

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Ole Miss vs Michigan State

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

State Farm Arena

## Ole Miss Rebels

## Chris Beard

### Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: If everybody's ready, we'll get started with Coach Beard. If you have a question for Coach.

**Q. Obviously you've faced Tom Izzo a couple years ago in the Final Four and second consecutive game facing one of the better defenses in the country. Just what have you seen from Michigan State over the past couple days and the defensive challenges they bring?**

CHRIS BEARD: Got nothing but respect for Coach Izzo and Michigan State, Hall of Fame coach, have followed his teams my whole career. We have a drill that we've done every day since 1999 at Fort Scott, Michigan State rebounding. The college basketball game is better because of Coach Izzo's time in the sport. Look up to him.

We try to build our programs over the years, so a lot of things in Michigan State in mind. This year's team at Michigan State is a really good team, obviously Big Ten champion for a reason. Definitely have an identity. The defense and rebounding are real. I think this team has a really good offensive transition to get the ball from A to B as quick as anybody we've played all season.

I think it's strength in numbers too. It's a real team, eight, nine, ten deep. Looks like they got great role definition. It's hard to prepare for a team like this that doesn't have one set leading scorer. They can play inside and out.

Just like every year in a Sweet 16 type game, our thing is we think we're going to have to play our best 40 minutes of the season to this point to be successful in this game. It's not a last-minute panic game plan. We've been telling the guys that all year long. It's really important that we play better in December than we did in November. It's really important that we're playing our best basketball in March.



Certainly we've even mentioned this, when you get to the second week of the tournament, you've really got to try to play your best 40 minutes of the season. So that's our objective tomorrow night.

**Q. Chris, three out of your top five scorers on the season returned. How important was that this off-season getting those guys back? And in the first couple games here in the tournament, has their leadership given you any kind of a bit of a boost?**

CHRIS BEARD: Yeah, no doubt about it. I think, when you study our team and why we've been successful, why we're here on this stage in the Sweet 16, our roster management, I think we did a good job.

In today's changing game of college basketball, we all know that our teams are going to change drastically from year to year. I've always thought the first brick, as you lay the team, the first building block has got to be returners.

For us, what was really important is that we returned the right guys, the guys that we thought could take the next step as individual players, the guys that we think we can build this thing around. So for us to have Matt and Brake and Juju back as well as Rob and Mugs, who play a big role behind the scenes, that's what's important.

It's about getting the right guys back. The media, the stories, are going to be about the transfers. I think more important for those stories are the guys that come back. It gives you a real advantage in college basketball. You don't have to have a certain number back, but you've got to have the right guys back. For us, with Matt, Brake, and Juju returning to Ole Miss, that's where this roster construction started.

**Q. As you look at the Sweet 16 field, obviously it's all about the Power conferences, including the SEC, and that means traditional Cinderella type teams in that field. Does it surprise you or maybe even concern you that the Sweet 16 has that composition?**

CHRIS BEARD: Yeah, I haven't thought about that. I didn't realize that. We're focused on our game against Michigan State. But with that question in mind, our



coaching staff has a lot of experience at the different levels of college basketball, and certainly our Little Rock championship team a few years ago that made the tournament, was successful in the tournament, I think those stories are a big part of college basketball.

But I wasn't aware of what you just said, and I haven't spent much time thinking about it.

We set it up for our guys, it's a four-team tournament each weekend. Last weekend in Milwaukee, it was a four-team tournament. The most important game in the four-team tournament is the first game. So for us, it's Michigan State in the first game, and that's where all of our focus is 100 percent.

**Q. Wondering how the salads have been. You referenced them in Nashville. You wanted your players to enjoy everything about it, including the salad. And just kind of how your experience of going through this has helped them acclimate and advance here.**

CHRIS BEARD: Last night we went to Morton's Steakhouse in downtown Atlanta. I was born in Marietta, Georgia, right down the road. My mom and dad are from Marietta, met in high school. Growing up in Marietta, we didn't go to Morton's in Atlanta, we went to the Varsity. I think the Varsity hot dog is arguably the best, in my opinion, it's James Coney Island, it's the Varsity, and then it's the old baseball game hot dog. Different than football, different than basketball, different than a concert.

