

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Michigan State vs Mississippi State

Thursday, March 21, 2024  
Charlotte, North Carolina, USA  
Spectrum Center

## Michigan State Spartans

## Tom Izzo

## Tyson Walker

## Jaden Akins

## Media Conference

Michigan State - 69, Mississippi State - 51

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to start with Michigan State.

TOM IZZO: I'm very proud of my team. My team, my staff. I thought we put a pretty good scouting report together. Chris is an excellent coach. He's done a helluva job there in a short period of time.

They had one of those days where they didn't make some shots, and we've been there before. Thank God these two guys made a bunch of shots.

But the game was won with the rebounding, and both of them had some great offensive rebounds, and I really believe that's where the game was won, along with some of the shots they made.

So it was an old-school win for us. The Cleaves and Smiths and Petersons and Draymonds and all the guys from the past would have been proud because it was a tough, rugged game, and we haven't been bringing that all the time this year, and I thought we did a helluva job.

**Q. Tyson, the rebounding effort that Izzo was talking about, can you talk about how the players had talked about collectively, I assume collectively, making that happen against a very good rebounding team?**

TYSON WALKER: The guards had to come back and help. That was the big part. The bigs, we knew they'd be



battling, boxing out, trying to keep them off the glass. We had to come and clean it up.

Just staying focused. Not losing your man as the shot goes up. Make sure you hit somebody.

**Q. Jaden, your shot was falling early, allowed you to kind of drive a little more, open up to the basket. Then you get a big dunk there. Can you talk about that play but also getting your offense into the flow of the game as well.**

JADEN AKINS: I felt like early I just took good shots. My first shot was an open three, and I hit it. That kind of got me going.

From there, the play you're talking about, he kind of closed out hard, and I hit him with a pump fake, went baseline and just tried to finish.

My team, I credit my team a lot because they just tell me to keep shooting it. No matter if I make or miss, just keep shooting it and stay confident, and so I did.

**Q. Just want to ask both players what you thought of the environment today, obviously the first game of the tournament.**

JADEN AKINS: The atmosphere was really good. Our fans showed out, as they always do. I heard a lot of "Go green! Go white!" chants throughout the arena.

It's March, so it's always going to be a great atmosphere.

**Q. I just wondered having the Coach sitting next to you, who's had so much success in the first round, 20-5, how much influence is that when you guys take the court for a game like this, knowing you're going to be well prepared?**

TYSON WALKER: I think he does a good job with the preseason, purposely making us play games on one-day prep, quick turnarounds for games. That's why we come in and know how to lock in mentally and just follow the scouting report.



JADEN AKINS: Like Tyson said, Coach has been in this situation. He always talks about experience is the best thing to have, and he has a lot of that in this tournament. So we've got all the faith in him to put us in a position, and we just got to go out and do what we do.

**Q. When Coach talks about this being an old-school game and then the legends that have played here and how they'd be proud of a performance like that, Michigan State has had so many legendary performances in this tournament, that can be pressure, I assume, or that can be sort of inspiration that allows that to happen year in and year out. How do you guys internalize that ahead of games like this?**

TYSON WALKER: That's kind of our motto, being physical, doing the dirty work. It's not like we're reinventing anything new. We've just got to do it.

TOM IZZO: Do it better than we've been doing it.

**Q. On exploiting Hubbard, explosive scorer. How you feel you did as a team defensively as the game wore on?**

TYSON WALKER: I think just trying to make every catch, be there on every catch, every shot contested. First half he got it going. Then we kind of second half just locked in more and contested every shot he took, made sure they were further out, not let him get any easy ones.

I think he only scored one more basket second half. Just everyone helping each other, making sure we stop him.

JADEN AKINS: We knew the type of scorer he was. We just really had to make it tough on him. A scorer is going to score the ball. They're going to find a way to get some points. If you hold them below their average or hold them below their field goal percentages, I feel like that's a win for our team. I feel like we made it tough for him.

**Q. Jaden and Tyson, they slapped that press on you early and got a couple of turnovers. Then after that, you guys seemed to handle it and always found the third guy open. Was that similar to an earlier press this year or just preparation before the tournament?**

TYSON WALKER: We always go over our press breakers. We call it special teams. Just being prepared. Just knowing where you're supposed to be.

The turnovers, we kind of just got relaxed a little too much. We just had to make sure we stayed focused and made the right reads.

