

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Four

Monday, March 16, 2026

Dayton, Ohio, USA

UD Arena

UMBC Retriever

Coach Jim Ferry

Josh Odunowo

Jah'Likai King

Ace Valentine

DJ Armstrong Jr.

Media Conference



because we can do the same thing if we just do everything right on the court. I feel like it just feels special just to be here.

JOSH ODUNOWO: Yeah, so similar to Ace, I'm a pretty local guy, so I live like 15 minutes away from the school, but I didn't know too much about UMBC until they had the upset. As I got older, I started to realize the significance of what happened.

Just like Ace was saying, I think it's a pretty full circle moment being able to be in this position again. We are our own team, but it's pretty cool to be in position to try to make something happen again.

Q. Josh, you were able to play in this arena earlier this season. Just the excitement, what you remember from that game, and do you think that's an advantage looking ahead towards tomorrow night?

JOSH ODUNOWO: So I was actually injured during this game to start the season. Kind of made it even better just being able to watch it from the sidelines and being able to watch the environment and how crazy the crowd got.

I think it definitely could play to our advantage just because we have played here before, and I think we did handle it pretty well the first time we came in here. It was a pretty close game, and I don't think we let the fans or the environment get to us.

JAH'LIKAI KING: It was actually great playing here. I feel like it felt special just to be in this environment. There was a lot of people. Probably the first time being in front of a crowd like this. So I feel like I live for moments like that. And especially our team, I feel like we like big crowds.

But yeah, it felt great being in this environment.

ACE VALENTINE: Yeah, I mean, it was definitely good to be able to play in front of that many people. I think it was a good experience, and for us it definitely prepared for us going forward. We started packing out our own arena back home. I think it's definitely something to look forward to, to be able to put on a show for that many people.

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: Yeah, I feel like it was a great

Q. For each of you, you were very young guys back in 2018. Did you have any awareness then of what UMBC had done? Over the years have you gotten to know more about it? You're very much your own team, but does that mean anything to you at this point?

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: Yeah, I didn't know anything about it. I'm just a kid from Florida. I really didn't know what UMBC was at the time. When I got recruited, of course it got pushed -- you know, never got pushed.

I think just knowing about that, it's what we chase for every day. It gets brought up a lot. But all in all, we're our own team, and all in all, we just want to go ahead and get to that point again.

ACE VALENTINE: For me, it was a little different because I live 15 minutes from UMBC, grew up right around the corner, had family that went to UMBC, as well. Definitely I noticed it even though I was only like 13. But I noticed it, and it was cool to see an underdog have that light on them, put on a show.

When it came back around full circle for me when I went to UMBC, it was always a goal to get to the tournament. This year I finally accomplished it in my third year. I want to be able to make a name for ourselves, as well.

JAH'LIKAI KING: For me, I definitely did not know anything about UMBC when they did that back in 2018. My first time hearing about it was when I got recruited by Coach Ferry. It's very special just to be in this situation just



game, like they said. It was a close game, great atmosphere, great environment, and we got to have an experience in here to basically go out there and compete.

I think having that is a great advantage for us.

Q. DJ, it's your first year here. You took the route of JuCo, D-II, you get here, and now you get to play in this tournament. I know you're a grad student. Did that have anything to do with going to D-I, hoping to have a chance to play in this tournament?

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: Yeah, it definitely did. All in all, I really just wanted to prove myself each and every time I got to play, whether it was JuCo all the way up to now. I think just having that chip on my shoulder and, of course, being older, to not only keep my head in it, but to do it for all of my guys, the whole team and the whole staff.

I'm just grateful that they trusted me and had the same confidence in me as I do with them.

Q. Ace, how has DJ fit into this team and helped make you guys better?

ACE VALENTINE: He was probably one of the easiest persons I've been able to play with. He doesn't really like fool with shots or anything. He plays hard. I feel like he matches what we look for and how we want to play as a program. So yeah, definitely.

Q. The value of conferences like yours, teams like yours, to have this opportunity to be in here with the Dukes and everything of the world, why is that important to this tournament, to college basketball do you think, for you guys to have this opportunity?

ACE VALENTINE: It's definitely important because you get to put on for teams that may be overlooked or, like, people who didn't hear about UMBC before they started to get recruited. So just trying to put on for our school and make a name for ourselves.

