

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

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

## Michigan State Spartans

## Tom Izzo

## Jeremy Fears, Jr.

## Jaden Akins

## Tre Holloman

## Jase Richardson

### Media Conference



**as veterans of this team. What does it mean to this season be leaders and kind of show Jeremy and Jase what this is all about?**

JADEN AKINS: It means a lot. Don't take it for granted to be playing in the tournament. We definitely are all excited to be here and ready to go. I feel like Jase and Jeremy, this is the moments they live for, and they're ready for it. I just told them keep doing what they do.

TRE HOLLOMAN: I mean, me and Jaden, we have played here, so the little things matter, so we're just trying to teach our young guys that every play matters. So just go out there and just play hard, and we're going to win.

**Q. Tre, I know your role has kind of evolved. You were starting, and Jase was put in the starting lineup. How important is it to have that versatility and make that sacrifice to help your team be successful on these stages?**

TRE HOLLOMAN: I mean, whatever the team needs to win, I am with it. You know, if that's starting, if that's coming off the bench, I just feel like I'm just trying to do the best thing for us to win. It has been working, so...

JEREMY FEARS, JR.: I'd like to say we have basically two starting units. I think our first unit and our second unit can start anywhere.

**Q. Jeremy, like you just said, you guys have depth. I've heard you guys and coach talk about the togetherness of the team. What has been so special about this group, and what about you guys make you think you can make a run in this tournament this year?**

JASE RICHARDSON: I just think what we do off the court. We're always with each other 24/7, always texting each other, playing the game with each other. I feel like we're so connected off the court, and it kind of just bonds on the court.

TRE HOLLOMAN: I just think that everybody wants to see everybody win, so this is just like a great moment for us. This season we've just been so connected, so together.

JADEN AKINS: Yeah, I feel like we've just been together

**Q. Obviously, you guys got here, I think, yesterday or whatever. How do you feel about Cleveland so far and how excited are you to play here?**

JEREMY FEARS, JR.: It's been great getting out here. We got to get some rest, got some food, watched some film and stuff. Other than that, Cleveland is pretty nice.

JADEN AKINS: It's nice. Watched film, like Jeremy said and we're just looking forward to our stay.

TRE HOLLOMAN: Cleveland's been nice, man. It's been chill. The vibes have just been great. You know, our team just trying to go and get a win tomorrow.

JASE RICHARDSON: Super excited to be here. First time being in Cleveland. I've been enjoying it so far, so hopefully, I get to stay a couple more days.

**Q. Jeremy, talk about getting to play in this tournament. What does it mean for you?**

JEREMY FEARS, JR.: It really means a lot, just the fact that last year I got to watch and kind of be a part of our game in North Carolina. So just now this year, I'm able to be able to play in my first NCAA Tournament appearance, so just grateful.

**Q. Jaden and Tre, obviously you guys have both played in March Madness before, and now you're back**



all year. We're all hungry, motivated to win. I feel like that's really our driving factor, and we're just a versatile team that can play multiple ways.

JEREMY FEARS, JR.: I'd definitely say just how together -- how much we are together and that everyone on this team, I don't think, has no egos or pushing and stuff. We all just come out to play basketball, play hard and play together. I think that's really why we've been so successful, and it kind of shows.

**Q. Each give me a word to describe Coach Izzo.**

JEREMY FEARS, JR.: Furious.

JADEN AKINS: Experienced.

TRE HOLLOMAN: Winner.

JASE RICHARDSON: Motivated.

**Q. Jase, your father obviously was a star at Michigan State. What advice did he give you about Coach Izzo, and how much of it is kind of the same as when he played?**

JASE RICHARDSON: First thing he told me was expect the yelling. That's one of the first things he told me, you're going to get yelled at and you're going to have to live with it because at the end of the day, he still loves you for the person that you are and not what you do on the court. I knew whatever he was going to tell me, I should take it with a grain of salt because I know he's still going to love me at the end of the day.

So I feel like that was one of the biggest things he's told me so far, just about playing with coach, and that he's experienced, so I to get to learn from him. He's been here for 30 years, been coaching 40 plus, so I know I can learn a lot of things from him.

**Q. Jeremy, Tom recently said that he thinks you're sort of playing your best basketball of the year at this point. Do you agree with that assessment? And two, what have you done differently that's led him to say that?**

JEREMY FEARS, JR.: I do agree. I think this stretch has been pretty good for me overall. I'd definitely just say just playing the game. Obviously, letting the game come to me, not forcing anything. Just changing my mentality on the game.

