

2023-24 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Quotes
Mississippi State vs. Michigan State – March 21, 2024
NCAA Tournament Round of 64

Mississippi State Head Coach Chris Jans

Q: It just seemed like what they were doing defensively seemed to knock your team off axis a little bit. What did you see from them, especially in the first half, to kind of get them going defensively and limit you all offensively?

CJ: “That was the story of the start of the game was us turning the ball over way too much. You can talk until you're blue in the face about that. But at the end of the day, you've got to give credit to Michigan State.”

“They didn't do anything different than we anticipated or that we prepared for. They just did what they do at a high level. They got in those gaps, and they've got guards that have really strong hands. They're very ball-hawkish when you try to drive it in there. I thought that really hurt us early.”

“Our half-court defense, our get back, getting from O [offense] to D [defense], was good. We worked on it a ton out of respect for how fast they play, but we put ourselves in some tough spots with our turnovers. We give them credit, but at the same time. We just didn't move the ball as well as we wanted to going into the game, and we got off to a really, really poor start.”

Q: Both teams turned it over quite a bit, 16 and 15 respectively, but three-point shooting, Spartans 10-of-23, you guys 6-of-27. That appears to be the difference, would you agree?

CJ: I mean, it didn't help. We've won plenty of games where we didn't shoot it very well. They played really well. I thought Michigan State played really well. They were very well prepared. We had a hard time keeping their guards in front of us. They were getting downhill on us for themselves and creating for others. We actually ended up playing quite a bit variations of different zones, especially in the second half, but it didn't slow them down that much. Then, we shot way more three's obviously in the second half trying to mount a comeback, more than anything.”

Q: Tom Izzo has had a lot of success in this tournament, particularly in the first round, 20-5. I just wondered, when you're going up against a team like that, what's it like going against him?

CJ: “For me personally, I talked about it prior to the game of the respect level that I had for him as a coach, and how he's run his program from afar. I don't know him like that personally. I've never been to his practices or games.”

“When you're in this mode of preparing, it doesn't really matter who the coach is. And I mean that with all due respect, we're just trying to put our players in a position to be successful. We didn't talk about any of his records in terms of first round or tournament success. I think our players have the same type of respect for his program. But, at the same time, it wasn't like we were trying to go in the game and thinking about things of that nature.”

Q: Chris, I guess for you guys, last game with D.J. Jeffries and Tolu Smith III, some of those veterans. What do they kind of mean to you, and what's it like to walk away on this note?

CJ: “These endings are tough. You don't prepare for walking in those locker rooms, and how you're going to handle it because you think you're going to win the game. Certainly, you're prepared for what you're going to say before the game. You try to have the message right leading up to these opportunities.”

"But we talked in the locker room about it. I thanked them for the guys that had been here since we arrived as a staff, just thanked them for believing in us and having blind faith in us when they didn't have to. There were people pulling them in all sorts of directions."

"I'm sure part of it was they love the university, and they were there for a number of different reasons. We tried to sell them a vision on what we thought we could do as a staff at Mississippi State, and I just really talked about that with them as a group. I'm going to appreciate them forever for sticking with us."

"I also told them that they might not feel it right now, but I promise you they've had a lot of growth on the floor and probably more off the floor, that we feel good about equipping these guys when they're through with their eligibility and preparing for the next part of their career and the next part of their life for that matter."

Q: Just to follow up on that, as you guys continue to build this thing, how much do you feel like this group now leaving, you're going to be able to look back and say how much, I guess, they helped establish your culture and helped move things forward for this next group of guys?

CJ: "You can't go backwards, obviously, and play the what-if game. But that's kind of what I told them. I'm not sure – I didn't say this to them, but I'm not sure where we'd be. We would have signed a lot more players than we did. We wouldn't have the same type of dudes in the locker room, maybe."

"But, we'll see. Who knows what the future holds? Obviously, we went from an 11 seed to an 8 seed. We talked about that in that locker room as well. This group of men that have been here, they're going to be remembered. They've done a lot of things in the last two years that this program hasn't for quite some time with the quality of wins and the tournament appearances, and certainly we're crossed yet we're not advancing."

"That was the plan. We thought we could win multiple games with the group we had. That was our goal all year long when we got together in June and refocused in the fall. That was our ultimate goal. It doesn't feel great not to achieve it, but these kids will be remembered for sure."

Q: Speaking on those guys, you're losing some key pieces to this team. Still got some decisions to make on some guys too, bringing back Josh. What's kind of the biggest point of emphasis, you think, moving into next year to get back to this point?

CJ: "Man, I really haven't gone there yet. I've been super focused on this team. Certainly, recruiting never ends. I've been super focused on trying to get our team into the best position possible to win these meaningful games. I'm sure as we get through with our obligations and get back to the hotel. The staff will be raring to go with getting me more on the phone than we have and trying to figure out where we go from here. We're going to want quality people. We're going to want obviously good players. Like you said, we're going to try to be better, in a better position next year than we are right now."

Q: Speaking on those veterans, with D.J. specifically, we saw that Alabama game he tried to play through an injury. Obviously, he wasn't 100 percent today and leading up to this game. What kind of impression does that give you of him, the way he tried to play through some of the difficulties this past month or so?

