

# Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 10, 2023

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

## Michigan State Spartans

### Coach Tom Izzo

### Tyson Walker

### Jaden Atkins

### Joey Hauser

#### Postgame Press Conference

Ohio State - 68, Michigan State - 58

**THE MODERATOR:** We are joined by the Michigan State Spartans, Head Coach Tom Izzo, Tyson Walker, Jaden Atkins, and Joey Hauser.

**TOM IZZO:** No matter how long you're in it, it never ceases to amaze you that -- and I thought we had as good a three days of practice as we could have. I thought our guys were fresh. I thought we started out the game pretty good.

But I give a lot of credit to Ohio State and to Chris Holtmann. I hope that writer was here that asked me questions in Columbus. If he is, raise your hand.

He got his guys to play hard, and I just didn't think we brought it. We were ready to go early, we get a little lead. You've got to give them credit too. They hit some incredible shots. We just couldn't buy some.

I said to our media for three weeks that I didn't think our defense has been very good and it would get you in a tournament, so I guess my experience kind of gave the answer. It's a shame, too, because these three guys I thought played pretty hard, not always made shots.

For Tyson to get eight, nine shots and Joey to only get five, that's kind of our fault as a staff, and we'll look at that. Some blame goes to us on how we played, a lot of credit goes to Ohio State on the job he did getting them off the debt and competing like they did. They were a good defense. They were good offensively.



## MEN'S BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

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And made some shots, man. They made some shots.

**Q. For any of you guys, both times you played Ohio State this season, you've had a fair amount of offensive success. It seemed like maybe you missed some open shots, but it also seemed like they forced you into a few things they hadn't. What was different about playing Ohio State compared to the first two times this season?**

**TYSON WALKER:** I think we didn't move the ball very well. We didn't at all. Of course missing shots factored into that, but we didn't move the ball. We didn't move off the ball, didn't screen well. And they got into us as they started making shots.

**Q. For any of the three guys, the three-point defense in particular, you guys held them down there to 6 of 29, but then they started to hit shots. How much of it do you feel like it was you the last two games they were hitting the shots, and how much of it do you think was their offense just getting in a rhythm and hitting some of those?**

**JOEY HAUSER:** Yeah, they were in a rhythm. We didn't do a good job defending the three-point line. But they had two games under their belt here already, and we knew that was going to be the case coming into the game, but we didn't do a good job defending the three-point line.

**Q. From a strategic standpoint today, what was the problem with your guys' defense in terms of always being a rotation or their three-point shooting? What was the issue on that end?**

**JADEN ATKINS:** I really would just say we were kind of giving up too many driving lanes, and we were getting put in tough situations because they were confident from three today. So you kind of didn't know if you wanted to help or try to stop the ball when they were driving.

That led to rotations and led to them making shots.

**Q. Tyson, when you guys came out in the second half, not only you started the half 4 for 4, but you guys were**



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**clearly more engaged defensively. You were picking up full court and stuff like that. It seemed kind of like when you guys were close, had a chance to tie it and didn't, that that kind of fell off. What do you think the reasoning was for that, the defense at least kind of took a step back after being so good to start the half?**

TYSON WALKER: We let them make shots, and that kind of like took our energy away. Stuff like that can't happen, especially when our defense got us back into it. We can't let missing shots make us not play defense

**Q. I'm wondering about the mindset of the team. The way the season was ending, it felt like there was momentum going. Does it feel odd to come here, play one game, not feel like you played well, but still know there's something else out there. How do you get back up quickly for that and kind of regain some of that momentum?**

JOEY HAUSER: Yeah, we're not happy with it. We came here to win a championship, and it felt like a letdown today. Give them credit, they played really well. But we've got to turn around and focus our efforts on the NCAA Tournament because it's one-and-done for real then that time.

We've got to get it figured out and just change a little bit of what we need to change here and get it locked in.

**Q. I had a similar question, so I guess I'll ask Jaden. How do you use this as a wakeup call or motivation knowing you've got the NCAA Tournament coming up next?**

JADEN ATKINS: Today we didn't come ready to play, but we've got a second chance in the tournament to turn things around. We just know we've got to put our all into that and make this run.

**Q. For any of you three, what do you feel the biggest lesson from today is now that it's one-and-done completely?**

TYSON WALKER: I would say that it's March and it's basically a new season now, people making shots. Things change, so you've just got to play basketball the best you can, play as hard as you can. You can't go off of their stats from months ago because people get better, teams get better, and today they showed it.

