

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Mississippi State Bulldogs

### Coach Chris Jans

#### Men's Media Day Press Conference



CHRIS JANS: We'll just go right to questions is fine.

**Q. Maybe every coach in this league has taken teams to the NCAA Tournament, but nine teams are ranked in the AP, which I think is more than the SEC had in the football preseason poll. And everybody thinks about football, but really basketball is just as good if not better than football. What's your thoughts on the league and just the depth and the coaching and the athletes and just everything about how good basketball is now in the SEC?**

CHRIS JANS: Certainly get that question a lot about what your opinion is of the league and how tough it's going to be, et cetera. I love it. I love being in the SEC. I love being in a league that has such great competition. At the end of the day, our goal, one of them, is obviously to get into March Madness and to play in the NCAA Tournament amongst others, but having those kind of opportunities each and every night makes that goal a little bit more attainable for most of us.

Scheduling is obviously difficult, but knowing, going into conference season, that you're going to have a bunch of Quad 1 and Quad 2 opportunities at the end of the day is what you want.

Certainly it can be daunting at times if you let it get the best of you, and everybody has got runs in their seasons as they look at their schedule where they've got three or four games in a row where it's going to be tough, but it's that way for everybody, and it's just how it works when you're in as strong a league as you are in the SEC.

But I love the fact that there's nine of them in the AP 25 to get people thinking about college basketball, in particular be thinking about the SEC. Obviously we're not one of them, so it's great motivation for our players here in the last two, three weeks of practice before we get on the floor.

But it's gotten stronger and stronger, and this is my third year. Certainly I don't know how this year will play out, but the league has gotten better and better each year that I've been in the SEC.

**Q. Josh Hubbard, I want to know what you think about his growth.**

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, Josh is a special human being. He's a better person than he is a player, and that's no slight to his game. Everybody that follows college basketball or certainly our league knows what kind of year he had as a freshman. He kind of took it by storm, if you will. Didn't have those kind of expectations.

A lot of people asked me in the postseason if I expected him to have that kind of year, and my answer is always no. I never dreamt in any world where he would have quite an impact, and to be honest with you, I don't know that anyone else did other than Josh and his family. They have a special family that they have a lot of belief in one another, and Josh had been preparing for that kind of stage his whole life.

Now that I've gotten to work with him over the course of 15, 16 months now, his work ethic is just off the charts. He's so committed to his game, his career. But for me in a selfish way, he's such a great teammate. He's taken a leadership role on this team as a sophomore. He's found his voice. I've encouraged him behind the scenes to find his voice. And people ask, How can he get better? And that was one way I thought he could get better for us and our program was to take on more of that old-school leadership role.

He can do that because he works so hard every day. He didn't do this last year, and he didn't do it all summer, but for some reason since the fall began and school started, we're now in the midst of our longer practices, he wins almost every dang sprint, and that wasn't the case last year. He's in better shape than he's ever been. He's more athletic than he's ever been. He worked hard all year long with our strength coach, who did an excellent job with him.

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I don't want to put any pressure on him, even though I don't think he'll shy from any of that. We expect an even better year from him on both ends of the floor.

**Q. With Josh being a Mississippi guy, just how good of a representative is he for your program, especially in the state?**

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, it's awesome. He's a special young man, like I said before. Again, in 15, 16 months, I remember him having one bad day, and it was so bad that I brought him into my office the next day to make sure everything was good in his life and everything was fine because it was so off brand for him.

He's so consistent with his mental approach, his physical approach to the expectations that we have for him every single day. It could be on the floor, off the floor. As you can imagine, like a lot of these kids now, they've got a lot of temptations. They've got a lot on their plate. There's a lot asked of some of these student-athletes. Certainly for us, Josh is probably asked to do more than anybody else in our program.

I know I don't have to worry about him losing his focus. He's always making the right decision off the court, and he was raised in such a great way that there's no worries that way when it comes to what you would think coaches worry about.

But yeah, there's a lot on him. He's the face of our program right now, and certainly him being from the state of Mississippi makes the story even better.

**Q. Obviously you had to replace a really good player in Tolu Smith. You went out in the portal and got two players. What's your assessment of what you've seen from the post and the guys you've put in that position this year?**

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, I think the first approach was, hey, we're not going to replace Tolu. That wasn't what we tried to do in the portal. We just needed some guys to come in and compete and hopefully eventually be in a position where they can be productive in their own way.

We certainly are going to miss Tolu, but everybody loses key players every single year. We're no different. Like you said, we brought in a couple portal kids, Jeremy Foumena from Rhode Island and Michael Nwoko from Miami.

And then we've got a third guy, Chol, who was with us last year who played pretty significant minutes in the fall when Tolu was hurt. Tolu didn't play the first 12 games of our season, and guy Chol who was a freshman that we had

planned on redshirting, we couldn't redshirt him anymore. We needed him to play minutes in the fall, and he was a critical part of his winning some big games in the fall. He didn't play like monster minutes, but he played valuable minutes at the 5 and held his own.

Those three are all in the same boat together, all competing, trying to find their way, and they're all different. They're all different.

We have KeShawn Murphy who is a returner, and knock on wood, it's the healthiest he's ever been. He's never been this healthy since he arrived on a college campus. It's been over a year now. He's had multiple surgeries, so it's stunted his progress, obviously.