CJ: "Yeah, he got hurt in the Auburn game. None of us knew it, he kept playing. He hasn't practiced fully since the SEC Tournament. He's been hobbled and just really rehabbing as much as he can."

"He said he was available. The trainer [Andrew Kegley] said he was available. Anyone that watches us throughout the season knew that he wasn't himself. That was tough that way."

"But it says a lot about him. He's grown so much. I love where he's at mentally. He's got a bright future. For him to do that on more than one occasion speaks volumes to who he is as a person and who he – what kind of teammate he is and what he believes in."

Mississippi State Guard Josh Hubbard and Forward Cameron Matthews

Q: Josh, what did you see from them defensively that you felt like was so effective and kind of limiting you all offensively?

JH: "Just following what Coach Jans said, they were heavy in the gaps, strong hands, scraping at the ball. We didn't really do that good of a job ourselves of moving the ball and moving off the ball as well. We could have done better. Yeah, great credit to them for how they played defense."

Q: Back to Josh, you made such an impact as a true freshman in a very difficult league. How do you kind of assess how you were able to adjust to this level in year one and have the kind of season you did?

JH: "It all started in the summer. We're battling at each other in the summer, going at it each and every day, practicing hard. There were frustrating times for not just myself. But all of us, having high expectations and wanting to play. So, Coach [Jans] instilled it in us, getting on us every day and holding us accountable. Once you go into that type of environment every day, it's kind of hard to not be successful for your teammates."

Q: Cameron, expectations, it seems like, have changed over the last few years. You guys are disappointed finishing in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. What's your thoughts on how far this program has come and the direction of things now moving forward?

CM: "Just the direction that it's going in, very proud for our state and our coach, Coach Jans, and I just see the program in the future just continuing to excel even after all of us are gone. I just feel like it's going to go to another level."

Michigan State Head Coach Tom Izzo Opening Statement

TI: "I'm very proud of my team. My team, my staff, I thought we put a pretty good scouting report together. Chris [Jans] is an excellent coach. He's done a helluva job there in a short period of time. They had one of those days where they didn't make some shots, and we've been there before. Thank God these two guys made a bunch of shots."

"But the game was won with the rebounding. Both of them had some great offensive rebounds, and I really believe that's where the game was won, along with some of the shots they made. So, it was an old-school win for us. The Cleaves and Smiths and Petersons and Draymonds and all the guys from the past would have been proud because it was a tough, rugged game. We haven't been bringing that all the time this year, and I thought we did a helluva job."

Q: Coach, you've seen this movie before, low seed, entering the tournament. Make a little noise, things turn around quickly. This performance by your team, what does it mean to you in terms of that?

TI: "I thought this was one of the better first game performances of a team that, you know, deservedly so, was seeded a little lower. I thought we brought everything from the get-go. We moved the ball well. We shot the ball well. We rebounded the ball. We were up 16-10 at halftime."

"The only thing I was disappointed in, it was sloppy. I give them a lot of credit, but Malik and A.J. made some sloppy turnovers, spin dribble in the lane and things like that. They got some buckets off of that."

"That first half, we were up 13 or 12, and Tre struggled a little bit. He threw some great lobs, but he threw them a little too high. Both of them might have been dunks, but that's where [Josh] Hubbard got fast break open three, fast break layup. All of a sudden, he gets going. When he gets going, it's scary because I've seen him light up some teams that I have a lot of respect for."

Q: Tom, you've talked a few times about Jaden Akins, sometimes if he misses a couple of shots, does it affect him on the other end. That was as locked in as he's been on both ends in a bit. Did you feel that coming?

TI: "I sent him a text really, really, really early this morning. The kid's been under a lot, but he just keeps working. He's in there every day. I said, 'As good a kid as you are, as good a student as you are, you should go into this game, you deserve to be good. You deserve it. You've done what we do as coaches.' We lose a game, we go back and work harder, and that's what he's done."

"I think it was his best game three-dimensionally. He defended it. He rebounded it, he shot it, and he even passed it some. Some maybe four dimensionally. It was no question Jaden Akins' best game here at Michigan State. It couldn't have come at a better time with a couple of big-time rebounds. I'm really happy for him. He deserves what he got."

Q: You called yesterday, making your 26th straight tournament, quote, neat. How would you describe your 56th tournament win?

TI: "Phenomenal, exciting. You know, I don't know. I think those are some of the things you do when you retire. That's what Jay Wright told me a couple of weeks ago. You worry about those things after you're done."

"For me, I'm ecstatic, you know, I kept saying all year this team was good enough, and I was proving me wrong just because of the mistakes we made. Ironically, we had the most turnovers we've had all year, 16. We've done a great job. We've been under 10. I think we're averaging 8. And I think they deserve some credit."

"This guy Chris [Jans] is a helluva coach. If you watch their film and watch some of the teams they dismantled, he's a helluva coach. Today wasn't their day. I don't know if [D.J.] Jeffries was hurt. Somebody said he was limping a little bit. He's a helluva player, and the best rebounding team I've seen since ourselves way back in the day."