Q. With all the hustle and bustle and the quick turnaround, how are you feeling mentally?

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: I feel great. It's another chance to play regardless of whatever happens. We've had to deal with adversity all throughout the year, so this is not the first time.

I trust that all of us will be ready when an opportunity presents.

ACE VALENTINE: Yeah, definitely. To piggyback off what

he said, just another opportunity to go out there and prove ourselves, another opportunity. Like today, we're not going to take this practice for granted. However long or short that we've got on the court, we're just going to attack it, go day by day, and once the game comes, we'll be ready.

JAH'LIKAI KING: Definitely going off what these two just said about adversity, I just feel like we're just ready to go practice. I feel good. Mentally I feel great. I just want to go out there and touch the ball.

JOSH ODUNOWO: Yeah, mentally I definitely feel real good. Just blessed to be able to have this opportunity and just to play another game. We played Thursdays and Saturdays so we're used to a quick turnaround, so I don't think it's anything too serious, so I definitely feel good about the game.

Q. The tournament starts tomorrow, but when you're from a one-bid league and the way the tournament started two weeks ago, one and you're gone, can you talk a little bit about just the pressure that you have to go through in your situation to get here and the excitement not just of making the tournament but having survived what you've had to survive through that situation?

JOSH ODUNOWO: For us, I don't think it was really ever any pressure. I think ever since the season started, we all had a vision and we all bought into it and we kind of put our all into it. And I feel like we prepared very well. When you prepare effectively, the pressure, it can't really do too much because you're already prepared for anything that might hit you.

I think we were able to deal with that throughout the whole year, deal with adversity, and just being able to stay tight knit and just bought into the same goal. And I think it paid off for us throughout the whole season.

JAH'LIKAI KING: Just like he said, I feel like we took everything step by step, game by game, not overlooking anything or overlooking any opponent this season. We took everybody the same, even if the team had a great record or a bad record. I feel like we just came into the game with the same mentality just to win.

I feel like there was no pressure at all. We just had to handle the stuff we had to do on the court.

ACE VALENTINE: Usually pressure comes from outsiders and stuff like that. But Coach Ferry, he always speaks on focusing on what we have and focusing on the people that's in the locker room. We put our all into our brothers and every day just trying to get better and don't let even

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

parents or fans try to say, oh, you've got to do this or do that.

We were a 14-2 team going into the conference tournament, and people say, oh, you're a first seed, that's pressure, you've got to make it. But we just focus on ourselves, do what we have to do, and don't let that outside stuff affect us.

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: Yeah, I don't think there's any pressure. Regardless, before the season even started, we didn't have anything to lose. We had to really start from scratch. We have a lot of new guys.

I feel like, like they said, just buying in, putting everything into it. And just going out there and living with whatever results and just living in the present, not worrying about anything in the future or the past. Just taking it day by day, step by step. We can live with the results like that.

Q. Ace, your dad played in the NCAA Tournament. How does it feel now to have your time playing in March Madness?

ACE VALENTINE: I mean, it's definitely a surreal feeling. He went back with Towson in, I think, '91 and '92, and he had a similar conference with a one-bid team. Just going through that conference tournament to having that goal to experience this, everything for me here is new, and it's a crazy feeling to be able to experience this.

Hopefully go on to get a win. It's just everything we've worked for since we came in here as a team in July.

Q. Did he tell you anything in particular about playing in March Madness?

ACE VALENTINE: Yeah, he definitely had some stories because they were a 16 seed two years in a row, I think. So yeah, he played against people that went to the NBA, and he has stories about that, yeah.

Q. DJ, Ace mentioned his father in the NBA. Obviously your dad in the NBA. But did he ever play in the NCAA Tournament, and do you have one up on him now?

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: I think I do got a little one up on him. But yeah, he never got to experience it. He went to Fayetteville State, a D-II Black college. Yeah, I got that one up on him. It was pretty cool for him to get to experience me getting the go-ahead.

He was at the last game, so he got to experience my performance and everything. Just all of us just getting to

have an opportunity to go ahead.

Q. You guys had a pretty dominant run through the America East tournament. How do you ride that success into the NCAA Tournament but still knowing there's a lot of work to do?

