

Michigan State: A school, a shooting, and a team in the aftermath



By Brendan Quinn Feb 20, 2023

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So what's a basketball team's place in all of this? [Michigan State](#) is one of the largest, proudest universities in the country. Undergrad enrollment of more than 50,000; a half-million living alumni. Spartans everywhere. All over this state, all over the country. One of your neighbors is probably a Spartan. There's a woman right here in this coffee shop, wearing an MSU sweatshirt. You see that Spartan head and give a compassionate nod. You want to ask, what year did you graduate? Did you have a class at Berkey Hall? Do you have a child at State? ... Are you OK?

Instead, there's only a moment of eye contact. A half-smile and sad eyes.

This is the heavy air of the aftermath. Michigan State was broken into pieces one week ago. The first shot was fired at 8:18 p.m. last Monday. In one moment, everything changed. Eight families tasked with living out a nightmare. Three saying goodbye to their children: Brian Fraser, Alexandria Verner and Arielle Anderson. Five families saying prayers no one should ever say. Pleas for survival.

The days since have played out as they do after school shootings. Vigils and memorials. Billboards lit up. Stories of heroism and survival. Hashtags. Questions, lots of questions. Fear, anger. Everyone doing their best, dealing with the worst.

In East Lansing, those atop the university have attempted to make impossibly large decisions. When to resume classes. What to do with buildings that are now morbid monuments. How to rapidly enhance and improve security. How to honor those lost and those trying to live.

Every student has his or her own decisions to make. A week ago they were barricaded in dorm rooms and apartments, in classrooms and cafeterias, in closets and bathrooms. Mass trauma. Do students want to walk across this campus, pass by these places, relive that night? No one can fathom what those who were in [Room 114](#) of Berkey Hall are going through.

The school's first return to regular activity came last Thursday when the university announced athletic competition would resume over the weekend. The hockey team traveled to Wisconsin. The baseball and softball teams went south for games. Men's and women's track and field set out for a meet at Notre Dame. The women's basketball team hosted Maryland on Saturday in East Lansing. So on.

While MSU's other 50,000 undergrads are taking their time to process and proceed, these athletes chose to go play and compete.

The men's basketball team is no different, except for the spotlight in which they step into.

For those 14 Michigan State students, playing their game means wearing the school's name on their chest in front of huge crowds and a national television audience. It means being public faces in this massive moment. It means opening themselves up to criticism and social media fodder. Nothing small, nothing easy.

But it's something, they say, they needed to do.

Thinking on all of this in a private moment, [Malik Hall](#), a Michigan State senior, considered the contours and said: "You know, Coach (Tom Izzo) has told us it's an opportunity. But I think it's a little more than that."

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Everyone at Michigan State has their story from last Monday night. Where they were, what they saw. For MSU men's basketball, the night played out from a makeshift command center in Garrett Briningstool's living room.

Briningstool is one of the faces in a Spartans huddle that you may not recognize. His official title in the program is chief of staff. What does that mean? Briningstool is essentially a problem solver. If there's a man behind the curtain, it's him. Those in the program say he's the type who coordinates with calm. Considering his primary role is dealing with Izzo, that's a hell of an attribute.

Monday began as a typical day. The Spartans were coming off a win at [Ohio State](#) the previous afternoon and feeling good about themselves. A second straight victory. Around 3:30 p.m., they gathered for a light 90-minute practice and preliminary prep for a Wednesday game at Minnesota. Then everyone went separate ways.

Around 8:30 p.m., Matt McQuaid, the program's assistant director of basketball operations, sent out the practice schedule reminder for Tuesday. He didn't know shots had just been fired at Berkey Hall. He didn't know police and ambulances were careening through East Lansing, racing down Grand River Avenue.



 Vigils were held after the shooting at Michigan State, the 71st mass shooting of 2023 in the United States. (Alex Wong / Getty Images)

Sitting home on his couch, Briningstool, a 30-year-old from Clinton Township, Mich., saw the text alert on his phone. He changed the channel to local news. He thumbed through social media. He called his wife, MSU senior communications manager Lauren Scott Briningstool, who was out to dinner with friends, but now scrambling into action herself. He sent text messages in group chats with players, staff, managers and parents. "Everyone good? Stay where you are. This is real." He called every player on the team and all student support staff. Status and location. Check, check. All were accounted for within roughly 10 minutes. Nick Richey, the program's trainer, was at his home doing the same. Calling everyone. A [Virginia Tech](#) graduate, Richey missed the 2007 mass shooting at his alma mater by only a few months.