JADEN AKINS: Like Tyson said, we go over press breakers basically before every game if a team pressed. It doesn't have to be like they pressed all game, just at all. I feel like we've been well prepared for that. It took us a little bit to get settled in, then we started breaking it.

**Q. Coach, you've seen this movie before, low seed, entering the tournament. Make a little noise, things turn around quickly. This performance by your team, what does it mean to you in terms of that?**

TOM IZZO: I thought this was one of the better first game performances of a team that, you know, deservedly so, was seeded a little lower. I thought we brought everything from the get-go. We moved the ball well. We shot the ball well. We rebounded the ball. We were up 16-10 at halftime.

The only thing I was disappointed in, it was sloppy. I give them a lot of credit, but Malik and A.J. made some sloppy turnovers, spin dribble in the lane and things like that. They got some buckets off of that.

That first half, we were up 13 or 12, and Tre struggled a little bit. He threw some great lobs, but he threw them a little too high. Both of them might have been dunks, but that's where Hubbard got fast break open three, fast break layup, and all of a sudden he gets going. When he gets going, it's scary because I've seen him light up some teams that I have a lot of respect for.

**Q. Tom, you've talked a few times about Jaden Akins, sometimes if he misses a couple of shots, does it affect him on the other end. That was as locked in as he's been on both ends in a bit. Did you feel that coming?**

TOM IZZO: I sent him a text really, really, really early this morning. The kid's been under a lot, but he just keeps working. He's in there every day. I said, as good a kid as you are, as good a student as you are, you should go into this game, you deserve to be good. You deserve it. You've done what we do as coaches. We lose a game, we go back and work harder, and that's what he's done.

I think it was his best game three-dimensional. He defended it. He rebounded it, he shot it, and he even passed it some. Some maybe four dimensionally. It was no question Jaden Akins' best game here at Michigan State. It couldn't have come at a better time with a couple of big time rebounds. I'm really happy for him. He deserves what he got.

**Q. You called yesterday, making your 26th straight**



**tournament, quote, neat. How would you describe your 56th tournament win?**

TOM IZZO: Phenomenal, exciting. You know, I don't know. I think those are some of the things you do when you retire. That's what Jay Wright told me a couple of weeks ago. You worry about those things after you're done.

For me, I'm ecstatic -- you know, I kept saying all year this team was good enough, and I was proving me wrong just because of the mistakes we made. Ironically we had the most turnovers we've had all year, 16. We've done a great job. We've been under 10. I think we're averaging 8. And I think they deserve some credit.

This guy Chris is a helluva coach. If you watch their film and watch some of the teams they dismantled, he's a helluva coach. Today wasn't their day. I don't know if Jeffries was hurt. Somebody said he was limping a little bit. He's a helluva player. And the best rebounding team I've seen since ourselves way back in the day.

I'm happy that my staff put together a helluva deal and players followed it. Why we don't lock in all the time, again, that falls on me, but today we did from start to finish, even with mistakes we made.

**Q. You started off strong. They were able to weather the storm. You weathered the storm a little bit. Can you just talk about what you're saying in those huddles or whatever to kind of keep that team resiliency.**

TOM IZZO: I was pretty good for me in the huddles. I thought we had that stretch with Tre, and Tre's been playing great. He's been my most important, and he hits a big three. But those two lobs and then a turnover, and they picked up seven points so quick it would make your head spin. That's because Hubbard is such a good player.

So we weathered that storm and then cut it to, I think, five. I don't know what they got it down to. They get it to four or five or whatever, six, whatever it was. Then we made some good plays too.

In the huddles, guys were focused. You can tell when guys are focused. I think I've got some seniors that don't want to go home yet, and they played like it.

**Q. Mady Sissoko had nine rebounds, I think, according to the box score. His ability to give you some of that rebounding strength that was required to win this game?**

TOM IZZO: It's been hard when you think of Jaden and you think of Mady, and I know people like to pick apart things you do, and that kid's been through a lot in his life and this year with some deaths in his family.

I thought the best he played was against Purdue when he just looked like a monster rebounder that I had recruited. He hadn't been that way all year. That's one of the things we talked about him. We did not think we could win this game without him doing what he did.

Sure enough, I didn't realize he had nine rebounds, so that's even more impressive. Everybody's got a job to do, as Bill Belichick says. His job is to rebound and defend, and he did that at a very, very high level.

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