

2023-24 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Postgame Quotes
Mississippi State vs. No. 5 Tennessee
SEC Tournament Quarterfinals

Mississippi State Head Coach Chris Jans

Q: Your team has had a ton of very impressive wins this year. To beat the No. 1 seed in the SEC the way that you did, was this the most impressive win of the year for your guys?

CJ: "I'm not in the mood or portion of the season where we're reminiscing that much. Certainly, it was a big win for us considering the platform, considering it's the end of the year and considering what we're trying to play for."

"We've got so much respect for Coach Barnes, his staff and their players. I mean, to win the SEC regular season title, is big-time. To go through the gauntlet of this type of league and to be able to come out on top says so much about their program. They do it the right way."

"Really felt our only chance was to hit them in the mouth. We had to come out and attack them – just get our toughness in the game and see if we could rattle them a little bit. Our plan was super aggressive in everything we were doing defensively and even offensively for that matter. You've been doing this long enough that sometimes when you got a game on that court you've got a run, you've got a win and you feel really good. They haven't played in a while. Sometimes, you get a little rust on your game that way as well. I thought that had something to do with the way the game unfolded, at least from the start."

Q: I think your team is the only team in the league that hasn't lost to Tennessee this season. Was there something about that matchup you felt good about going into this, or is that your guys having two good days?

CJ: "It doesn't happen very often, but we actually felt going into the first game. And even this afternoon with a similar mindset, that we wanted to really attack inside-out and try to go at [James] Aidoo and their other bigs as much as we could. He's an unbelievable player, especially on the offensive end. He's a good shot-blocker, as well. We felt like we had a little bit at times a weight advantage. Try to get our back-down game, get Jimmy [Bell Jr.] and Tolu [Smith III] doing, get to the free-throw line while you're trying to pound the ball inside."

"On the perimeter, obviously, it starts with [Dalton] Knecht and [Zakai] Zeigler out there. With Knecht, you do the best you can – try to make him a volume scorer and make it hard. With Zeigler, you got to do your best. They're obviously both really good players. We felt good about the matchup, and that's helped us. We beat them [in the regular season], and we got confidence going into this game. Our kids felt good about the matchup all day long."

Q: Cam [Cameron Matthews] mentioned having a chip on his shoulder, feeling the fire. Why do you feel you've embraced that underdog mindset, use it to win many of these top 10 games?

CJ: "I don't know, a lot of different reasons probably. These kids are tough-minded guys. We feel like we work pretty hard on a daily basis. They bought into that. They bring it every day, lunch pail mentality. For the most part, some of them weren't recruited at the highest levels, not a bunch the stars by their names. We've got a couple of them that did, but a majority of our guys didn't grow up in basketball that way."

"We mixed this group together. Fortunately, they got to know each other and like each other. You can tell by the way they play for each other. At times, we talk about that chip and try to use it to our advantage in certain situations."

Q: Cam's mom, Tolu's family back there, Josh's family. What is the dynamic like with the families behind the bench? What are your thoughts on their involvement?

CJ: "It's been really fun to be here for the last two years and getting to know these guys. When you walk in, you're talking about a bunch of guys that have been with us for two years, certainly some additions. They didn't know me, and I didn't know them. There was some blind faith on their part to stay with us. They had choices not to. Even after the first year, they had choices not to. Getting to know their families and how supportive they are, that's what impressed me the most after our first year. During our first year, it was the quality of young people that I inherited."

"Certainly, what we added to the group, it makes it more fun every day knowing you're going to work and to practice, and they're going to have a good mindset for the most part individually and collectively. In terms of the dynamic during those games, it's different. I don't have rabbit ears fortunately. My wife [Sheri] will ask me a lot throughout our career of, 'Did you hear what they said?' I'm like, 'No'. She goes, 'I don't know how you don't.' I go, 'I don't know either, but I'm glad that I don't.' So, I'm sure there was stuff said that I didn't hear. But don't get me wrong, I can't lie to you that I don't hear them once in a while. As long as we keep winning, them being behind there is no issue."