While most players were in their apartments, two were on campus. [Steven Izzo](#), the head coach's son, was on his way to pick up his girlfriend at the MSU Union around 8:30. Police stopped his car, told him to get as far away as fast as possible. Steven went to what amounts to his second home —

Breslin Center — and locked himself in a suite. Soon, via a group text, he and three members of the program's support staff realized they were in the arena but hiding separately. They met together in a secure spot and waited out the night.

The MSU Union ended up being the site where Brian Fraser was killed.

[Nick Sanders](#), a Michigan State freshman walk-on and son of [NFL](#) Hall of Famer Barry Sanders, was inside IM West, the school's largest rec center. He sheltered in place there, sending updates along to Briningstool and everyone else. Among the vast amounts of misinformation last Monday, rumors swirled that shots were fired there.

Briningstool continued calling each player every 20-30 minutes, making sure each was staying put. He served as the program's conduit in a group text with parents. Constant updates. He did the same for the parents of the program's 12 managers and eight student assistants.

Every athletic program at Michigan State went through the same horrific process on Monday night. Men's basketball was thankful it had Briningstool.

"Garrett," Tom Izzo would later say, "was incredible."

Later in the evening, around 12:30 a.m. Tuesday, authorities announced Anthony McRae, the suspected gunman, was dead of a self-inflicted gunshot. The 43-year-old was located by officers about four miles from campus, near Lake Lansing and Larch roads in Lansing. He was carrying two 9-millimeter handguns, eight loaded ammunition magazines and two empty magazines, authorities said.

Briningstool remained in contact with Izzo until after 2 a.m. He stayed up for another hour after that, responding to endless unopened text messages.

"Everyone under the sun just wondering, you know, what is happening?" says Briningstool. "For me, it didn't really all set in until 2:30 a.m. when I could kind of stop and collect myself and say, 'Oh my God.'"

As the sun rose Tuesday, cars lined curbs all over campus with engines running. Parents picked up students, tossing bags in backseats and driving them home. Other students climbed in Ubers and set off for the airport. A mass exodus.

The basketball team, meanwhile, arrived at Izzo's house a few miles from campus around noon. All together for the first time, they shared their stories of where they were, what they heard. Personal plot points on the night's timeline. No one was quite sure if they were allowed back on campus or inside Breslin Center. Should they practice? A game at Minnesota scheduled for Wednesday was already postponed. Instead, players were encouraged to speak to Molly McQueary, MSU's director of student-athlete wellness, and other mental health professionals.

Izzo addressed the team.

“He straight up put it out there — we’re not forcing anyone to play,” Briningstool recalls. “He said, if you can’t do it, you can’t do it. That’s OK.”

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On Wednesday night, East Lansing police blocked off roads surrounding campus for the second time in three days. At the beginning of the week, it was to keep everyone out. On Wednesday, it was to let everyone in. Mourners showed up one by one to the Spartan statue located in the shadow of the school’s 75,000-seat football stadium. Together, the crowd marched en masse a half-mile, along the banks of the Red Cedar River, to the bridge on Farm Lane. They crossed over water typically seized in a February freeze. On this day, it was thawed and flowing. Ducks drifted past.

Beyond the bridge, another crowd awaited. They gathered by The Rock, a school landmark, and the university’s auditorium. Thousands packed in tight, a sea of knit hats, winter coats and hunched shoulders. They huddled under a relentless wind. Temperatures dove into the 20s.

[Joey Hauser](#) and a few MSU basketball support staff members positioned themselves near the front of the crowd. Steven Izzo was among them, doing what he could to hold himself together. A hundred yards away or so, near a bank of cameras from national and local networks, Malik Hall and the rest of the Spartans gathered. They were handed candles.

The vigil began around 6 p.m. Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer addressed the crowd. Tom Izzo stood off to the side listening along. “I will tell you I met with two survivors today,” Whitmer said. “One of whom told me he wanted me to share with you that a fellow Spartan took off his shirt and pressed on his chest and saved his life.” Izzo pressed his eyes closed.

After a rendition of “Amazing Grace” by two Michigan State students, the mic picked up his raspy voice telling them, “That was incredible.”

When it was his turn to speak, Izzo reached into a pocket and pulled out a creased piece of paper. Some prepared notes. The 68-year-old is well familiar with speaking as the de facto face of the university, but never anything like this. “Our hearts are heavy,” he said. “Our loss has been great. Our lives have been permanently changed.” Izzo stressed no one will ever forget what happened at Michigan State. Not the tragedy, not the trauma, not the three lives lost.

