: Tolu [Smith III] had 25 points and 11 rebounds. What did you see from him? How nice is it knowing you have a guy like that who's so gifted by the rim and the post?

CJ: "Yeah, he got them in a little bit of foul trouble in the first half. He was going against the backup, that was helpful for. Tolu, he had a nice game on the stat sheet. He should've had 30 [points] and 15 [rebounds]. He had opportunities at the free throw line. He had opportunities to grab more rebounds if he would quit flagging them down with one hand and grab them with two."

"The way we work together and the way we are, he knows that's what I'm going to say because I have high expectations for him. We go through him and Jimmy [Bell Jr.] both. Jimmy has had his moments as well, but it's certainly a luxury to have a guy like that where you can throw it inside. If you're playing one-on-one, you've got a pretty good shot he's going to get a good look or a foul. If they double him, we can get into rotations and get it to the people in close outs."

Q: Jimmy Bell Jr. signed up for this just doing what the team needed him to do. How valuable is it to have a piece like that where he can come in, sub in for Tolu [Smith III] and not miss a beat?

CJ: "Yeah, I'm on record multiple times saying that I'm not sure where we'd be if we didn't have Jimmy Bell [Jr.]. Certainly, you can't plan for any sort of injuries, etcetera. I just don't know where we'd been, where our team would be and what our record would be. Jimmy was a Godsend for us."

"I knew once Tolu got back that it would be no issue with him. He's all business. He's a great kid, and he gets it. He was very productive today. He had seven rebounds and four points in 10 minutes. That's some quality production. He's going to have big games. We all know it, and he knows it. So, we're really glad he's with us."

Q: Trey Fort started off the season red hot and then hits a cold spell. What was it like from your perspective seeing him go through that and then come out on the other side of it?

CJ: "It was almost a curse that he made the shots he did that first game, because it's natural for all of us as humans to expect him to do that all the time. That would be hard. That's a tough standard that he set his first game out as a Bulldog. He made five three's, and he looked good doing it."

"Then, like you said, he struggled a little bit. Then, his role changed, obviously. Certainly, it's not something that he probably thought was going to happen. But like you said, he stuck with it. He's leaned on some unbelievable teammates that have been there for him. I watch those guys encourage him in practice. Even if I'm on him about something, they're coming behind me and slapping him, telling him to stick with it and buy in. He's been doing it. His minutes will hopefully continue to go up if he continues to do the things that we need him to do."

Q: D.J. Jeffries seems like he's really settling into his role lately. He was a +23 in this game. What have you seen from him as of late?

CJ: "He's a big key for us. He's just got great flexibility defensively. He can guard 1-through-4. So, it gives us a lot of choices when it comes to that end of the floor. We're just trying to continue to get him to play north and south. He's best when he's straight-line driving people, playing across the court, being careful with the use of the dribble and being aggressive with it. Most of the time, at least in SEC play, he's been doing that. It really helps us. He's got to get on the offensive glass more consistently. He's always been a good defensive rebounder for us."

"That shot he made in the corner was a big shot. That kind of stopped their momentum and vibe. The best thing about that particular shot was that I loved that we shared the ball, got it to the open guy and he knocked it down. He's a big key for us. He plays a lot of minutes for us. He's kind of our Swiss army knife along with Cameron Matthews. If he starts making open three's, then it becomes a lot more dangerous."

Forwards Jimmy Bell Jr. and Forward Tolu Smith III

Q: What were you seeing that allowed you to have a good performance during today's game against Vanderbilt?

TS III: "I think the coaching staff and my teammates did a good job of getting me and Jimmy the ball. I knew there were mismatches down low. I feel like most nights it's going to be a miss match regardless of how big and how tall [the opponent is]. We put a lot of work in on the low block and a lot of work in on our game in general. The results showed tonight."

Q: What's it been like having Tolu back from injury?

JBj: "It's been feeling good. I started off the year without him. That was the expectation that me and him would be playing together at the beginning. Now, he's back. We rotate and beat up on the other team bigs, and it feels good."

Q: What have you seen confidence wise from Trey Fort recently?

TSIII: "If you don't know Trey, he's a flamethrower. He can get hot out there at any time. I hang out with him a lot, and I get to see firsthand at how great he can shoot the ball and just score the ball. He's an offensive threat. People have to come out and guard him. He's an asset that we need on the court every time."