Q: Another night where Cam [Cameron Matthews] and D.J. [Jeffries] have the really impressive plus-minus numbers. For them, when you have games like this, yesterday against LSU, how key are the two of them?

CJ: "I mean, great basketball bodies. I've talked about this with the local folks, obviously, they know how to play. That's the one thing that in my opinion is the hardest thing to teach, is just instincts. They either have it, or they don't. You can get a little bit better at it, just an understanding of what's going on out there all the time."

"Those two are at the top of the list for our team. We got a bunch of other guys, too. They just get it. That's nice as a coach to have guys on the floor that do get it. It makes a big difference. They're about winning more than anything else. In this day and age in college basketball, unfortunately, that isn't always what's going on. Our guys in that locker room, especially these two, have put aside some interest of their own to sacrifice to be part of something bigger than themselves. It's fun to be a part of it."

Q: On a couple occasions in the second half, then with five minutes left, Tennessee made a run. You were able to stem the tide. What were the keys to doing that?

CJ: "Well, I'm not surprised obviously with the quality of program and the players that they weren't going to go away. We talked about it at halftime. Certainly, talked about it in some of our huddles of trying to get out of this huddle and have the mentality that we were down 10. [We wanted to] Play with that urgency. They're not going anywhere, and they're going to punch back. They did that. [There] definitely had some similarities to the first matchup where they slapped the press on us, and we struggled a little bit. We played well enough in the first half that the deficit was a little bit bigger than it was in Starkville. That certainly brought our comfort level to us when they were trying to make their comebacks."

Q: I want to ask you about trusting your guys. You got some senior leadership, guys who have been with you for two years. Talk about your trust in those guys down the stretch.

CJ: "Yeah, it's been fun to coach a team the last couple years that have voices. Some of them have grown recently, and some have been there from the jump."

"To empower those guys to take ownership of the program, like I said earlier, we have a lot of high-IQ guys that get it. You don't have to worry about them saying the wrong thing that could get you off the path a little bit. It's a big plus."

"We obviously went through a stretch there where we weren't playing our best and weren't having the outcomes. Like I kept telling them, we're a good basketball team that is playing another good basketball team. It's hard to win, especially on the road ... They continued to scratch, fight and claw. Now, we're being rewarded for it."

Forwards D.J. Jeffries and Cameron Matthews

Q: D.J., obviously you guys had a tough task defensively today, but came out and had a good showing in the first half. How well do you feel you executed for 40 minutes?

DJJ: "I felt like we did a great job for 40 minutes. We stayed together from the start. We just dictated. We didn't allow them to get into their stuff. They were just fighting from behind the whole time. We did a good job for 40 minutes."

Q: Cameron, you guys talked on Wednesday about not just wanting to win the game against LSU, but to secure a tournament spot, playing beyond that. What was the message last night going into today about wanting to beat Tennessee and keep this run going?

CM: "Just going out playing like that could be our last game. Having a good lay out of the bracket. Most of the teams on our side, we already played good or already beat. Just knowing we've got the confidence to go out there and compete with all the teams."

Q: Cameron, what do you think for someone who is more of a casual college basketball fan, what do you think you and your guys showed everyone with Mississippi State basketball today?

CM: "That we get after it. Please, please, keep counting us out. Please keep giving us a chip on our shoulder. Gives fuel to the fire, just keep doing that."

Q: Cam and D.J., talk about what it meant to you to hear the Mississippi State fans at the end hooting and hollering and silencing "Rocky Top" in Nashville.

CM: "Yeah, it just means a lot having a good crowd like that because I don't know if the people that couldn't see, it was mostly orange out there. It just felt good silencing all that noise and having our fans root for us."

DJJ: "Just piggyback what he said. It felt good because it was mostly orange, like this is their home. It felt like it was a home game for them. Just go out there get a win, see our home fans be happy. We're doing it for them, trying to go get a championship."

Q: D.J., for the veterans on this team, you got bounced in the next round after beating Florida. What does it mean to get to play another day? What was the mood in the locker room?

