

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

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State Farm Arena

Michigan State Spartans Tom Izzo

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: If everybody's ready, we'll get started with Coach Izzo.

Q. Coach, I heard Chris Beard talking about your adaptability. How much have things changed for you over the years? And when he talks about adapting, what would some of those things at the top of your list be?

TOM IZZO: I don't know if adapting, adjusting, I think we've all had to adjust. It's just that I've been here longer than Chris.

Over the years, you think about the different things -- it's fun to have your players come back from 25 years ago, and they say why do you allow this, and what do you let go here, and what do you do there? Those are adjustments that I think hopefully the principle of what you do doesn't change, but you do have to adapt to the --

Just like -- I always say it's like, if you keep your tie, the fat tie goes out, the skinny tie comes in, and the fat tie comes back in. The bell bottoms, the straight leg, the miniskirts, the short and long skirts, the different hairstyles. I think that's where you adapt.

I think at some time I've adapted too much to not realizing still what it takes to win championships. You've still got to defend, rebound, and run. Football, you've still got to block and tackle. Both sports you can't turn the ball over.

We always make it more difficult than it really is because everybody wants to hear some new fancy phrase, but it's still the meat and potatoes, I think, are basically the same. If I've adjusted a little bit, I'm sure he's adjusted a little bit, but I don't think I've changed a lot.

Q. Kind of a two part question, the first part is we saw the reaction when you first heard you were going to play Chris Beard again, a coach that you faced in the Final Four. Based on what you said then versus watching him now, does it confirm a lot of what you previously said? Secondly, one of those Final Four runs, you all faced Ole Miss along the way, and I know you played in a lot of those tournament games, but do you recall anything from that last meeting?

TOM IZZO: Yeah, we lost. So it sucked. We lost.

I didn't know Chris very well then and gained a lot of respect for him. Number one, he had coached for Coach Knight, and Coach Knight I was a fan of, and we talked about him. This is before the game, meaning a couple days before the game.

But what I loved about him is I think we're kind of out of the same cloth. His teams are always tough. I thought we got punked up there. I thought we weren't ready for that, and we're usually the more physical team.

I thought his team did a helluva job. It was a dogfight game, in it till the end, but they did beat us and deserved to beat us. So I gained respect for Chris then, just how he coached, how he was, and how he was after the game. He wasn't arrogant and this and that. He was -- and still is to this day.

So, yeah, I have an appreciation for him as a coach and I have an appreciation for the way he coaches, and I have a real appreciation for how hard his team plays.

Q. I believe it was last weekend you mentioned when you were sort of asked to reflect on your career, and you immediately remembered the 26 offensive rebounds -- I think it was actually 24, so maybe the memory was a little fuzzy.

TOM IZZO: Geez, my memory, huh?

Q. I only read that somewhere else. It was interesting to me that you still remember that game from your first season when you're thinking about your success over the longevity of your career and how -- playing off the



adaptability, how do you decide what things that are going to be there forever and those things that can change a little bit on?

TOM IZZO: Because I remember the people that influenced my life. Of course my father, my mentor Jud Heathcote. But some of the coaches, in the Big Ten it was Bobby Knight, it was Gene Keady, it was Clem Haskins. But early in my career that first year, we played Arkansas, and they were good. I just loved him as a coach because he was tough and his teams were athletic, and they could rebound.

We went and got 20-some offensive rebounds. That was a lot. It coined the phrase by Jud Heathcote, my boss, he said, man, your best offense is the missed shot because we couldn't shoot it very good, but we won the game.

A year later, John Chaney had an influence on me. We talked about scheduling and that I should schedule the best teams. He said, I'll come play you. I said, I don't want to play you. They were really good.

So I did, lost by one the first year at my place. Pepe Sanchez hit a shot the second year at the buzzer to beat us again. And yet I took what he told me, and I kept scheduling that way, and I think it really helped my program.