Just trying to do anything that we can do to win. That's the most important and the only thing that matters.

**Q. I want to go back to Tom Izzo a little bit. Do each of you kind of remember the first time he yelled at you, and do you guys kind of embrace that hard coaching?**

JEREMY FEARS, JR.: Yeah, definitely. First time he kind of got on me, it was a non-conference game last year. Yeah, it was pretty intense.

JADEN AKINS: Yeah, I mean, it was sometime early in my freshman year. I mean, when Coach is yelling at you, you've got to take it and just realize he's trying to get the best out of you. So that's how I look at it.

TRE HOLLOMAN: Probably my freshman year, probably, probably in practice or something. I probably, like, turned it over or something, and he got on me.

But it's all love, though, so...

JASE RICHARDSON: I was waiting for my turn to get yelled at when I first came out here. It took me like three, four months to finally get yelled at. I was kind of excited about it. I don't know why, but I was kind of excited, like, yeah, he's finally getting on me. So yeah.

TOM IZZO: Well, there's nothing like the tournament. I mean, it's one thing that hasn't changed. Everything else has changed in college basketball. But the excitement of the Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday first weekend is second to none, and I'm just happy that we get to be a part of it.

I've got a good basketball team that has played awfully well, and yet our margin for error is very slim. It's a unique team in a lot of ways, but a fun team to coach and a very connected team and looking forward to seeing what we can do.

**Q. Tom, when you won the national title in 2000, your tournament road began here in Cleveland. Any superstition or possible luck?**

TOM IZZO: Yeah, I got the same socks, underwear and hat on, but other than that -- no, you know, it was interesting. I called one of my former assistants who's now with the Phoenix Suns, and he said, we started in Cleveland. I was on the bus on the way down here, and I talked to -- I just wish it worked that way, but I'm not sure that's God's plan. It's great. It brings back good memories. But the sad part is, none of my guys were born then. (Laughter).

I'm not sure they're thinking, whoa, yeah, we started back then. Now, I am; I was born before that. But no, it was



good memories, and we did start at Cleveland State we played at then.

I'll never forget it, even though it's been too long ago.

**Q. Coach, you talked about just the Cleveland start there, but also other connections of this year. I mean, you got a relationship with Phil Martelli, Jr., and then Van being here. Talk about these other connections. It feels like things are coming full circle for you 25 years later.**

TOM IZZO: Yeah, his damn dad is in my locker room right now. Thank God he brought his wife with him, so there's a little joy in the locker room. He's been a good friend, not forever. We became good friends in a short period of time, and working on some of these crazy things that are going on in college basketball.

I have incredible respect for him and -- and both his sons I know got into it. Jimmy is at Penn State, so he's in our league. And of course, Phillip has done an incredible job. The job he's done there in two years is remarkable. I think he's destined for stardom. We have a lot of concerns. He's got a unique team with their size and everything, but they play hard.

I built my team on playing hard and rebounding well. They rebound the ball really well. They play really hard. They've got some unique matchup problems for us.

I'm looking forward to the game, but I'm just making sure Phil -- he was at Michigan for a while as an assistant. He's probably giving them our scouting reports because blood is thicker than water. I guess I don't blame him.

**Q. Coach, Jeremy Fears was telling us that he thinks you guys have two starting fives with all your depth. How has that helped you guys, and how important is it to have that bench group?**

TOM IZZO: Well, we've outscored teams on the bench. It's been incredible. We've won a lot of games where we've had all 10 players score. It's unique. And yet, as normally should happen and could happen and would happen, as people started. Jeremy and Jase, they started separating, I definitely have seven starters that I could start at any time, but there is getting to be a little separation. Guys are playing -- but we're still playing nine, ten guys.

I think what it does is, it helps the chemistry, helps the camaraderie. They pull from one another, makes the practices better.

One thing I think I've found out -- now, I'm not a doctor, I'm

not a medical guy. But we've had less injuries, like none, all year, and I don't think in my 30 years, that's ever happened. It's because both in practice and games, I don't think we're wearing people out as far as their selves. Hopefully, we're wearing our opponents out and that's helped a little bit.

I think mostly it's the chemistry that's helped, guys pulling for one another.