JOSH ODUNOWO: I think the main thing is just kind of focus on what we've been doing, what's been working for us, regardless of who we're playing or the name on the jersey. I don't think anything really changes. I feel like we found what's been working for us. And I feel like we've been preaching that in the locker room all season that it's just about us, and we don't got to worry about anything else.

So I feel like we've got to fall back on what we know and just keep going from there.

JAH'LIKAI KING: Definitely what Josh just said, just being us in general. I feel like we've just got to go out there and play the game of basketball. It's a basketball game; anybody can win it. It's definitely how you start the game the first four minutes, so I feel like we've been doing great with that lately. To just go out there and have fun and just be us, like Coach Ferry always says.

Q. Is there a game as you were growing up watching the tournament that you can think back on the first time you watched a March Madness game and you thought, I want to be there one day? Is it something that clicked in and triggered the love of this event in you?

JAH'LIKAI KING: I don't really remember the first game I watched, but I know my favorite game I watched was when Baylor won the National Championship. I feel like that was my favorite game to watch because I think Gonzaga was like -- not the underdogs, but I feel like Gonzaga was the underdogs and Baylor just came in there and beat them by like 20. They was up by 20 by halftime, so I feel like that was my favorite game to watch.

JOSH ODUNOWO: For me growing up, I didn't watch the most basketball, so a lot of the games that I watched are more recent. I think the game I think about is Fairleigh Dickinson over Purdue, because when I was at Columbia, we beat Fairleigh Dickinson. So we were all watching that game thinking they were going to get blown. They come out, upset the No. 1. I knew some guys on the team too so I was super happy for them, but it was definitely a good game to watch.

ACE VALENTINE: Yeah, I grew up watching a lot of basketball since both my parents played. But I feel like the

most memorable March Madness moment that I can remember was when Kris Jenkins from Villanova hit that shot against UNC and I was like, just moments like that stuck out that I knew I wanted to live for even at a young age. Yeah, that's probably that moment.

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: For me, I'll say the Kemba Walker game. That was a really high moment for me in March Madness. It definitely had to be that.

Q. DJ, I'm looking at your bio, and I know you'd like to play some pro basketball. But you're an entrepreneur, you've got a business degree. What are the things you want to do with your life based on that?

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: Really honestly, I actually don't know. Just figure it out. I felt like I wanted to choose something that was more broad so I could have multiple different avenues I can go down.

But all in all, I think just entrepreneurship -- I like to create. I just want to kind of innovate. Just test different sides of things is pretty much it.

Q. I asked one of the guys from Howard in here about the idea of -- do you guys really ever dream about being that team that goes on that run?

ACE VALENTINE: Yeah, definitely. You see teams that do that, and it's just amazing to see how much publicity they get. Just being an underdog every game and coming out and proving yourself, it has to feel crazy, like getting so much publicity, getting so much love from fans. Fans love underdogs, so just to be able to go on a run like that, that would be amazing.

JAH'LIKAI KING: Definitely what Ace just said. I just feel like everybody definitely looks at us as the underdogs, probably a lot of games. Just getting that feeling just to win multiple games would definitely be fun just because just winning the championship in our conference was a lot of joy.

I feel like if we go on a run in March Madness, it would be even better, especially the fans at home back in New York and where all these guys are from, as well.

JOSH ODUNOWO: Yeah, I definitely dream about moments like that all the time. It's definitely something you want to be a part of. Just like JK was saying, just the feeling and the atmosphere of how it was after we just won the conference, you can only imagine how it can get better from there. Definitely just the fact that one game like that can change the whole team, everybody's life, the trajectory of their basketball career, everything like that. I definitely

dream about moments like that.

DJ ARMSTRONG JR.: Yeah, I think it's always something that you want to make happen. I feel like that would be anybody's dream, to go out there and be underdogs and upset the No. 1.

But I think we do have a chance to do that. It's a basketball game, at the end of the day, so we'll just go out there and just compete and just try and make it happen.

Q. Just an opening statement of what this team has been able to accomplish, playing here in the First Four.

JIM FERRY: Yeah, first of all, we're really excited, especially excited to be back. We played here in Dayton early in the season, so it's always great. Being the first game to tip off in the NCAA Tournament is always exciting.

