

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Chris Jans

Josh Hubbard

Tolu Smith III

Postgame Press Conference

Mississippi State 70, LSU 60

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Mississippi State. We'll go straight to questions with the two student-athletes.

Q. Tolu, obviously disappointing offensively today. You did a lot defensively. Talk about that, overcoming that adversity to help the team.

TOLU SMITH III: Yeah, I got a great coaching staff and Coach Jans believes in me. He just tells me to keep going. If the offense not going, it gets like that for a lot of good players, I know we got to keep going defensively. I got another chance tomorrow. We won (smiling).

Q. How aware were you going into today that you kind of need to avoid a loss to feel better about your standing come Sunday?

JOSH HUBBARD: We knew it was a good opportunity for us. Big game. One of our biggest games of the year. So we just came with a mentality of preparation and confidence. We knew that we have to earn it, that it wouldn't be easy or given to us.

TOLU SMITH III: Yeah, piggyback off of what Hub said. It was a battle game for us. We needed this win. We're coming off a couple bad losses that we should have won. And we executed, and we do what we had to do.

Q. Now that you have this win, where do you feel about where you currently stand within your March Madness résumé?

TOLU SMITH III: Can you repeat the question? I'm sorry.



Q. Now that you got that important win, how do you feel about where your résumé stands going into next weekend? What is your case for being in?

TOLU SMITH III: I mean, we in the SEC tournament right now. We not in the NCAA tournament. We focus on the SEC tournament. We try to keep advancing. We're not ready to go home. We are packed till Sunday. I think that's main focus, our main concern. We'll get there when the rubber meets the road.

Q. Josh, you always look so calm out there. First game of the tournament, post-season. How do you keep the nerves under control? Were you nervous at all?

JOSH HUBBARD: It was just another game. All our guys put confidence in each other. We're all positive. We were prepared for the game. Just a lot of repetition on the scout and stuff like that. Yeah, I was pretty calm and confident of what to do, do my assignment.

Q. Both of y'all being Mississippi guys, what does it mean to you represent Mississippi State? What was said at halftime amongst yourselves to get that win today?

TOLU SMITH III: Yeah, I think being from Mississippi means everything. We're trying to build a legacy here. I think when Coach Jans came in, he had a blueprint for us. We try to follow the blueprint to the best of our ability. He's a Mississippi guy now, too. We open arms with him.

We're so thankful to be from Mississippi and get an opportunity to represent Mississippi.

JOSH HUBBARD: Yeah, halftime we were down seven. We knew that it could be different. We could be playing way better.

We just stayed positive and kept rooting for each other. We didn't stick our heads down. We lifted each other up. We just knew we had 20 minutes to change things, so that's what we did.



Q. Tolu, you have a reputation as being a big, physical, strong player. Can you assess physicality within the conference itself now that you played.

TOLU SMITH III: What do you mean by 'assess'?

Q. Can you talk about how physicality plays into it.

TOLU SMITH III: SEC is the best conference, one of the strongest conferences out there. Not a lot of foul calls, which is good for both ways.

I just think we got the best athletes, all-around guys. Every night, it's not a pushover. It's a good game every night. You have to be on your Ps and Qs every night.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse the student-athletes and continue with Coach Jans.

Q. Walk us through the halftime adjustments.

CHRIS JANS: We were really struggling offensively. Obviously that has a lot to do with LSU. Pretty obvious Tolu was missing some things around the basket. We were trying to attack them inside-out early and just sort of getting the ball to go through the net, and then Cam Matthews missed the four free throws.

That just kind of takes your confidence away a little bit. I thought it hurt our defense because our defense the first five, eight minutes was as good as it's been in a while. When you stop making baskets and you miss free throws, it just gets you dialed down a little bit.

At halftime we did make a pretty major adjustment to our ball screen D. We were pretty aggressive in the first half. Hunter Dean especially was getting behind us and they were rolling behind us. We switched it to a little more passive coverage, try to keep the ball in front.

The obvious was Hannibal started really take advantage of it and getting to the basket. I think it worked better for us in the second half.