DJJ: "It's a big relief. For two years since I've been here, we always get put out in this round. Just relief to get to the [SEC] Final Four. Never been in the SEC final four. It's a big relief. This is my last go-around. I'm going to go out there and give it my all, whatever it takes."

Q: D.J., you've been teammates with Cam [Cameron Matthews] for a long time. How often have you thought about this could be the end?

DJJ: "I mean, I try not to think about it too much. But, some days, I think about it. I've been with him for a long time. This is my guy. He's like my best friend. I don't know what he going to do without me next year (smiling). I'll have to call and check up on him."

Q: Cameron, that dunk you had in the first half went viral quickly. The camera panned to your mom. She was celebrating. What has it been like having her sit right behind the bench?

CM: "Same old, same old. She's very supportive even since I was a baby playing football, tee-ball. She's been the same person my whole life. Feel like it would be kind of weird if she weren't right there yelling and screaming. Really appreciate it, love her. But don't show her this stuff, so (smiling).

Q. Talk about the performance out there for both of you guys. You unlocked the beast out there.

DJJ: "You said talk about the performance?"

Q: Yes. Personal performance.

DJJ: "I just did my job. I just went out there and played defense. Played hard, do what I need to do. Whatever they need me to do, I'm going to do it. I'm going to give my all each and every night."

CM: "Just trying to piggyback. Played better than I played yesterday. I kind of beat myself up yesterday. I didn't have my best performance. My teammates and my coaches just told me to stay with it: We trust you, and we got belief in you that you're a good player. Just go out there and do what you do."

Tennessee Head Coach Rick Barnes

Opening Statement

RB: "Congratulations to Mississippi State. I thought from the get-go they came out, and their plan was really to be aggressive, drive the ball and obviously play inside. We got away from really our defense being in gaps, trying to shrink the court. That's how we play, but we got away from that. I thought, again, give them credit, offensively that we started missing shots. We let that carry over to the defensive end. We got down. It snowballed on us. We didn't do a very good job of staying to our game plan. I think Coach [Chris] Jans did a great job of executing their game plan. Again, congratulations to them. They dominated the game in any way they wanted to."

Q: Just what were they able to do defensively to make it so tough on you guys?

RB: "Well, they were switching. They're a very good defensive team. We've seen nothing they did today that we haven't seen. We really haven't. Again, this time of year as you get late into the season, we all know each other well. But you have to work extremely hard offensively to get open and get your guys passing the ball. It's important."

"We had a couple possessions where we ran what we wanted, but the pass wasn't delivered where it needed to be. It allowed the defense to catch up. We didn't screen on a couple sets we ran, where they really came through the route, we were trying to run untouched. You've got to take care of the details offensively. We didn't do a very good job of doing that."

"They're a good defensive team. Chris [Jans] does a great job with his team. But, I thought Jahmai [Mashack] hit it. It's pretty much what I said at halftime, we allowed our lack of defensive alertness, intensity, sticking to the game plan to roll over into what I thought went on the offensive end."

Q: One of the players mentioned Mississippi State was just the more desperate team today. What is a trait you're looking for in your team's response, desperation or otherwise?

RB: "Well, I told them, I said, 'Let's just sit here and think about how we feel right now. Let's just talk about it, sit here and marinate in how you feel right now. If you feel like this again, it's over. I want you to not forget right now what you did. This time of year you want to give it your best.'"

"Shack [Jahmai Mashack] used the term 'underdog'. I don't know if 'underdog' is the right term. You've got to understand how hard it is to win this time of year. If you want to be a team that can play through three days and win a conference tournament and through six days and win a national championship, there's got to be somewhat of a desperate mindset that every possession matters."

"But, we didn't play with that type of mentality today. Really the first 20 minutes, I haven't seen that team all year, even including practice. I'm sitting there watching it like, man, maybe it might be good to get this out of our system. We haven't had one like this where we didn't respond better. I thought we got impatient, lost our poise, fouling with six seconds on the shot clock and trying to steal the ball when giving up position."

"Like Shack [Mashack] said, offensively, we've won games where we haven't been good on offense, but our defense has kept us in it. Our defense didn't help us today."

Q: Do you feel like there's any commonality in what Mississippi State exposed in both games this year?