This is a special group. I've been doing this for quite a while. As you saw when you got to interview these guys, they've just been a really unique, selfless group of guys. Brought in 10 new guys and we all kind of blended together, and within months I was like, wow, we got the looks of a team that could win a championship. Now we've just got to build, get better and work on it.

I'll be honest with you, these kids have done or tried to do everything they've been asked to do. We haven't had a bad day all year. It's just a pleasure to be around these guys.

Even today, obviously you guys know the situation with our 35-hour flight. These guys were laughing, joking, having a good time. Meanwhile all the coaches were all like (descriptive sound). But it's been such a pleasure to coach these guys on a daily basis.

Q. One question that just comes off that, what do you do during the delay on the flight? There was a line in the NCAA history book that will forever belong to UMBC. These guys were in middle school. They're their own team. Does that mean anything to you, to them at this point in time just being there at the place where --

JIM FERRY: Yeah, it's always going to be a part of it. First of all, in our practice facility, we have this big huge Sports Illustrated cover. It's a big huge part of our wall in our practice facility. I mean, huge, bigger than all this.

So no, we put UMBC on the map, and obviously we always honor the people that wore the jersey before us. Jairus has been back on campus. The guys know of it, and every year this time of year, it always comes up because of the

special run.

So it's stuff that we talk about and having pride. And then we have an opportunity right now to -- we have to play well to go win another NCAA Tournament game.

Am I supposed to answer the first part of that question?

We're working. We're watching film and we're talking about matchups and getting the scouting report ready. We kind of pretty much worked through the night.

We found out at 6:30, went right back to the office. I think we were all up until about 3:00, 4:00 in the morning. Got on a flight and sat next to each other and used the time for that.

Some of you guys might remember this, when I was at head coach at Duquesne, we got stuck on a bus for 32 hours one time. For me, this is old hat, man, it's nothing. We're fine.

Q. You mentioned the 10 newcomers that you had on your team, but how rewarding is it for the guys that have been with your program for multiple years now, like Daylon and Ace, to be able to stick it out over multiple years and get to the NCAA Tournament?

JIM FERRY: Yeah, great question. I hope people will listen to this one because Ace Valentine -- and Daylon was on a team coming for a second year -- but Ace Valentine, he was a sophomore last year and he really didn't have a good year. For those guys that know me, I'm a pretty direct guy, I'm a truth teller. I really challenged Ace at the end of the season and talked about I didn't like the way his body developed, I didn't like the play he played, he took a step backwards. It was a strong conversation. It was a real conversation.

To credit Ace, he didn't flinch. 95 percent of the kids these days would have walked out of my office, would have walked out to the compliance office and jumped in the portal. I think kids need to learn from what Ace did. Ace took the criticism. He understood what needed to be done, worked his tail off, came back. And oh, by the way, look what happened. He was able to lead a team and a program to one of the greatest years in the history of the school because he didn't run away from things that weren't good and try to patch it by just running away.

I think kids can learn a lot from that, and hopefully they do, because I think there is a lot to learn from adversity. As adults, we've been all through it, and these kids think it's the end of the world, the adversity they're going through basketball-wise, and it's not even that much of it.

I'm so proud of Ace, taking on the challenge, and on a daily basis he's stepped up and made unbelievable improvements. And like I said, now he's leading the team to the NCAA Tournament and winning a championship and having the most wins in the history of the school, all that stuff. It's something to be rewarded for sure.

Q. Coach, a couple things. What did you see in DJ that made you want to bring in a guy with Division II experience?

JIM FERRY: So that whole Division II thing goes back a little bit. I played Division II. I coached some extremely successful Division II teams. So myself and my staff -- Danny Lawson, who's an assistant, his father is Jay Lawson, legendary Division II coach at Bentley -- we kind of know what translates from Division II to Division I.

One of the reasons, and there's many, was we're not a rev share team. We're not a big NIL money team. A lot of these Division II kids aren't asking for money. I'm out with these guys, some kid calls up or an agent calls up and says Well, it's going to cost this much.

All right. Good. I hang up and say good luck.