**Q. Is it strange or humbling to coach against guys like Phil Martelli, Jr., Richard, who are the sons of your peers in the industry?**

TOM IZZO: Is that a backhanded compliment? What the hell is that? You can just say it if you want to say it. Do you want to add one more thing? And I'm coaching one of my former players' sons who happened to win the games here to get us to a championship in Jason Richardson, with Jase.

Yeah, I'm not coaching anybody's grandsons, and I think it's an honor to be able to coach against some of your friends' sons because they're your friends because you respect them, and you respect them, which means they probably raised good kids.

I think Richard was in our league at Minnesota, could play against him. Phillip, we play against tonight. Shaka is a good friend in a different way.

All the guys that we could play, and especially when we do, there's some ties to it. I think that's a good thing.

But going against a guy's son who you have great respect for won't change our friendship, won't change anything because it's not a -- it's a respect factor that I think will go on no matter what happens.

**Q. Just with the current basketball landscape, college basketball landscape, how have you and your coaching staff balancing still playing in the tournament and then all the other factors that are influencing college basketball right now?**

TOM IZZO: I'll just say it's harder than most people think. Everybody tries to make it out to be like it's just part of the new regime. It's not. It's different. There's coaches that are going to lose today and already have lost today, and now their work really starts, keeping their players. We have people messing with people's players during the tournament and during the year.

So there's some issues. But I've done a pretty good job after two miserable years of dealing with it, being on

committees and trying to fight the fight and realizing there's no winning the fight. So, I've done a better job of saying, I don't worry, and I don't talk about questions like you asked me just now. No insult to you.

But I'm trying to just focus on my team and not worry about what's going to happen tomorrow or tomorrow night if we lose or what's going to happen Sunday if you lose or what's going to happen whenever if you lose.

But don't let anybody kid you; there ain't any coaches that feel great about it, and I think there's been a lot of players, as you've watched what's happened -- some made some great moves, but a lot of them made big mistakes.

So we'll see what happens in the long run. It's just something I'm not worrying about anymore. I'm just going to worry about my little Spartan team and see what I can do with them, and it's served me well. It really has.

**Q. It seems you have a lot of joy this year, maybe more than last year with everything going on. What does Michigan State mean to you?**

TOM IZZO: Well, you know, I got married at Michigan State. My kids were raised at Michigan State. My kids went to Michigan State. I lived on the upper peninsula of Michigan, which is way up there where there's 11 months of winter and one month of poor sledding. I grew up a Michigan State fan in a state where maybe a lot of people are Michigan fans. We had a basketball player from Menomonee. We had a couple football players from Kingsford that went to Michigan State, so I always grew up a Michigan State fan.

I'm not sure there's many guys in the world or from my college that care more about their university, care about where it's going, want to be part of the resurgence, want to be part of putting it in the best possible place.

I said Michigan State has been good to me, and I think I've been good to them. And my old boss, Jud Heathcote, once said that a good deal is a good deal for you and a good deal for me. If it's a one-sided deal, it's not a good deal. This has been a good deal for me and a good deal, I think, for them and the 600,000 living alums. I coach and try to win for each and every one of them.

**Q. You mentioned about the matchups and some of the things that Bryant poses. Your team has worked with some big lineups and small lineups. How do you feel that has come around, and will this be a game in which you might need to do that, and how important is Coen Carr defensively with his versatility working with him through the course of the year? Is he important**

**for this one?**

TOM IZZO: Coen Carr has been one of our guys that has gradually -- his shooting has improved so much and his defense and his ball skills. His best basketball has been the last month, and I think this tournament could springboard him into a whole 'nother level next year.

So I think he will be important. I think one of the strengths that most of my teams have had over the years is we had some versatility. We could play big. We could play small. When we won the National Championship, we played Wisconsin. I think the score was 2-3 at halftime or 17-19, whatever one you want to pick. Then two days later, we played Florida and scored 90 points.

I think that's kind of been our motto, and that's been -- we won't try to just impose who we are. We should be versatile enough that if we have to play a different style, it's all about winning. Whatever you've got to do to win.

I kind of grind that into my guys. So if we've got to go big, we'll go big. If we've got to go small, we'll go small. We want to run and do all those things. If somebody slows it down, I think we're equipped to play a lot of different ways, and I think that's one of the things that have helped us in this tournament over the 27 trips we've been here.