"I'm happy that my staff put together a helluva deal and players followed it. Why we don't lock in all the time, again, that falls on me, but today we did from start to finish, even with mistakes we made."

Q: You started off strong. They were able to weather the storm. You weathered the storm a little bit. Can you just talk about what you're saying in those huddles or whatever to kind of keep that team resiliency.

TI: "I was pretty good for me in the huddles. I thought we had that stretch with Tre, and Tre's been playing great. He's been my most important, and he hits a big three. But those two lobs and then a turnover, and they picked up seven points so quick it would make your head spin. That's because Hubbard is such a good player."

"So, we weathered that storm and then cut it to, I think, five. I don't know what they got it down to. They get it to four or five or whatever, six, whatever it was. Then we made some good plays too. In the huddles, guys were focused. You can tell when guys are focused. I think I've got some seniors that don't want to go home yet, and they played like it."

Q: Mady Sissoko had nine rebounds, I think, according to the box score. His ability to give you some of that rebounding strength that was required to win this game?

TI: "It's been hard when you think of Jaden and you think of Mady, and I know people like to pick apart things you do, and that kid's been through a lot in his life and this year with some deaths in his family."

"I thought the best he played was against Purdue when he just looked like a monster rebounder that I had recruited. He hadn't been that way all year. That's one of the things we talked about him. We did not think we could win this game without him doing what he did."

"Sure enough, I didn't realize he had nine rebounds, so that's even more impressive. Everybody's got a job to do, as Bill Belichick says. His job is to rebound and defend, and he did that at a very, very high level."

Michigan State Guard Tyson Walker and Guard Jaden Akins

Q: Tyson, the rebounding effort that Izzo was talking about, can you talk about how the players had talked about collectively, I assume collectively, making that happen against a very good rebounding team?

TW: "The guards had to come back and help. That was the big part. The bigs, we knew they'd be battling, boxing out, trying to keep them off the glass. We had to come and clean it up. Just staying focused. Not losing your man as the shot goes up. Make sure you hit somebody."

Q: Jaden, your shot was falling early, allowed you to kind of drive a little more, open up to the basket. Then you get a big dunk there. Can you talk about that play but also getting your offense into the flow of the game as well.

JA: "I felt like early I just took good shots. My first shot was an open three, and I hit it. That kind of got me going. From there, the play you're talking about, he kind of closed out hard, and I hit him with a pump fake, went baseline and just tried to finish. My team, I credit my team a lot because they just tell me to keep shooting it. No matter if I make or miss, just keep shooting it and stay confident, and so I did."

Q: Just want to ask both players what you thought of the environment today, obviously the first game of the tournament.

JA: "The atmosphere was really good. Our fans showed out, as they always do. I heard a lot of "Go green! Go white!" chants throughout the arena. It's March, so it's always going to be a great atmosphere."

Q: I just wondered having the Coach sitting next to you, who's had so much success in the first round, 20-5, how much influence is that when you guys take the court for a game like this, knowing you're going to be well prepared?

TW: "I think he does a good job with the preseason, purposely making us play games on one-day prep, quick turnarounds for games. That's why we come in and know how to lock in mentally and just follow the scouting report."

JA: "Like Tyson said, Coach has been in this situation. He always talks about experience is the best thing to have, and he has a lot of that in this tournament. So, we've got all the faith in him to put us in a position, and we just got to go out and do what we do."

Q: *When Coach talks about this being an old-school game and then the legends that have played here and how they'd be proud of a performance like that, Michigan State has had so many legendary performances in this tournament, that can be pressure, I assume, or that can be sort of inspiration that allows that to happen year in and year out. How do you guys internalize that ahead of games like this?*

TW: "That's kind of our motto, being physical, doing the dirty work. It's not like we're reinventing anything new. We've just got to do it."

TI: "Do it better than we've been doing it."

Q: *On exploiting Josh Hubbard, explosive scorer. How you feel you did as a team defensively as the game wore on?*

TW: "I think just trying to make every catch, be there on every catch, every shot contested. First half he got it going. Then we kind of second half just locked in more and contested every shot he took, made sure they were further out, not let him get any easy ones. I think he only scored one more basket second half. Just everyone helping each other, making sure we stop him."

JA: "We knew the type of scorer he was. We just really had to make it tough on him. A scorer is going to score the ball. They're going to find a way to get some points. If you hold them below their average or hold them below their field goal percentages, I feel like that's a win for our team. I feel like we made it tough for him."

Q: *Jaden and Tyson, they slapped that press on you early and got a couple of turnovers. Then after that, you guys seemed to handle it and always found the third guy open. Was that similar to an earlier press this year or just preparation before the tournament?*

TW: "We always go over our press breakers. We call it special teams. Just being prepared. Just knowing where you're supposed to be. The turnovers, we kind of just got relaxed a little too much. We just had to make sure we stayed focused and made the right reads."

JA: "Like Tyson said, we go over press breakers basically before every game if a team pressed. It doesn't have to be like they pressed all game, just at all. I feel like we've been well prepared for that. It took us a little bit to get settled in, then we started breaking it."