And he was right. No one around here will ever forget. As Izzo spoke, though, a quick look atop homepages for The Washington Post, The New York Times and Google News showed stories about Michigan State already swapped out for the latest headlines. Two days later the sites were populated anew with stories of a gunman in Mississippi killing six people, including his ex-wife. Gun death in America doesn’t cease. It just moves to the next place.



Michigan State basketball coach Tom Izzo was unafraid to be the voice of the university after a mass shooting on campus. (Gregory Shamus / Getty Images)

At Michigan State, the fallout of Monday's shooting played out in all-too-familiar stages. Fear, then shock, then grief, then mourning, then anger, then calls for increased gun control. The calls sounded an awful lot like those from late in 2021, when a 15-year-old with a 9 mm semi-automatic handgun killed four and injured seven at Oxford High School in suburban Detroit, roughly 70 miles east of Michigan State. Some members of the MSU Class of 2026 were members of Oxford's 2022 senior class. They've lived through two school shootings in 14 months.

Whitmer, a 1993 Michigan State grad, says the shooting at MSU should be the final straw for a series of gun control initiatives to be passed. In her recent State of the State address, the second-term governor called for enhanced background checks, requirements for safe storage of firearms (a measure directly linked to the tragedy at Oxford) and extreme risk protection laws, otherwise known as red flag laws. Some wonder if even further measures — mandatory waiting periods, restrictions on magazine capacities, etc. — may also receive broad support in the fallout from Michigan State.

What, you may ask, does this have to do with basketball? Well, it's not every day you hear a hall-of-fame coach stand at a press conference and say: "If we forget about it, we're making a mistake, and if we don't do everything we can do to stop the crap that's going on around our country, then shame on all of us." But Izzo has never been shy.

Gun violence and Michigan State are now inextricably tied.

"Question is, is anyone going to do anything about it?" says Chris Smith, the board chair and acting executive director of the Michigan Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence.

Smith is in his 29th year as a criminal justice professor at MSU. Among his course load this semester is a 400-level class, “Law and criminal justice policy.”

It’s held once a week. At night. In Berkey Hall.

Just so happens to not be on Mondays.

“The randomness of it all,” Smith says.

Seeing his own school serve as site of the 71st mass shooting in the U.S. this year, Smith says he’s “numb” to it happening at Michigan State. He says he’s never operated with the thought that MSU was immune, so it came as no surprise. “I follow it every day, I see these things every day, and the reality is, why wouldn’t it happen here?”

Smith’s angst, he says, isn’t shock that it happened but trying to understand and account for a student body with unknowable emotions.

“How do I address a room of students when I don’t know their individual experiences?” Smith wonders. “What buildings were they in? What did each person see? Did they know any victims? Do they know someone who had to jump out a classroom window to escape? Did they barricade themselves in a room in this building? I don’t know what trauma each person experienced. I’m really concerned about them not wanting to come back.”

Last week, Michigan State’s student newspaper’s editorial board [spoke for everyone](#) when it noted, “Some of us are looking at the next 1-3 years left at MSU and wondering, ‘How am I going to do this?’”

For the basketball team, the only way is to play. During Tuesday’s meeting at Izzo’s house, the Spartans decided they would return to the floor and represent the school. It was, at that time, unclear if a game scheduled for Saturday at Michigan would be played, but an agreement was made to practice on Wednesday with the intention of competing.

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Because real life doesn’t relent, Malik Hall got a call last week that his father was being transferred to a hospital. Since first displaying signs of dementia in 2009, [Lorenzo Hall has traveled a long road](#) of deteriorating health and mental capacity. New complications are only the latest cause for real concern.

So, once again, Hall set out last week to balance his two worlds. Checking in at home, getting updates. Checking up on his teammates, making sure they're OK.

Any time to spend worrying about himself? Probably not.

This has been Hall's entire college experience. He was a freshman in 2019-20 when the program was shaken off its moorings by [the death of Zachary Winston](#), brother of star Cassius Winston, in a season that ended a week shy of the NCAA Tournament when COVID-19 stopped the world. Hall was a sophomore in 2020-21 for a season played out in empty gyms amid huge challenges tied to the pandemic. His junior year brought some normalcy, but this season has been dogged by injuries and, now, the unthinkable.

A college basketball player?

Malik Hall has rarely ever been able to be just a college basketball player.

The 22-year-old senior leader spoke to teammates throughout the past week. Took temperatures.

