

2023-24 Mississippi State Men's Basketball Quotes SEC Basketball Tipoff – October 18, 2023

Head Coach Chris Jans

Q: *I know you lost Tolu Smith for a while. Is there a timeline on that? How tough is that?*

CJ: “Yeah, I could’ve thought of some better things to happen to us a few weeks ago. It’s a part of basketball. We’re trying to deal with it as best we can. Certainly, he’s the heart and soul of our team. We’re excited that he made the decision to come back and finish his career as a Bulldog. It meant the world to our staff and our fan base. Certainly, his teammates as well.”

“Now first and foremost, we’re just trying to be there for him. It’s a lot to handle with the kind of expectations that were placed upon him, the type of season that he wanted to have. At this point, we’re just being there for him and making sure he gets through it mentally and physically. He’s had a great attitude. He’s ready to attack his rehab. He’s going to get back as soon as he can.”

“In terms of a timeline and what they’ve told me originally, it hasn’t changed ... Obviously, as they give you updates and do scans, they can tell how it’s healing, et cetera. Hopefully, keeping our fingers crossed, that would change going forward, but that’s all I know for now.”

Q: *You mentioned how much the Portugal trip did for you guys. Building off that over the last month, how have you seen the guys get closer and show that on the court?*

CJ: “Yeah, obviously lots of coaches have been a part of the foreign tour, the experience that allows your program. There are so many benefits from it, but certainly one of them is the expectation that that particular team will become a closer-knit team.”

“We have a lot of experienced guys coming back. We signed seven new players. The feedback that I got, which was heartwarming for our new guys, is how welcoming the older vets were. They brought them in, welcomed them with open arms. Just hearing little bits and pieces about the interaction they had while they were over there – I thought gave us a chance going forward to just be a tighter team and have different, deeper relationships than maybe you would have in a normal season.”

“If there’s going to be some silver lining, the injuries that have happened to us – hopefully that will be one of them, is that they’ll bond together and understand that everyone’s got to pick it up a little bit here and there in order to keep the train moving.”

Q: *Last season defense was at the core of your identity. Again, this year with just about everybody returning. What’s it going to take to maintain that intensity on that half of the floor with Tolu out?*

CJ: “In addition to Tolu, KeShawn Murphy is injured as well. Another junior college transfer, Jaquon Scott, that’s 6-8, we’re not as big and physical and athletic as we were hoping to be if we were full strength. That’s certainly going to hurt us in all areas. The obvious is not having as much size on the floor which shrinks the court and erases some mistakes you may have on a particular possession out front.”

“Our staff and I are trying to tweak how we play on both ends of the floor, in addition to the defensive side of the ball. But I think in the end we’ll still have that as part of our identity. We’re hopeful that the guys that we’ve brought in, the new players that have joined us, will provide some shooting and some scoring that we were lacking last year. At the same time, buying into what gets them on the floor and what keeps them on the floor.”

Q: SEC has five teams ranked in the pre-season polls, most of any conference. What do you think of the league going into your second year? What did you learn the first year?

CJ: "Yeah, it's awesome. I didn't know what to expect. I'd never been in a Power Five in 31 years of coaching college basketball. I didn't know. I didn't know what it was going to feel like. I had an idea, but until you go through something and gain that experience, you just don't know. It just means so much to so many. Every given night you're playing against quality players. The staff that you're trying to compete against is of the highest quality that there is in college basketball. And the fan bases, it means a lot to the fan bases in this league."

"It's just awesome to be a part of it knowing that every single night you go out, you're going to be playing against a really good program. There's going to be a lot riding on it. We're obviously happy we were able to make the NCAA tournament in our inaugural season, when most people obviously wouldn't have predicted us to do that. That was a big step in establishing ourselves. We're disappointed at not staying longer. We're certainly not where we want to be. But with the recent additions, if we can hold this thing together until we get back healthy and win enough games until that point, I think I'm going to like our basketball team."

Q: Without knowing Tolu's timeline going forward, what's your confidence in Jimmy Bell taking that spot?

CJ: "Good question. Fortunately, Jimmy has been around the block a couple times. He's older. He's been there, done that. He started 34 games in the Big 12. He understands what high-level basketball feels like. He's a worker. He has a business approach every single day. I haven't sat him down and told him, 'Hey, now you got to do this, that and the other. He just knows.' Certainly it isn't about Jimmy trying to replace Tolu. We've got to put our team, and our individual players in the best spot for them individually and figure out how we need to play."

"But it's definitely made us adjust on the fly. The only silver lining right now is that we have time. If this was in November or December, it would be really hard to make those adjustments on the fly. But we've got enough time to figure out which lineups we can put together to put ourselves in a good position. But Jimmy Bell obviously is going to be relied on to burden some of the load until Tolu gets back."

Guard Shakeel Moore

Q: What needs to happen during preseason to maintain things as a team defensively?

SM: "Lock down, get those assignments tightened up. Small details are the big issue with our defense. If you're not in the right spots, a lot of things could happen."

Q: What are some things the team has to improve on and get better at?

SM: "From last year, I think it's our three-point shot. I think everybody knows it's evident we're not a great shooting team last year. Myself and all of our returning guys staying in the gym working on it ourselves. I think we're going to shock a lot of people."

Forward Cameron Matthews

Q: Talk a little bit about your season, what are you excited for? What are some goals you have?

CM: "I'm just excited to finally be playing against somebody outside of our own team. Some goals we have set for ourselves, of course is to go to the tournament again. We need to win in March not just go but win, little goals like that."

Q: What are some expectations that you want to be able to exceed this season?

CM: "We just want to get off to a good start with missing somebody like Tolu. Obviously, a big blow, but I feel like we have enough pieces to be competitive and win. Just getting a good start in the non-conference and get momentum going into conference."