**Q. How do you view the value of the mid-majors to this tournament?**

TOM IZZO: Well, you know, sometimes I hate them. But most of the times, I love them. You know, let's face it; the first thing I tell my team, the first night we had it, we had a team meeting right after the selection. I said, you have uniqueness in your coach. There's things you like about me, things you don't like about me. But one thing you should know is, I have experience. I've experienced a 2-15 with a great team getting beat by Middle Tennessee. I've been a 7 seed and made it to a Final Four.

We've kind of did it a lot of different ways and been involved in some upsets, and I've been involved in some upsets the other way.

I think the difference with basketball and March Madness, what makes it so spectacular but so grinding for us and hits you right in the gut, is football -- I know now they're at 12 teams in their playoff, but it's the 12 best teams in the country. We have 68 teams of all different levels and all different schools that have 3,000 and schools that have 60,000. It's just so different.

Everybody loves Cinderella. I mean, my mom was probably -- if she's pulling for them tomorrow, she's 98 and

three quarters years old, I'm going to be mad at her, but everybody loves the underdog. Everybody loves the small school. Everybody loved when Valparaiso -- I still remember the shot and the things that have happened.

I have great respect, because those guys got to coach without some of the things we get at our level, and there are some great, great, great coaches at that level that are making a name for themselves and going to do some damages. They move up the ladder and get jobs here.

Our respect is off the charts. Do I ever see the tournament going to just -- there's times I'd say yes, like when we got beat. But this is what makes it. This is the difference with the NCAA basketball tournament compared to just about any other tournament there is.

**Q. With the expanded conference this year and some of the road trips you had to take, does that become an advantage, this type of year, because of the amount you've had to be on the road and playing in different places?**

TOM IZZO: You know, in fairness, most of us in the Midwest had to take one trip out there. In fairness to our brothers in the West Coast, they had to take three trips sometimes.

I think what's going to help us is, we've had some tough trips where you come back and then all of a sudden, you're playing two days later, and you don't have a lot of prep time, and that's what happens in this tournament. If you win tomorrow, you've got a day to prepare, and then you play again. Then you get a week off.

But the quick turnarounds, I think the league and the way it is helps prepare us.

The travel, you know, if we got out of this and we traveled to Atlanta, it's not like we're traveling to Hawaii. I don't know what the travel does for some of them. But I think it does prepare you for adversity. We went on our first couple trips, plane problems, weather problems. You don't usually have those at this time of year. We have no excuses.

**Q. I was asking your guys if they remember the first time you yelled at them, and Jase Richardson says it took a couple months. So, my question is: What took so long?**

TOM IZZO: You know, you guys are something, man. Let me ask you something. What kind of kid were you when you were five?

**Q. I probably needed to get yelled at.**

TOM IZZO: Well, did you? Because if you didn't, you probably turned out like you did and you became a writer, so that's your problem.

But I would say that yelling at -- nobody gets yelled at. When I talk to my staff, I've got Thomas Kellie, who was here in 2002, and Mateen comes into practice and asks me why we're belly bumping now for our award row instead of playing. I said, I'm worried about lawyers suing me suing me.

To be honest with you, you don't have to yell at your child if he doesn't walk into the street, if he goes to class and gets good grades. What is the word insanity? It's when people do the same thing over and over and over wrong. If you let that go in coaching, you're getting fired. Your team is not winning. And most importantly, most importantly, whether you believe this or not, that player that has a dream of where he wants to get, doesn't get there.

And so Jase is like a 3.9 student. He speaks more languages -- I don't even understand him. He's worldly. He works on his game. He doesn't make a lot of mistakes. If he does, I'm going to tell him. But if I tell him once, it probably hits home.

Other guys need a little more pushing. Some guys need a lot of pushing.

But you don't yell at people like you used to in the good ol' days where I could have some fun doing it and then you could laugh about it after. My reunions are about all the fun we had. You just don't look at it as fun.

But when you accomplish championship level -- let's take a look at some of the guys. I grew up with Saban. Me and him started together. Sometimes, he's not the happiest guy. I love him. I think he's the best because our job is to push people to do things that they don't even think they can do. Our job is to make them compete at a level that they have no clue how to get there.

And most of their parents have no clue how to get there. Once in a while, you get lucky as a parent was a player. But that's hard to do, and so -- and you get a very small time to do it in.