**Q. Tom, you've done this a long time. No team has made it past Friday that played on Wednesday since '14, I think. Is fatigue overrated, or is it a real thing?**

TOM IZZO: It all depends. You look at with Sensabaugh out, I thought they played better. That's not an insult to him. Another three-point shooter in there and definitely defensively. Somebody else got a chance.

Where fatigue is overrated is excitement and energy is underrated. I try to tell a couple of my guards that your body language, your emotion, your energy makes a difference.

Tyson, I thought he played hard all game. We had some other guys that didn't play as hard, I don't know why. But when you start making shots like that, things go your way -- I mean, they made some shots. Give Sueing credit. He acted like a fifth year senior. 4 of 7, he's just not that kind of shooter. But give him credit on that.

And Gayle, he gets his chance more now and goes 3 of 3, and a couple of them were tough shots. And the best shooter shot the worst, McNeil, you know.

But we didn't guard, and we haven't guarded, and I've been complaining about it. But I hope you weren't the one that asked me that -- you weren't, right? That dumb question on -- innocent? Oh, he's not innocent.

I've always pulled for coaches and disappointed in how we played, but it just goes to show how college basketball is so like this, and very difficult to coach, very difficult. I give Chris a lot of credit. Everybody thinks like he's my uncle or my cousin or my brother. He's not. He's just a human being that went through some tough times with some injuries, and people make stupid statements like he hasn't been to the second round in four years. Well, one year nobody went. So don't make it look bad for him.

It figures the guy wouldn't show up for this, and I think he's a good guy personally. If he hasn't done a good job, I deserve to be fired because I didn't do a very good job at all.

**Q. You guys are 13-2 this year when you take 20 or more threes. Only 16 today, only 7 in the second half. Do you think with the 1 for 9 start from deep, you guys got a little worried about missing that many and didn't want to keep putting them up? Is that a little bit deflating with how hot you guys were shooting it the last four games coming into today?**

TOM IZZO: No, I think it was more their defense honestly. I think they did a good job. I think they're a better defensive group with the team they've got in there. That's no insult. I'm a better defensive team with certain guys, you have to weigh whether it's offense or defense.

The great thing about the tournament is we all know defense wins games. We all know the scores are lower. Look at the scores of some of these games. We all saw what happened. A team like Rutgers who guards the hell out of people, and they find a way to win a game and they find a way to almost win another game.

You've got to be able to guard, and if you don't defend well and you give up, as Tyson said, drives, then you don't rebound as well. When we're outrebounding them by two, that's not good for us.

I just thought from the head down our energy wasn't there. It wasn't fatigue. It was, maybe we thought with Sensabaugh out, you know, I warned my team of that, had it happened. I didn't think they responded that way in any way, shape, or form in the locker room, but I had to address it.

I don't know. It's one of the more disappointing days because I thought we had a legitimate chance to maybe win this thing. That doesn't mean everything's gone wrong, and the way we played the last three weeks, month, after all we've been through has been pretty damn good. Today we laid an egg, and part of it was Ohio State, and part of it was Michigan State.

**Q. In the first half, you guys shot 9 for 29 from the field. In the second half, 12 for 26. What changes were implemented at halftime that kind of played a role in the offense starting to improve?**

TOM IZZO: We've heard this a little bit lately. Energy. Tyson did a helluva job. We did not -- the point is a key guy, and whether I had Mateen Cleaves or Waltons or different guys over the years, 'Tum Tum', they've got to put pressure on the ball, and we didn't. So we switched it up, and we got Tyson in there, and he started to, and it started to turn things.

We had a chance to tie the game with that layup, and not only didn't we, but we gave up two threes in a row. So we played like a front-runner team, which is probably the most disappointing to me because it's the anti-whatever to me. I do not want a front running team, but that's kind of what we played like.

For whatever reason, I don't know, but that's what I'll have to get back and figure out.

**Q. You talked about Sensabaugh a little bit and the impact of him not playing in the game. As the opposing coach, when the other team's leading scorer is out, how, if at all, does that impact your prep? I know --**

TOM IZZO: It didn't impact our prep at all. We didn't find out until minutes before the game. Didn't impact my prep at all. Didn't impact me at all because I've been through it a hundred times.

I've seen some teams play better when their superstar leaves. I've seen some teams fall apart. So for me personally -- but I don't play the game. When I address my team with it, I didn't see any reason where anybody took it like, whoo, good. It has no bearing on it. They've already proven that they've got guys. They've got six starters because McNeil to me is a starter, has been a starter.