If you go to a baseball game at any level, high school, summer ball, all the way to the Major Leagues, if the hot dog is served in tin foil, that's the key. Not a big fan of the hot dog where they pull it with the tongues right off the deal, drop it in water. That's not my deal. If I'm at a baseball game and I see that there's tin foil involved in a hot dog, that's where we roll.

Back to Morton's, true story. Morton's had the Caesar salad there last night, but the food was so amazing after the salad, that myself included, not a lot of us went with the salad. They got the shrimp cocktails on the table and the crab cake -- I guess you call them balls with a little stick in it. It's hard to get fired up about the salad knowing what's coming down the line.

My personal experience in the NCAA Tournament, that's not going to help us in this one. Coach Izzo has coached in more of these than I think anybody in the history of college basketball, including second weekends and the third weekend too.

Luckily that won't have anything to do with the game. If they gave points on the scoreboard for the coaches' resumes before this game, we'd be a little bit behind to start.

But we do share with our players the experiences of playing in the tournament, not just myself, we have three players that have played in the tournament. Then we have one player, Juju, that played in the Elite Eight as a freshman at St. Pete. So Juju's had some voice this week in preparation, as have I, been in the second weekend.

So we just try to share with the guys who haven't been here exactly what they're getting into.

**Q. Last time you coached against Michigan State, they had a star point guard in Cassius Winston, and now Jeremy Fears is their guy. Not necessarily asking you to compare them as players, but what do you notice in Fears and just the importance of that position for Tom Izzo and his program?**

CHRIS BEARD: There are some similarities in every player over the years that has played point guard for Coach Izzo. That position is going to be a leader. That position is going to be a ball mover. That position is going to be a great decision-maker. That player is going to play on both ends of the floor. He's going to be the heartbeat of the team in a lot of ways.

I think this year's two point guards, two guys that wear headbands, two guys that are, to me, got Tom Izzo DNA all over them. It's been a focal point of our scouting report understanding -- trying to explain to our guards what you're getting into.

You can look at that stat sheet a little bit, but that doesn't tell the whole story. You're going to be playing against a guy that's basically the extension of the Hall of Fame coach that's standing and sitting on the other sideline.

Yeah, I think Michigan State has been so good over the years in the point guard on every team, whether he's the leading scorer some years or whether he's the defensive anchor other years, the bottom line is, in my opinion, when you play point guard for Coach Izzo, you're all about the right things.

**Q. I know you have a trend of going to Greek life housing and trying to recruit students. Do you expect that crowd to show out tomorrow or feel somewhat like a home game? I think it's like an hour and a half trip or something like that.**

CHRIS BEARD: Where did you go to school? What

college?

**Q. University of Georgia.**

CHRIS BEARD: My daughter was considering going to Georgia, but your geography is a little off. Oxford, Mississippi, is not an hour and a half from Atlanta.

Georgia is a great school. I told you I was born in Marietta, the Bulldogs. I had a Bulldog T-shirt. I used to watch football on Saturdays with my grandfather.

We're deserving of the seed we got. We had a good season in the SEC. We beat a lot of teams that were in the Sweet 16, so we have a lot of confidence internally. I think one of the benefits is where they seed you, so this is a good location for us. It's about a 5 1/2 hour drive from Oxford here. Now with Atlanta traffic, that can turn into a 9-hour drive pretty quick.

I remember those days vividly too coming from Marietta to Georgia because we didn't have cell phones or iPads back in the day. We had a radio, and it wasn't my music. We're going to listen to what my dad wants to listen to. He would always say, son, when you turn 16 and you drive one day, listen to whatever you want. Until then, we're going to listen to what I want.

We have a great fan base at Ole Miss. One of the reasons we've been able to build this a lot quicker than most anticipated was that we have all the ingredients necessary to build a good program, leadership from our chancellor and AD, fan base, beautiful campus, other sports succeeding on campus, resources, collective, and one of the things we have is a great student body.