Q: What do you think caused the level to drop off a little in the second half?

TS III: "Basketball is a game of runs. It's not going to be perfect every night. Mississippi State basketball is not pretty. We're some grimy players, we get down, we get nasty, but I think the main thing that Coach Jans was emphasizing was that we've been here before. We've been here many times. We've just got to fight through and fight back, and that's what we did."

Q: What's the dynamic been like for you and Tolu on and off the court?

JBj: "It's been good for me. That's what I can here to do, do my role. Starting off, I had a bigger role in the beginning of the season. Now, I'm back to where the expectation was. Now, it's time to get rolling for the rest of these games and win some games. Me and Tolu need to continue to dominate the other team's bigs."

Q: How did it feel for the team to get back on track from those Alabama and Kentucky losses?

TS III: "It feels great. It feels great to win. That's what we needed. This was a must-win for us. I think there's no pushovers in the SEC from the highest to the lowest. So, we needed this one. I'm glad we got it."

Q: Talk about the defensive effort today because Vanderbilt is a team that shoots it pretty well.

JBj: "Coach [Jans] has been on us about defense, really since we started SEC. We had a few games, in the Kentucky game, they scored 90. Alabama, they scored a lot of points. So, our goal is to just keep teams at around 50 or 60 points. I think we did a good job today. So, we just have to keep that up and sustain it."

Q: What have you seen from Trey Fort in the past couple of weeks in games and practice?

TS III: "Just buying in. Buy in with us and having him believe in us and believe in the coaching staff. I think everybody on the team knows that he can shoot the lights out. It's just him buying in for us, and he's been doing a great job of that."

Q: How big was it for you to shift your mindset in the end and knock those down in crunch time?

TS III: "So, I feel the old me would've been like 'Dang, I'm missing, I'm missing, I'm missing.' The new me is the 'Next shot up'. I had that mindset, make the next shot. I just keep thinking that the next one's going in."

Q: What did you see from Vanderbilt when you had those seven rebounds early on?

JBj: "I just try to use my size and my ability the best way I can. The ball kind of bounced my way, but I feel I was in a good position. I was able to snatch them out and grab them."

Q: What makes Vanderbilt a good matchup for you?

TS III: "I have no idea, I don't know. I just go out and play every night. I think Coach Stackhouse is a phenomenal coach. We had some words after the game, and I'm a big fan of his."

Q: What are your thoughts on what Jimmy provided for the team when you were out?

TS III: “So much, he provided so much. He got us a lot of wins. Without those wins, we wouldn’t even be looking at March. I congratulate Jimmy. I’m always with him, and we always talk about what we’re going to do when I’m back and the things that we want to achieve. We’re going to keep striving.”

Vanderbilt Head Coach Jerry Stackhouse

Q: How do you feel that your team competed especially in the second half?

JS: “I liked the fight. I thought our guys did a good job of battling. I like the way we competed. I saw some positives too. We just kept battling. We got off to a pretty good start. Tolu [Smith III] is a load down there. He’s been in this league a long time. He’s a 25-year old going against a 19-year old.”

Q: What do you contribute the struggle to behind the three-point line?

JS: “We weren’t making shots that we normally make. Jason [Rivera-Torres] wasn’t his best today, he was 1-for-7 from three. We still need some more contributions to the mix. We still need to make more shots, but I still liked how we came in and put a pretty good fight.”

Q: Talk about what your full court pressure defense was able to provide in the second half.

JS: “Yeah, I felt like we pressured them and got them had to commit some pretty good turnovers. We had some pretty good traps, and we tried to build off of that.”

Q: How did you feel that Ezra Manjon and your guards played today?

JS: “That’s something you got to find the balance for. We talked about it a little bit about being more of a facilitator trying to feed guys more in the corner. But that doesn’t mean he has to turn himself off and not be who he is. But it’s just finding that balance, and he’ll be fine. We talked about him getting and making some plays for us and staying away from what we call petty shots. But it’s just finding the balance, and I’m pretty sure we’ll find it. He’s smart enough to find out. He’s had some space and rotation, but they just didn’t fall. We’ve got to keep doing that and keep trusting. We got to believe.”