

State Farm Champions Classic: Kentucky vs Michigan State

Tuesday, November 18, 2025

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Tom Izzo

Press Conference



Michigan State 83, Kentucky 66

TOM IZZO: Well, it was a heck of a win for us. Kentucky did not play as well as they've been playing. I hope we get some credit for that, but I think they just missed some shots and did some things early.

I didn't think we played so well early. I thought Jeremy was below average early, and the first time-out we got him out, and after that I thought he was spectacular. Made a mistake here and there because they're a good team.

But the things we wanted to do was take away the three and rebound the ball. I think they only had six offensive rebounds. Give our guys and my coaching staff a lot of credit; I thought we executed things pretty well. We turned it over a little bit more, and as good as we played defensively in the second half, those turnovers, some of them were for touchdowns.

Then they got more baskets at the free-throw line. That was the only negative for us. The positive for us was we made some shots, and those of you that are at Michigan State, I don't know, did we make more threes today than we made all year? Yeah, that's not meant to be funny, but it is funny. 11 of 22, you know. We just shot the ball better and rebounded the ball pretty well.

What I'm proudest, though, with this team, where it's getting a little bit like last year, it's very unselfish. 25 assists on 32 baskets. The other day it was 24 assists on 28 baskets. I still think we've got some more upside. I think our running game can get better.

But don't be fooled; we weren't that good because we don't shoot the ball that well, and they weren't that bad because they do shoot the ball well and missed a lot of shots. The combination of things worked for us tonight. That is a very talented, good team. Mark is a good coach. I'm just proud of my guys.

Questions?

Q. Do you think at least from the outside, the media or the experts don't focus enough on how important continuity is? We all talk about the portal and how the portal gets ranked and all the freshmen, but you guys are a little different with all the quality players you have back, and you're seeing around the country whether it's Gonzaga, UConn, the teams have look the best early a lot of times have a lot of key guys back. Do you think that is kind of undervalued in the sport right now?

TOM IZZO: I'm guarded in what I say. How about 100 freaking percent? I mean, home-grown. People that are playing for the name on the front of their jersey because they know the name on the front of their jersey, people that care about the place they're at and the players they're with.

I give credit to a lot of people. Everybody does it a different way. But it's funny you'd ask that question because that seems to be the people that are getting the most credit, the transfer portal recruitment is almost bigger than winning games.

Not at Michigan State. Some day it could hurt me. I'm going to do what I gotta do. But I'm also -- I don't give up on the people I got.

That's what we call development, and that's what you call working with players. You stick with them and they stick with you. Jeremy Fears is a good example. Just like Mateen. They were a couple of rough years because that's what happens as you're trying to make a boy a man and make a good player a great player.

But tonight it was fun to see some of that come to fruition.

Everybody does it a different way, but I'm saddened that it's become a transactional society as far as football and basketball. But I'm just going to keep hanging in there until it doesn't work, and I'll still get a transfer here and there.

I just don't want to get rid of guys that have put in a lot of time and put in a lot of effort. Their loyalty to me has got to be my loyalty to them, and loyalty still freaking matters. I cleaned it up a lot from what I was going to say (laughter),



but I just want you to know that I'm proud of my guys.

I'm proud of the guys that hung in there. A lot of them could have left. Tonight they got rewarded for one night. What does that mean in the future? We'll see.

Q. Last year when you came here I think you put Kur in for just a few seconds at the end but said you kind of regretted that decision but his parents were there. What does it mean for him to come back to this arena and do what he did tonight, career 15 points, and really sparked you guys off the bench.

TOM IZZO: Well, Jeremy had a career high 13 assists. I thought Coen did some real good things and then some not, but Kur was really good, Trey was a lot better. Some of those guys, that's the other thing. Kur didn't play much last year and the other two guys just got here. They weren't superstars where they were, so it's going to take a little time, a lot longer, by the way, than just today. It's going to take a lot more time.

My staff did a great job. Another thing that happened, you say the portal gets credit, head coaches get credit, and it's your staff that does a lot of the work, so they did a hell of a job.

Q. Everyone is going to talk about Kur off the bench, but what about Cam Ward and Jesse McCulloch? And this was a little different second half from the last game.

TOM IZZO: Jesse's threes was a sneak attack. You didn't know he could do it. I didn't quite know he could do it like he did it. But Jesse does shoot the ball really well. There's another guy who opted to redshirt, and let me tell you, schools came after him and things. Thank God for his mom and dad. He opted to redshirt and still stick it out.

He's been great. But he's going to get better and better, too.

Look, it was one of those nights where I told them it would be a football game on hardwood because they're such a good rebounding team, but I'd like to say we've been Rebounding U for a long time, and that didn't change tonight.

But we've still got a long ways to go, and you're going to see Kentucky win a lot, a lot of games. Well-coached, good team, and it wasn't their night.

Q. What did you learn from the second half of the last game that helped you tonight?

TOM IZZO: A lot. That was half the speech at halftime. We didn't go over a lot of X's and O's. I took those four juniors and seniors and told them your legacy is going to hinge on these kind of deals, because last time you didn't do a very good job and neither did I.

I got off it a little more and they got off it a little more and we got off it a little more, and that was the difference.

Q. You mentioned about the three-point shooting. You get those -- I think the first four buckets were on threes, but in particular the one with Jaxon and some of the ball movement, how much did all that play into some of that because there were good looks it looked like?

TOM IZZO: You know, I told my wife, I told my AD, I told my staff, we had three of the best days of practice. We went at it. We had two-a-days one day. I don't know, that's probably illegal now, I don't know. But since there's no laws and rules -- right, since there is none, it doesn't really matter, but we did.

I think when you get players to the point where they realize the work is beneficial for them and us, and that's what wins like tonight will do. Maintaining that, there's 27, 26 games left, so don't -- as my buddy Nick says, don't throw rat poison at me, but we deserve to feel good for a night because we weren't great other than our shooting early.

We still found a way to win against a quality team, and a bunch of our great fans in New York. It was fun having Plex here and all the others.

I just want to say that I was proud of my guys for how they responded in a big setting.

Q. I want to go back to Kur, if you talked to him more, just where he started the season, you sticking with it like that --

TOM IZZO: He had a great summer until the end of the summer and then he wasn't shooting the ball very well, and then in the fall he didn't shoot the ball very well and he wasn't a great defender.

But I think the lack of defense came from the lack of offense. It's nice to say that you feel good about yourself even if you don't make shots. Well, a shooter never feels good about himself if he doesn't make shots.

I think the combination of things.

But we chart every week how many shots a guy gets up on his own, and he's always at the top. So the old story of



hard work gets you where you want to get, and he deserved it. Now if we can build on it and keep going, that'll really help us because then we'll have some depth.

Q. You spoke on the 13 assists from Jeremy, but the six rebounds and those two leaping plays on the break when he broke up those two, the sorts of winning plays he makes, in terms of the complete picture of what he can become for you, how do those moments factor into what that could be?

TOM IZZO: Yeah, I was most pleased. Kohler was really good. Those two guards played really good. But Jeremy after that first five minutes -- let me tell you, he wasn't very good the first five minutes. He knows it and I know it. When I can call him into a locker room and he starts saying, that was my fault, then I know I've made some progress. If you can self-evaluate, that's pretty good.

The great ones I had, especially Cleaves, could self-evaluate. In fact, he was on FaceTime with us just a little while ago because they still care about what happens to this program.

I thought Jeremy, 13 or 15 assists is phenomenal, but I thought he took way bigger steps than that just by how he handled situations.

I appreciate it, thank you.

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