Sensabaugh is a helluva player by the way. A helluva player. I just felt like maybe they played different without him. Maybe he convinced them they've got to really guard. A couple of those guys, I thought, put on a lot of pressure. I thought Roddy really played well. I thought their center, Okpara, did a good job on the ball screen stepping up, and that created some problems. We just didn't handle it very well.

I say all that, I still think it was our energy on the defensive end. What did we shoot the second half? 46, 28, not great. But it was our defensive effort that those of you who want us to be an offensive team, there aren't many around.

**Q. Chris talked about intentionally growing this team young, playing them a lot of minutes, which is not really the way college basketball is these days, but he wants to build that foundation, which is not easy. What does that say to kind of see the progress and the struggles they went through for him to be able to get them to this point?**

TOM IZZO: Like I said, I give him a lot of credit because I know what it's like in Columbus. It's not as bad there in basketball as it is in football, but I know what it's like. As a coach, like we kept saying on the bench, poor Malik, he just didn't look like he was moving very good, you know, and they had some injuries early. Then they had freshmen. And then they had to deal with freshmen on one side, the transfers in the middle, the seniors on the other side.

There's so many obstacles we all have to go through now, and we have to figure them out. I don't need anybody feeling sorry for anybody, but they're not easy. I think the greatest job he did was not this tournament, the greatest job he did was saving them for the last five games of the regular season, even when they lost. Other than the Purdue loss, they were playing better for those five games.

I don't know about playing them a lot of minutes. That's

okay, but eventually you've got to have some subs. But they're on a high. They're playing with energy and emotion, and that can get you through fatigue, I guess is what I'm saying.

**Q. We talked so much about the three-point line and everything, but when you guys did try to go inside, you mentioned Okpara. He had a difference making kind of game on the boards and with those blocked shots. I guess how difficult is that when you are trying to hit from outside and you get downhill and then you run into a guy throwing shots out.**

TOM IZZO: That was one of the other things that we've been so good at. We've been so good on our break, and I think the last time we played them, we scored 22 points or something off our break.

Today I thought A.J. pushed it early, and then I thought we just didn't. For whatever reason. That was part of our struggles. Listen, they're playing really good. We're not as bad as we played today, and that's been evident by what we've done in the last month, to be honest with you.

A couple things happened early in that game. We didn't cut out to get a rebound. We've been really pushing the envelope to try to make people understand that the little things matter. I was watching a game today, and my pet peeve is free-throw cutouts. We lost at Iowa because we did not cut people out. That went unforeseen with all the threes they hit, there was a missed free throw, we didn't cut them out, they got a bucket. That was the difference in the game.

I saw today there was about four times when one of the teams didn't cut out at the free-throw line and it ended up costing them. The little things do matter, but this day and age, I think most kids don't look at it the same way. So that will be emphasized this week in practice, see if we can do a better job.

**Q. You've had defensive issues the past couple weeks. What can you do between now and the start of the NCAA Tournament to get things turned around?**

TOM IZZO: That's the beauty of it. I don't have to reinvent the wheel, as I said. We've been there, done that. We played really good defense. We were second or third in the league in field goals. We were first, I think we're still first in three-point field goals. You wouldn't guess it, but we really were.

Even when those two teams late hit some in the regular season, we're still first. So we've already been there. But effort is a funny thing, and energy is a funny thing.

Sometimes, when I think you start playing better offensively, I feel like we got casual defensively.

You saw that one stretch when we weren't, that should be 40 minutes of that, and that falls on me. So I'm going to find some guys who want to do that for 40 minutes, and today we didn't. The better team won. They outplayed us in every aspect -- offensively, defensively, even rebounding that we beat them, blocking shots.

I give a lot of credit to them. They'll have their hands full with Purdue. This tournament is about matchups too. Sometimes matchups work for you. Sometimes they work against you. If I wasn't playing against them, I would have been cheering when some of those threes that had no business -- I'm giving them a lot of credit. So make sure you guys from Columbus, especially my buddy back home, understands they still made some shots from heaven, and that's kind of what happens.

I give them a lot of credit. If they can keep that going, they'll keep winning. I think those guards could create some problems, and Purdue is really good, but maybe they'll set a precedence and keep winning. I mean, it's been a fun team to watch from close and afar.

Tell my guy that probably Chris deserves some credit for that.

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