So the Division II guys -- like DJ was just looking for an opportunity to play Division I basketball. I took five Division II guys. DJ Armstrong, not that I should share all this information, but he doesn't get any NIL. He just wants to play basketball. For me, it was understanding that level, certain leagues, and the guards sometimes translate a little bit better. I just thought DJ's poise as a basketball player, like, he just plays the game the right way. Yes, his shooting is phenomenal.

But I didn't even know he was as great of a human being until I got him here. I'm talking like never a bad day. Doesn't say much, but when he says it, he's freaking right, an unbelievable leader. Just a great kid. Great kid.

As they all are.

But the Division II guys, it's kind of from the experience I've had, and I kind of knew what translates with it.

When I watched the tape of Jah'Likai, it took me like 10 minutes, like yep, that's the one. I've had success in Division II with guys like that that I know can be successful here. Same with Jose, they come from good leagues, and it's worked out.

Q. Is there a particular thing in their game those two guys?

JIM FERRY: Well, my thing with the Division II players is it's the size. They're normally not as big as the Division I guys. My whole thing is -- and I know you're going to laugh at it because it's basketball -- I look for guys that can all pass, dribble, and shoot. You say, well, it's basketball, they should all be able to pass, dribble, and shoot. There ain't many guys out there that can pass, dribble, and shoot. Even Jose, he's 6'10" but he can pass, dribble, and shoot. And when you have guys like that, they translate especially into my system the way we play offensively.

So I look for those certain things, and we're fortunate to find it in those guys.

Q. Early in December you guys lost four or five games, but then after that, you only lost two games the rest of the season. Is there something you can point to that flipped the switch or what changed with the team after that South Florida loss?

JIM FERRY: Yeah, we lost four or five games, but we lost four bye games, one of them was here, which we played without two key players and actually had a good game against Dayton. Lost a very tough home game basically at the buzzer to a very good Buffalo team, lost to Army at home. So those were the non-league losses.

The in-league -- the like opponents, I think we only lost two games against like opponents.

I saw it at the end of league play. I remember being in the locker room talking to these guys, I said, guys, listen, I know what a championship team looks like, and we have the look. That was right after non-conference play came. It's a matter of can we continue to get better and focus on being unselfish. Because if we do, we have what it looks like, but can we achieve it.

To the guys' credit, they all just bought in 100 percent. I would say it was pretty early I knew we had a chance.

But then when these guys stepped up, especially after our first loss in league play, it was in overtime at Bryant, we came in and we talked a little bit about our defense wasn't where it was supposed to be, and from that point on, we really took off.

Q. Coach, what does March Madness mean to you? You've been around a long time coaching college basketball. Specifically what does it mean to you?

JIM FERRY: I think it's the most special event ever. I'm a kid that grew up in New York, a son of a New York cop, New York City cop. I was a pretty good basketball player,

played Division II. I grew up with a bunch of football players that played basketball, a bunch of high level football players. When we were younger we could do it, always go to somebody's house and watch the NCAA Tournament.

Even when I got older and into business, on that first Thursday, we'd always find a good Irish pub in town and at noon we'd be there with our newspapers and bagels and watching the games and having a couple drinks all day. What was crazy about that, we would do that for years.

And then the first time one of my teams won a championship was at LIU, and we were going to the NCAA Tournament. All my buddies were like, hey, man, we're going to be together, we're all going. You don't just go, we're all going. And son of a B, man, they all came. We played North Carolina in Charlotte, and they came and we went the next year and played Michigan State and they came. A bunch of them are going to be here.

I'm 58; there's 60-year-old guys that it's still the most exciting thing in athletics. I'm just happy to experience it again.

To be quite honest, I'm more happy that I'm able to help these guys experience it because that's what it's all about.

Q. Were you having bagels and beer and watching UMBC beat Virginia? Second of all, can you talk about the journey here, what it's like to go through months and build a great conference record and then go into a conference tournament and have to prove it all over again?

JIM FERRY: First thing, no, I was not eating bagels and drinking beer when UMBC won, although I do recall it. I think I might have been at Penn State at that time.

Then this is one of the hardest things. People don't really understand -- a lot of people see all the big time games. I coached in the Big Ten, I got it, we were No. 9 in the country the year I was at Penn State. For us, it's like, shoot, we don't want to play in the Big Ten Tournament, we know we're going to get a 5 or 6 seed. Let's get going.