So, yeah, I think some of the students will drive down. I wish those guys a safe trip coming down from campus. We had a great showing in Milwaukee last week. So our fan base is awesome.

I've coached some great places. Ole Miss, top of the list. Our fans travel, they show up. So I think we will have some red and blue and some powder blue in the stands tomorrow, and we're very appreciative of that.

**Q. You mentioned Coach Izzo several times. What stands out to you for the reason to do what he's done for as long as he has? The success he's had is pretty amazing. What stands out to you as a fellow coach of sort of the reasons why he's been able to be back here year after year and at age 70 here again?**

CHRIS BEARD: Are you a golfer or just wearing the shirt? Tim Floyd, my friend, he gave me a shirt like that, and it's

in my rotation, but I don't play golf. The first day I wore that shirt, I had so many people coming up to me asking about golf, and I didn't get it. It wasn't until later in the day I realized I was wearing it.

Yes, sir. Coach Izzo, everybody in our game could talk to him. He's impacted the game in so many ways. It's like when I worked for Coach Knight, there was never anybody I talked to in the basketball world that didn't have some type of connection. Even if they never met Coach Knight, maybe they saw his first clinic, maybe they ran his offense, maybe they loved one of his stories or press conferences.

It's the same thing with Coach Izzo. To me, he's Mt. Rushmore of this sport. To answer your question in a timely way, the first thing I think about is just his ability to adapt. He's coached in all these different eras of college basketball, he's had different players, different coaches, different rules, different styles of the game.

Now here we are in the Name, Image, and Likeness and portal area and Michigan State here on the main stage. What's the common ingredient? It's Coach Izzo. I think he's one of the GOATS, and I think his ability to adapt and adjust through the changes of the game while still staying true to Michigan State basketball, which to me, I've never been to a practice live, I'm on the outside looking in, but in my opinion it's defense, rebounding, sharing the ball, playing the right way, team over self.

A lot of the things that we built our program starting way back in 1999 at Fort Scott Community College, had been Michigan-based. When you tell somebody we want to be as tough as Michigan State, we want to rebound like Michigan State, then all of us in the basketball world understand what that means.

**Q. Wondering, this Michigan State team's evolved a little bit throughout the season. I'm wondering how far back you went in scouting and what you've seen and how they've changed throughout the season.**

CHRIS BEARD: I'm a basketball junkie. I don't say that in a self-promoting way. I hate the coach that sits up there and talks about how hard he works and puts everything on Instagram. We all work hard. I can assure you that there's 16 staffs that work hard or we all still wouldn't be playing college basketball this late in March.

But I just like to watch games, period. I would estimate I'd already seen one-third of their schedule before we ever drew this game. Then certainly now we've had a chance to really watch.

So I would agree, like all teams, they're playing different



than they did in November, and they're better than they were in February. That's a compliment, respect to their coaching staff and their players. I think they're playing their best basketball of the season right now. To me they're one possession away from being a 1 seed. They're the Big Ten champs for a reason.

They're just a really good team, and they're playing really well. I think strength in numbers might be something they're saying on their end this year. It's something we've used before, that terminology. We believe that we're strength in numbers at Ole Miss as well. I don't know who our leading scorer is, but I know we've had five or six guys average double figures all year long. It's one of the reasons we're here today.

I think the same is true for Michigan State. We've described their team to our players in a way that they have a nine-man rotation, and all nine are very capable of being the leading scorer, the leading assist guy, the leading rebounder, the best player on the floor in this game. So I think that's a compliment, how they've set their team up.

Obviously that means they don't have an ego problem in their locker room. I think they play for each other. So many clips we've showed our team this week in preparation aren't the Xs and Os of the games. It's the clips in between the games -- it's the 50-50 balls, it's the bench energy, it's the helping the teammate up off the floor.

We know what we're getting into. We came here to compete in this game and have a chance to win this game, but we know exactly what we're getting into. We're playing one of the best teams in the country, one of the most connected teams in the country with a Hall of Fame coach, and we'll have to play our best 40 minutes of the season to this point to have a chance to be successful tomorrow night.

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