RB: "Well, the one thing that they did was the physicality inside. I think one thing good today was J.P. [Estrella]. I told the coaches we probably should have put him out there sooner because he's the one guy that can guard post guys. [Cameron] Matthews had a great day today. He drove us and went by us. So, much of that was not taking care of the details of the scouting report. Again, as you know, our coaches do a great job with the scout. To continue to let him get to his right hand and where he wanted to go. Even at the end of the game when we had really a pretty good possession, trying to double-team to get him to play quicker, and getting driven by in the last four or five seconds, you can't give up those straight-line drives."

"We didn't do a good job on one-on-one defense. But there's other teams that have played us the way they played us. They made up their mind they're going to drive the ball at us. We've seen that all year with teams doing that. Again, we just got really spaced out. Why? I can't tell you. We harped on it so much. Every loss we've had this year, that's been the case, where we have gotten away from our defensive principles and allowed teams to do what they wanted to do. We didn't have an answer for it."

Q: So much gets made about this time of year, having success this time of year. Do you worry a performance like this at this moment for these guys and this team could get in their head a little bit, put too much pressure on themselves?

RB: "I talked about that, too. I've said I've had teams many years that I've been blessed to do this, playing well at the end of the year and didn't do well in the NCAA tournament. I've had a couple teams that were limping a little bit and ended up having great runs."

"We are who we are right now. Like Jahmai said, like we talked back there, we've got a week or so to fix it and go back. Like he said, we do what we always do. We have a system that we believe in. We have to scrub it out, look at it. It will go back to a mindset. That's what I spent a lot of time talking to our team about, our mindset. Where is it? Where was it? Why was it like this today? Was it preparation different? It was. We're an experienced team."

"We didn't know who we were going to play until, what, 3:00 yesterday. We had already practiced. Everything we did, we walked through. That's not an excuse because you would have done that today. We wouldn't be going in the gym to do what we normally do leading up to it. With that said, our older guys who we count on to get us going, they struggled in a big way today. We just got to get back to being who I know we are and who I think they know we can be."

Q: Do you worry about going from an uncharacteristic performance back to whatever the character of this team is in a week's time?

RB: "Yeah, I wouldn't be truthful, I'm concerned. I don't know if I'd say 'worried', but I'm always concerned about where we are, our mindset and what we're thinking. Like I said, I've been doing it long enough to know I wish I had a crystal ball to look into it and know exactly. All we can do, like I said, we have a program. We have a system we believe in. Win or lose, we got to do what we do and get prepared to play someone next week, whoever that might be, go from there."

Q: Are you concerned about some guys passing up open looks right now?

RB: "Yes, absolutely. That's what we've talked about. Again, whether people think they're putting it all on Dalton [Knecht], but he's got to do a better job with his shot selection. I think more of it has been put on Z [Zakai Zeigler] to be honest with you. Everything ends up being like an avalanche hitting him because he's so competitive."

"Obviously, they're going to game plan for Dalton. Because of that, some other guys are going to get opportunities and they have to shoot the ball. Early in the year, when we were turning the ball over, it's because we were turning down shots and trying to do other things. Normally, we get a high volume of quality shots. You've got to take the shots. You've got to take them. If we do that, most of the time we have the floor spaced the correct way where we can rebound the ball and get some offensive stick-backs. When shots get turned down, guys start driving. What's next, it leaves the floor unbalanced, and we don't get what we need to off the offensive glass."

Q: You said you weren't sure about the mindset to start. Several guys in the locker room said that. Could you feel that coming into the game? Was it a surprise?

RB: "I thought what we did leading into this was good. Our rhythm gets broken a little bit. The season is over with. Then, you have a longer week. This is the longest time we had off since our open week. I will say this. We did not respond well after our open date. I don't think we played well. I told the team that, leading into that game. I trust these guys. I've been with them. I know how hard they work. I know how much it means to them to be a good team. I know they believe in each other. I think they'll hold each other accountable."