Where at this level, the hardest thing to do in college sports is to win a regular season championship in college basketball because you play everybody twice, it's over a two-month, three-month span. That's a hard thing to do.

You go through that, you win a regular season championship, and then it's like, okay, now you've got to go win the tournament to get to the NCAA Tournament. This year I was like, this is BS, the regular season champ

should go. Next year if we finish second, I'll be like, tournament champion should go. We knew it was going to be a real challenge, and we played an unbelievable Vermont team and program, John Becker does a great job, they've dominated the league for a while.

We win the first one, and it was a tough game. Second one we had it going. Now we're playing Vermont in front of a sold-out crowd. The environment was unbelievable, which I think is great at the America East at this level to play home games where the place is packed.

The joy of winning that, knowing, like, you're going to the NCAA Tournament, it was just such a special feeling. These guys put a lot of work into it. They deserve everything they get.

Q. Coach, you talked about how special it is, and I know it's special no matter whether you're at Penn State or UMBC or Duquesne or anywhere. But is it a different feeling at a place like UMBC where you have to win that tournament to get in, versus, like you said, Penn State, you knew already you were in, you didn't have to win a tournament?

JIM FERRY: 100 percent different. Like at Penn State, it's all about scheduling, quality wins, more so making sure you don't lose a certain game.

You can project -- all right, we're going to be in. You can almost project what seed you're going to get when you're at that level. At this level it's coming down to the last game.

The thing that makes it different is the approach is from day one just focus on today, stay present, and get better every single day. So when we won the semifinal game, it was like, we had a couple days in between. It was like, all right, we've got two more days to get better. Even at that, it's like, what? No, no, we have two more days to get better because you have to play your best basketball in that last game. Or at least be playing your best basketball in that game.

That's what it's all about. So to try to keep the focus with these guys about just stay present, keep getting better, and really, at this level, it doesn't matter if you win your regular season championship. What matters is just keep getting better. That's what I think these guys had such a mature approach to, that we kept getting better, and it's just fortunate that we won 12 in a row.

It's very similar to my first year at LIU, that first championship team. I think we went into the NCAA Tournament with one of the longest win streaks in the

country as well. I think my staff does it, we keep building it the right way and these guys keep buying in. I think the pressure on that is a lot different than it is --

Q. Or is it the same?

JIM FERRY: Yes, total amount of joy. At the Power Five level, it's relief. Let's not bullshit each other. It is what it is. And it's getting to be like that at this level, too. I've been doing it so long where you don't enjoy the wins as much as you should.

At that level, it's relief because if you don't get in, you're out. Where our level, it's pure joy because we all are fighting for that same thing and there's only one spot.

Big East, they're getting three, the Big Ten, they're getting six, nine, whatever it was. When I was at Duquesne, I think we had six teams in the NCAA Tournament. Very different.

Here it's one, man. It's one. When you do it, you know you're the best of the best in that league. So that's pretty special.

Q. Just wanted to talk about the addition of Caden Diggs, ask you about the process of bringing him in. What were your expectations when you recruited him out of the portal? What has he accomplished and what was he able to contribute to your team?

JIM FERRY: Yeah, Caden has been awesome, man. You know, another just fantastic kid, fantastic family. I remember when Caden, his mom and dad came to visit us, and we sat and talked and spent the whole day. We ended the visit, hey, we'd love to have you. I know he had other visits set up. Caden stopped in the hallway and came back and he said Coach, I just want to thank you for being so honest and up front with me.

Because never once did I talk to him about starting, never once did I talk to him about how many minutes a game he's going to get. I just talked to him about the opportunity and how we're going to help him develop and grow.

When he got here, he wasn't a great shooter. He was good at a lot of things. He just blossomed. Just blossomed because he's such a good kid. He's like a sponge, in the gym all the time.

The one great thing about Caden is I don't think the kid gets nervous. I don't think he flinches. Sometimes I don't even think he knows what play we're running, but he's out there and he's getting buckets and it's next play. We had a big play this year, he closed out short on someone, and

someone hit a three, and I was like, Caden!

He looked at me like, all right, and then he comes down and hits this huge three. I'm like, all right, I guess he got it. He's just a fantastic basketball player and the best of Caden is yet to come. He's improved so much in this one season that he's going to be a fantastic player.

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