I guess what I'm saying in the long run is I look at things that have happened to me, experience does matter, especially if you use it in the right way. I've had a lot of people, you know. I have not done anything that I've done myself. I've stolen from every possible coach that I've ever -- in football and basketball. I look at both sports, and I steal, steal, steal.

Back then, I stole from Arkansas, I stole from Temple, I stole from Indiana, Purdue, Minnesota, still stealing from Nick Saban and different football guys I know. Because everybody -- I always say you can win games in a lot of different ways, but to win championships, it's pretty standard still. You've still got to be able to do things with some accountability and some discipline, and some of those guys taught me that best.

Q. You always have a special bond with your teams, but it feels like with this group you really like these guys. What is it about them that's created this bond between you and them this season?

TOM IZZO: I think, if I say that, yeah, I have a special bond with them more than others, Cleaves will kill me, and Draymond will be hunting me down. You've got to watch that when you've been in the same place a lot of years.

I do think it is one of the more connected teams, but I wouldn't say elite talent, I mean, I've had some teams with pretty good talent. But this team is connected. I think we did things to help it. We went to Spain. We went to the UP, where I'm from, and taught them how to eat pasties for pregame meal. We did some different things.

Oh, you like that? You're probably the only guy in this room who knows what the hell they are.

Then we started playing a lot of players. So everybody had some ownership in the team, and different guys would rear their heads and maybe score. We had seven, eight, different leading scorers. This team appreciated that. And most teams are so selfish they don't appreciate that.

I don't think it's what I did, I think it's what they've done. I just kind of sat there and said, wow, I do appreciate, in this day and age where we're a little more selfish, this team so far hasn't been selfish at all.

Q. Coach, because of your experience, now that you have -- you joked about Coen being here from Atlanta and how he has to pay for everyone as far as food. When it comes to preparing for this game tomorrow and hopefully Sunday, has it changed as far as the flexibility you've given the players, as far as maybe curfew or bedtime, versus focusing and preparing for the game?

TOM IZZO: Hell no. Still have curfew, and I told Coen, don't be inviting any of those old girlfriends over either. So that hasn't changed one bit.

You know, it's funny, for some reason with this team -- and sometimes you get stung -- but I learned when I got the job, I'd fall asleep with two eyes shut. It wasn't long after having the Flintstones that I learned to sleep with one eye and then no eyes shut. With this team, I'm kind of back to I just trust them.

I've never had a group of guys that are better students, better guys. I know it sounds corny, but it's true. Coen Carr is one of them that I don't worry about. If he told me he was going somewhere to do something right now with his family or with his friends, I think I could sleep with both eyes shut.

But there's still going to be some rules now. Just because our world has no rules and college sports has no rules, Michigan State still has some rules.

Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you about Jase. Obviously his role is amped up throughout the year, but early on,

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was there any concern that as a freshman he'd struggle against some of the other veteran five, six year guys in the Big Ten, and how do you think he's been able to speed up and excel in the Big Ten?

TOM IZZO: I'd say early on I thought that, and then we played Kansas in this building. I realized that the moments aren't too big for them.

Now, I think he's got good pedigree, you know. Not only his dad and his mom played and she coached. It's kind of -- but I had to learn that too. You don't just see that in recruiting, you learn that.

But if there's one thing I will say, somebody asked me last week he didn't shoot it as well. Was he nervous? No, the kid is confident, not cocky. He's got an unbelievable demeanor to him, and he has gotten better in a lot of different areas. But he's also been damn good when he came.

I think the way he was raised, the moments aren't too big. I never -- after the Kansas game here -- that was only the second game of the season. It wasn't like -- we lost. But I started realizing then this kid -- like some kids are so cocky that they don't get moved by the moment. He's not cocky. He's just confident in what he can do.

I've been amazed. I haven't had many kids like him in that respect, to be honest with you.

Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you a big picture question about NIL. I think a common criticism of it is the kids are chasing money and opportunities. I'm curious kind of how you square that when the same probably could be said of a lot of coaches.