"Like Shack [Mashack] said, 'I go into every game thinking we're going to win if we do what we're capable of doing.' We didn't. I don't want to sound like I'm taking away from Chris [Jans] and his team. I thought they did a great job, and they deserved to win the game. They outplayed us the entire time. He's a terrific coach. From our standpoint, we're not happy with a lot of things that happened today. Things that shouldn't have happened, there's nothing that did happen that we can't fix."

Q: With some of those older guys, is there anything you can say to them that hasn't been said yet about trying to figure out what's going on there offensively?

RB: "Well, we do a lot of different things. We go back, put together a video of them playing well and making shots. We're going to do it all. I think the biggest thing, is again, what we've always done. We'll watch the tape. Again, the tape is going to point out everything that we've talked about. Like I said, there's nothing that they did that we can't fix, that we haven't had to fix before. Understand that there's no more fixing. It's done. You got to get it done right now. You can't look back and think, again, the question about a mindset. I thought we'd be ready to play based on how we prepared coming in here."

"I know how bad Z [Zeigler] wanted to play well because he wasn't a part of this tournament last year. Still, this is all new to Dalton [Knecht]. Today, I thought he played like it. He's got to understand how he's going to figure out ways to impact the game when he's not making shots, other people are playing him. One of them is simply running the court hard, pulling people with him."

"The key is that we've all got to be honest, myself [included], look at it and see what I didn't think we did or I did well. What our staff didn't do to get ready because we have to avoid it somehow, somehow. I've got all the confidence that these guys will figure it out, because they have all year. We'll go back and learn from it and get ready for next week."

Tennessee Guard Zakai Zeigler and Forward Jahmai Mashack

Q: Jahmai, what do you feel went wrong for you to start the game?

JM: "Defense, I feel like defense. That's how you're going to lose games ... You can control defense, you can always control defense. Like they always done, whether they lose or win, they're going to stick with what they do. They didn't change whether it was the first time we played them or now. They did what they always do. They weren't trying to do anything. They weren't trying to do anything they don't always do."

"With us, we just got to settle down and play good defense. I think that will get us in transition, get us some easy looks. We're a good team when we're out and running. If we're not getting our defense there, our offense is just going to go downhill from there. I think that's exactly what happened. That's all you can say is defensively we weren't locked in, especially in the first half."

Q: Zakai, how do you keep this from becoming something worse? How do you turn this into something that can help you down the road?

ZZ: "When we go watch the film, we can't take anything personal. Everything that we see on that film, film don't lie. We just got to take it to heart and know if we go out there and do that again, it's going to be the end of the season. So, we've got to know what's the cost."

Q: Jahmai, any level of concern going into March Madness with a losing streak?

JM: "Absolutely not. Whatever it is we were doing, we're going to get that fixed for sure. I think we've shown it this whole seen, that we're a team with resilience. I think games like this just build toughness for us. But guarantee, that we're going to go back. We're going to look at whatever we need to look at. We're going to look at what we have to do ourselves and as a team, and we're not going to go through what we went through today."

"It starts with the seniors, with me and Zakai, the guys that have been in that tournament. There's no second chances from there. Whatever we need to fix, we're going to get it fixed. We're going to go from there and have ourselves a great March Madness."

Q: Zakai, the team has had games this season where things don't go right, you get in a deep hole. Until today your team usually came back and made those games interesting or won them. Why didn't that happen today?

ZZ: "Just wasn't ourself. We can't let that happen again, simple as that."

Q: Jahmai, you pride yourself on the toughness and physicality when it's not going well. Do you feel you had the proper response? How do you make sure you do next week?

JM: "I think me, personally, it's really hard to be that team that goes down and is always known for we're going to get back up. I think we've got to lose that and start with the team that starts off like that. That can't be us. We can't be that team that is like, 'We're going to give them the first half, the second half ... No, that can't happen.'"

"To be the team we want to be, that starts in the first half. If you're applying or not, you've got to have energy, come in like we're the underdog. That's the mindset, that's going at that point. The rest of the season, we're the underdogs. No matter what. I don't care what seed we're playing, we're going to be the underdogs and play like the underdogs. We're going to come back from the jump playing defense and rebounding."