Yeah, Jase doesn't do a lot of things wrong. I've got some other guys that -- what the hell you want me to do? Get on my knees and say, would you please guard somebody for the 4,800th time? That doesn't work, either.

**Q. You've reflected on what this place was in 2000 and**

**what that meant going on to win the title. It's worked out for you at Michigan State, you could say, but have you ever wondered what it might have been like if you were coaching the Cavs?**

TOM IZZO: Yeah, walking in the door, I did. You wonder. I don't regret. I don't regret. I had some great opportunities in the NBA.

Everybody has a choice to make, and I made my choices. But I'm just blessed that I had opportunities.

Times have changed, too. Who knows what coaches will do nowadays compared to what it was like 25 years ago. Our world has changed a lot. I get a kick out of people when they say, man, you've got like pro rules. I always say, which ones are those? We don't have free agency. We don't have a salary cap. We've got beyond pro rules.

I never had a bad year where things went wrong and I said, boy, I wish I was in the NBA or something. I have tremendous respect for the coaches in the NBA. I think the coach here has done an unbelievable job. One of my former GAs is one of the top assistants here, Jordan Ott. I follow all my friends in the NBA.

But no, I did it my way. I picked and chose what I wanted to do, and I was lucky enough to work for people at Michigan State that kept me around, and it's worked out pretty good. I'm cool with that.

**Q. When you've got a guy like Frankie who's getting this opportunity for the first time, a guy like Jeremy who was here -- or was there last year, but couldn't play, a freshman like Jase, do you see this first-time experience, whether young or old, just to get that little bit of an extra spark for the tournament?**

TOM IZZO: Szymon, too. Those guys never got a chance to -- I mean, like, Szymon on senior night, he was like a kid in a candy store. He was like, oh, my God. That is cool.

I don't want anybody not excited about playing in this, and that includes me. Sometimes, I've got to slap myself to wake up and say, wow, there's so many guys that don't get a chance to play in this year. I've got some good buddies that just didn't have great years, and they're not playing in it.

So, for a player, just think of Jase, he watched his dad come back for reunions and watched highlights of his dad, and his dad won two Big Ten championships, went to two Final Fours, won a National Championship. He gets a chance to do his thing now. He gets a chance to be in that position.

I know he's excited. I think Szymon and Frankie are thrilled to death to be in the NCAA Tournament. They've never been in it, and it is happening.

Jeremy, knowing he couldn't play last year, he's had a hell of a two, three weeks. He's really elevated his game, too, and I think he's pretty excited, but not as excited as the coach. The coach still appreciates the NCAA Tournament more than you can believe. Don't sleep, get nervous. I played in enough of them, you would think it would go away, but it doesn't go away because it's the ultimate to me. It's why you work, why you play. You don't work to win games. You work to win championships, and you work to have opportunities to play in these kinds of settings.

Hopefully, we'll play well.

**Q. We talked to A.J. earlier and, obviously, he's here with Vanderbilt, and I wonder how much you've followed that what it means seeing him get back. And also, being here in Cleveland, what has Jesse McCulloch meant to the development of your big men when they get to go against a scholarship big guy every day?**

TOM IZZO: Well, the best and worst thing we did was redshirt Jesse. I think a lot of people in this city questioned even when we took him, and he has been a -- you guys have been in practice. He's a really good player and is going to be a really, really good player, and going against him every day, he's got energy, he's got enthusiasm. He never has a bad day. I wish I could borrow some of that from him. But it's meant a lot to us, I think, to have him.

With A.J. I talked to A.J. I don't know, every three, four weeks, sometimes every two. I text him. I congratulate him. Mady, those guys graduated from our place. They'll always be part of us. Sometimes things work out better or worse, but nobody leaves my place very often with a lot of animosity. They leave it. I tell them the truth. They tell me the truth, and it works out.

But I am pulling for A.J. Ironically, I got a nephew that is an assistant coach at Vanderbilt. So, I double pull for him.

But I want him to be successful, I really do. I don't sit there and say, I hope he fails, if that's what anybody thinks because he's a graduate of Michigan State. He's part of my family, and he'll always be part of my family. His dad came up for a football game, and A.J. came up for grind week. We've got a weird thing at our place. Very few people leave without -- they might not always be happy. I might not always be happy with them. But I think for the

most part, there's always respect because there's always communication.

I'm not afraid of controversy. And most of the guys I coach, by the time they're seniors, they're not afraid of it, either, and that's a good thing.

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