"Obviously, everyone deals with things differently and being young guys, we might not talk about it much," Hall says. "I feel like that's part of it. It's difficult not knowing how everyone is feeling. You're just going out there and trying your best. In practices, you're trying to go through it like normal, like you're focused on a game. But are you?"

Michigan State's first game back after Monday's massacre would be at, of all places, Michigan. Seventy miles down the road, in front of 12,707 opposing fans. One of college basketball's best rivalries played out amid tragedy.

The Wednesday practice for the game was, in Izzo's words, "awful."

Thursday's was better.

The Spartans traveled Friday night, leaving campus for the first time since the shooting. They checked into a hotel just outside Ann Arbor and waited what seemed like forever. Saturday's tip at Crisler Center wasn't until 8 p.m. the following day.

A lot of time to think about what was in front of them.

That goes for all involved. As Michigan State players bid their time on Saturday, Julie Hall, Malik's mother, spoke by phone from a hospital outside Chicago, sitting by her husband's side. Like so many others, she planned to watch the game on television, curious how the Spartans would play under the weight of it all.

She thought about her son.

"Being the face of an institution at a time like this," Julie Hall said. "That's what we're asking 18-22-year-olds. To be strong, courageous, resilient. And to go play a game. Go face that pressure. Go be criticized."

A pause.

“It’s extraordinarily hard,” she continued. “You go back to thinking, that’s my baby, that’s my kid, and he’s not that different than the music major and the kid in student government, other than, our society puts an emphasis on sports. So they’re being asked to go on national TV to play basketball.”

Hall was one of 14 players to wear the Michigan State uniform Saturday night at Michigan. And though his story is the one told here, that doesn’t mean his is the only one. Just as every Michigan State student has his or her own personal circumstances, every MSU player experienced the week in his own way. They just happened to be the ones on your screen.

That goes for Izzo, too. The man moved to East Lansing from Michigan’s upper peninsula in 1983 and never left. Four decades later [he could retire at any time](#), go sit on his piles of money and fame, but Michigan State is all he knows, and vice versa.

Saturday afternoon, before heading to Crisler Center in Ann Arbor, Izzo picked up his phone and called ESPN analyst Seth Greenberg. The two spoke multiple times through the past week. Greenberg, a longtime friend, was the head coach at Virginia Tech when a gunman killed 33 people in a 2007 massacre. Like Izzo, his child was an enrolled student at the time.

“We just talked over and over about how important the healing process is, and how returning to a routine is important, but that the hardest part is — the tragedy is still right in front of you,” Greenberg says.

Saturday night’s game came and went in an incredible scene of unity and empathy. It was what it should’ve been. Bigger than basketball.

It was also, though, a Michigan State loss that on one hand felt bigger than normal, and on the other hand felt so inconsequentially small. These are the maddening lines now drawn for all Michigan State teams.

Wins and losses don’t feel so black and white.

“Trying to figure out how to deal with it, manage it, motivate, sympathize,” Izzo said late Saturday. “All in all, we played the game for two hours. We played the game to try to make many people back in East Lansing, and people around the world who are Michigan State fans, escape for two hours and enjoy the moment.”

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Sunday was unseasonably warm in East Lansing. Any other year, campus would be teeming with students. Any other year, Brian Fraser, Alexandria Verner and Arielle Anderson would be among them.

Instead, on this day, sidewalks and bike racks were empty. Windy, but a certain stillness in the air. Over at the Henry Center for Executive Development, yet another press conference was held, this time to address classes resuming Monday. Thomas Jeitschko, interim MSU provost, said: “No one thinks we are coming back to a normal week.”

Over at Breslin Center, meanwhile, behind closed doors, Izzo and the Spartans gathered Sunday to review film from the previous night’s loss and for a light walk-through. Another day together. Another game to prepare for. This Tuesday, Michigan State will welcome [Indiana](#) to Breslin. Those students who’ve come back to campus will line up outside and walk in as one. Alumni and fans will fill the rest of the building to the top. All 15,000 seats. They’ll stand side-by-side and cheer for those wearing Michigan State across their chest. A big game.

What's a basketball team's place in this? Maybe it's something for people to return to.

(Top photo: Gregory Shamus / Getty Images)

What did you think of this story?



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AWESOME

Brendan Quinn covers college basketball and golf for The Athletic. He came to The Athletic from MLive Media Group, where he covered Michigan and Michigan State basketball. Prior to that, he covered Tennessee basketball for the Knoxville News Sentinel. Follow Brendan on Twitter [@BFQuinn](#)

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