Q. Not specific to today, I'm curious, how the block charge change has affected college basketball, the style of the game, the way it looks, coaching it, all of it?

CHRIS JANS: It's made a huge impact. I don't know how anyone that follows the game and watches the game or plays the game or coaches the game can't see that. It's going to change the way people recruit. Like a lot of teams rely on it. It's not so much even the charge, it's the thought

of, Hey, if I drive it in there, I know they're going to be waiting in the weeds for me.

For us, the way we defend, it was a big adjustment. But we had plenty of time, obviously, other than recruiting, because we didn't know that then, to try to adjust.

But it's changed the game. It's going to change the way we coach the game. I think it's going to change a lot of programs in terms of how they recruit because of not being able to do that like you used to.

Like Shak Moore attempted to take a charge this afternoon. We tell our guys all the time from day one, Don't even try. Avoid it. 'Cause 19 out of 20, it's going to be a block. That's the interpretation of the rule. We understood that.

It's definitely changing the game.

Q. On the league in general, you have one of the better defenses in the league. When you have this much offensive weaponry from team after team, can you talk about what the challenge has been on a nightly basis trying to stop these people?

CHRIS JANS: You were kind. I don't consider our defense in the upper echelon this year. It was last year. But that part has something to do with I'm not doing as good a job. It's a very frustrating situation when you watch last year's games to prepare for this year. You go, We were just better defensively.

We talked a lot about that heading into this game actually. The offense, like I'm a second-year guy. The league is a lot different than it was a year ago. There's just more high-octane offenses. Last year I think was one of the worst shooting teams from the three in all of college basketball. I don't think we're at that point now. I think people went out and really loaded up offensively with different weapons, et cetera.

It's a huge challenge. It's a huge challenge. It's hard to game plan for some of these teams because they have so many guys on the floor that can hurt you so many different ways, both inside and out. You just try to do your best.

Q. Another matchup with Tennessee. You were able to get them earlier in the season. Talk about that game.

CHRIS JANS: I haven't even thought about that. Second time I've been asked that. Not trying to be coy. We've been ready for LSU and preparing. You know the drill, our staff is way ahead. They'll give me all the information that I

need.

As soon as we're done with this media, see our family, it will be a long night preparing for them.

Obviously they won the league. Can't argue that they're the best team over an 18-game schedule, which to me means more than anything in my opinion, to do it like that, especially in a league like this.

We have great respect for Coach Barnes, their staff and players. It will be intense. They play a hard-nosed style. We're trying to play a similar style. I think it will be an intense basketball game, to say the least.

Q. You got one field goal in the first half from Tolu and from Josh. LSU's defense, how disruptive were they in the first half?

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, we were struggling. We had seven baskets, seven turnovers. That's not a good recipe to win games. Obviously gave Hub a ton of attention. He's used to that now.

It goes back to the missed free throws in the first half. We were 7 for 13. Tolu missed at least two that he probably should have made, and I think the game's a little bit different.

They were revved up. Coach McMahon is obviously a great coach. He's won everywhere he's been. We talked about they're not happy we beat them at their place. It's a great motivation for them. They've been playing really well. Won three of their last four. It's tournament basketball. They certainly didn't disappoint when it came to that.

I think the second half, our start helped settle us. We started getting into a rhythm. Obviously we scored a bunch more points, 48 in the second half.

Q. All season long, the students have brought it, the energy, pushed you guys over the finish line. Talk about your student support, fan support, what that means to your program?

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, it's been fun to watch it grow from when we arrived. Every coach talks about your style is going to resonate with the fan base, we're going to build relationships. We really try to match our words, if you will.

It's grown. We had three sellouts in the SEC last year. We sold out seven of nine this year. A great testament to the folks at Mississippi State and our guys for doing a good job of being good people, understanding how important that is, that they build relationships with the student body.

They've been the best. Not that the other folks haven't. Our student body has been there since day one. We've had great support. We've tried to build the relationship with those folks like around spring break like a lot of schools are. To look over there and see the band, the students behind them, you could hear them, it's a great feeling.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

CHRIS JANS: You bet.

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