But he's had an unbelievable off-season. Really excited about where he's at. It's not ideal to play him at the 5. He's a little light for that position. But he's smart enough, skilled enough, versatile enough that if we have to play him at the 5 in sort of a small ball look, we can do that. But the hope is that those other three guys will continue to get better and progress and figure out a way to get themselves on the court.

**Q. Curious your thoughts on the transition at Kentucky, Mark Pope taking over that program, what it means for the landscape of the SEC.**

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, that's a big-picture question in terms of what it means for the landscape. Just happy for Mark. I know him personally. We were in the WAC together for a couple of years when he was at Utah Valley and I was at New Mexico State. I had a ton of respect for him then and certainly still do now. He's an excellent coach and even a better person.

I was always impressed with how hard he worked at his craft. I would see him on the road recruiting, and he was pretty relentless when it came to that. And I know he's gone home, if you will, and back to where his playing days were.

He's an excellent coach. I look forward to competing against him as the year unfolds again.

**Q. Speaking of changes in the league, obviously John is now at Arkansas. What are your thoughts on John and what he can bring to Arkansas, and in the coaching community how big a shock wave was that?**

CHRIS JANS: I think it was a pretty big shock. I've got to know Coach Cal, obviously, more so since being in the league, and he's been very kind to me and had some nice conversations with him. But I'm not in his inner circle

where he's calling me to talk about his future options and decisions that he's making. So how that went down, it went down.

He's obviously a Hall of Fame coach, and he's had a remarkable career, and he made the decision to change it up, if you will, and go to another program. Certainly he's probably excited for that new energy you get when we take over a program, for those of us that have done that. I'm sure it's rejuvenated him at the same time.

**Q. Getting a chance to play neutral site games all over the state of Mississippi in the non-conference season, including what's essentially homecoming games for both Josh Hubbard and Cameron Matthews, how important is it to introduce your program to fan bases and groups of fans all over the state of Mississippi and making sure that more fans are going to be able to see you play who can't necessarily make the trip to Starkville?**

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, it's been a priority for us since we arrived. We've played games within our state not in Humphrey Coliseum in all three years that I've been the head coach here. Certainly it's been for a variety of reasons. You mentioned a main reason was to be able to bring the games to them, if you will, and not have them to have to travel to us so much, and that's been a big reason why we've been able to do that or we made the decision to do that.

But at the same time there's other factors that come into it. Certainly they're considered neutral games, so it's easier to get a Quad 1 or Quad 2 opportunity when you play them at a neutral site rather than having your opponent always play in the friendly confines of your home arena, so that always comes into play.

And then the NIL factor, most of those games have an NIL piece, and it's obviously changing weekly or monthly or daily, if you will, but at the time when we were trying to figure out how we could inch up where we were at with that, that was an area that we decided to look into, and it's been good for us so far.

**Q. What would you like people to know about Mississippi State, this version of your team?**

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, this version is going to be different than the other two. We've been an inside-out team since I've arrived. We throw the ball inside, play through our bigs. It's kind of how I was raised in basketball, and it's been done well for us thus far.

But because of our roster makeup this year, we've had to

transition to more of an outside-in team. The strength of our team will be on the perimeter as opposed to being around the basket.

I don't think I've had this many shooter scorers on a team before. I think we're going to score more points than we have in the past, which I'm sure is music to the ears of many of our fans. It may be a struggle for me. I don't think on paper, anyway, our defense will be quite as stout as maybe it's been in the past. I'm nervous about the rebounding game within the game. I don't necessarily want to just rely on being able to score the basketball. That's not really in my DNA.

But at the same time, we've modernized our offense. We're playing with more space in mind, a lot more dribble drive. We've got multiple play makers, multiple guys that can shoot the basketball. We're going to be able to spread the defense out a little bit more than maybe in the past.

Then the other thing that we're real proud of since we've arrived is our retention rate. We haven't lost any players that we haven't wanted to, that wanted to come back. We've been very good about being able to keep the good players that we've been fortunate enough to get in either the portal or just high school recruiting, and we're batting an unbelievable percentage of the players that we want to be back for the next year's team.

I think it speaks volumes about their experience in Starkville, of living in the community, of being a student at Mississippi State.

With the portal, et cetera, and not having to sit out anymore, kids obviously are leaving at an unbelievable rate, and I just think it says a lot about their experience they're having in Starkville, not just in our program, and being around us and their teammates, but more importantly, being a part of the university, being a part of the Starkville community, and it makes us feel pretty good about it.

**Q. Back to Josh Hubbard, what are the things about his game that make him stand out? What makes him special?**

CHRIS JANS: You know, you can't judge a book by its cover. He's not been blessed with a ton of size or length. But it's not slowed him down at all, and I think people underestimate him on the court because he's just so good at -- either off the catch, off a handoff, off the bounce where he'll rise up and shoot it, and when he gets into that mode it's like he's 6'5". He gets off the floor so quickly and he has an old-school jump shot where he gets off the floor, and it happens so fast that I think it puts the defense on



their heels.

He loves the big moments. He loves the big moments. He likes the ball in his hands. He likes taking the big shots. Even as a freshman, he took some big shots for us.

He's not bothered by the lights. The bright lights, the platforms, the SEC. He's so even keeled. When you watch him play, you wouldn't know if he's in the midst of a 20, 25-point game or a 5 or 10-point game. He rarely changes his demeanor, and he's that way in practice, too.

He's just got a lot of great qualities to him.

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