TOM IZZO: You all saw my comments. So I respect your question. But there will be no talk of NIL or transfer portal here. This is going to be about Jaden Akins, the seniors, all the players I had before, and the opportunity to try to do something that the memory will last -- winning a championship, going to Final Fours is a memory like no other if you're an athlete.

So if you want to take my number and call me when everything is said and done, I'll give you a different opinion than maybe what most people think. But I apologize, I'm not going to talk about that the day before the opportunity to play a game that could lead to another game that could lead to going to a Final Four, which is better than any NIL, it's better than my contract, it's better than the money I make, it's better than anything I do.

That's where I'll leave it, but I'll be more than happy to give

you my number.

Q. Tom, Jeremy had mentioned that the guys hadn't seen the Texas Tech film from the Final Four. I'm guessing you probably went back and watched it. I'm just curious if you see similarities from the defense that they played that day to Chris' team now, and what are sort of the philosophies that makes that thing go on that end? I know they frustrated Cassius pretty well that time in Minneapolis?

TOM IZZO: I'm crazy, but I'm not a masochist. Why would I want to go back and watch something when I got my butt kicked?

In all fairness, I did watch a little bit of it one night, but not much because that's five years, six years ago. So much has changed in so many ways. I know, I watch Chris during the year, I watched him when he was at Texas, I watched him once they beat us and we actually did become friends.

Of course I watch people that I respect and how they play, but every team is different. I think I know what his philosophy is, and I think he knows what mine is. So it wasn't like I went back and looked at something that didn't work out for me.

In fact, when I looked at it, that famous quarterback was sitting in the stands. So I don't even know if I'm going to be a Chiefs fan. I mean, I love the guy, but now I don't know if I'm going to be a Chiefs fan anymore because he was there pulling for Texas Tech, which he should have been.

No, I didn't spend much time on that film. I got enough work to look at all the film. I got 30 games to evaluate them now.

Q. Coach, I haven't seen a Michigan State practice in 10 years. A lot's changed, three letters aside. I guess I would ask you if some of the changes and some of the opportunities that players have has changed the way you coach. You hear so much about maybe guys don't want to get coached hard anymore. Maybe coaches are going to have to adapt to a different type of athlete. So how different are the practices now than they were 10 years ago?

TOM IZZO: Back when you were there, back in the day -- I was even more than that. We had the famous War Drill, our rebounding drill, and I did borrow 12 sets of football pads from Nick Saban, and we did do that. They asked me would I do that again, and I said hell no. They asked me why, the players couldn't take it? And I said, no, the lawyers would sue me, so I don't do that anymore.

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I do still feel the War Drill is still important. You know, I think I adjusted a little bit. We went through a lot of things at Michigan State for a while, and I think I -- like we all do. We go too far to the right or too far to the left when we're making adjustments, and that's why I vowed that I'm going to do what I believe in.

I study a lot of coaches, and I call coaches I don't know, football and basketball, and I do call coaches I do know. I think we still figure it out. Once you win a National Championship, winning a tournament game means nothing. To our fans, it doesn't mean much, but to me it doesn't mean as much.

Finishing third in the Big Ten a couple times or fifth was okay because maybe they weren't that good, but it just doesn't turn me on, it doesn't do anything for me.

So I have to figure out a way to try to win championships. We won the Big Ten by three games, which to be very honest, was shocking to me. At the same time, unfortunately, I'm going to play against a team that I think has a similar philosophy as mine, so I know we're going to play against a tough team. I know they're going to be physical. I know they're going to play hard. I know they're going to be somewhat disciplined.

I think that's what, probably, if I really looked at all the teams that are left, there's got to be some common denominator. Somebody could have just an incredible amount of talent, but the gist of it is you'd better be pretty focused, pretty disciplined, pretty accountable, and pretty together and connected if you're going to move on unless you have unbelievable talent. Maybe there's one or two that do, but most of them don't.

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