

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Akron vs Texas Tech

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Tampa, Florida, USA

Benchmark International Arena

Akron Zips

Coach John Groce

Tavari Johnson

Shammah Scott

Evan Mahaffey

Ognjen Stankovic

Amani Lyles

Media Conference



TAVARI JOHNSON: We're excited. It's a great opportunity. They're a really good team. We're confident that if we play our game and play together, that we have a good chance of getting the outcome that we want.

AMANI LYLES: I'm excited to do it with this group of guys and at this level. We've worked our way up, and now it's time to put our five letters across the next platform.

SHAMMAH SCOTT: I'm just excited for the competition. I love playing against great opponents. I feel like it brings the best out in me and best out of our guys. So I'm just excited for the challenge.

EVAN MAHAFFEY: Same. We're all excited. Excited for the challenge and the competition.

OGNJEN STANKOVIC: Same. We're all excited. They're a prestige program. This will be our opportunity to go out and play hard and compete.

Q. Tavari and Shammah, what do you kind of see from TTU, especially Christian Anderson at the point guard position? How do you see him as a way to shut down Tech's offensive system?

TAVARI JOHNSON: They've got really good guards, really talented. They can score well, as you know. We've got to go in with all five guys, play team defense, play together, and try to slow them down as best we can.

SHAMMAH SCOTT: Obviously they're great players and stuff like that. Our job is to constantly make it tough for them. They're good players. They're going to make shots. We just need to try to make it as hard as we can.

Q. Tavari and Amani, this isn't your first rodeo. You guys have been on this stage before. How will it help this time?

AMANI LYLES: It will definitely help. Just keeping our composure, no matter how high we get or how low we get. I think our leadership will carry on throughout the game. It's a big stage for a lot of our guys. So just keeping our heads level is a big key.

TAVARI JOHNSON: I think it will allow us to control our

Q. Shammah, I have a question for you. You're at Northwest Florida State College where you won Juco National Championship. How did that tournament run prepare you for your college career here at Division I level and what did junior college do for you overall?

SHAMMAH SCOTT: It definitely prepared me. We had a game each and every day. There was no rest in between and quick turnaround. Obviously because at the Juco level people look at it as lesser competition, but there's a lot of great players on that level. And then getting me ready knowing there's a lot of players just as good as you, and you've got to go out there and compete.

What was the second part of your question?

Q. How did Juco compare? What did it do for you?

SHAMMAH SCOTT: Honestly, like the grind. We didn't have the privilege of doing a lot of stuff we're able to do now. Like, just waking up every single day, we didn't have that much funds and stuff like that. We had to go out there and really grind to get to the position we're at now. I'm just really grateful for how that shaped me.

Q. For any of the guys, your thoughts on taking on the Texas Tech Red Raiders in the first round.



emotions a little bit more, and that will allow us to lead our team better and show them how to process and how to execute in this type of environment.

Q. For any of you, being the double-digit seed, people expect of you, you guys are kind of a trendy upset pick, how do you kind of handle that? How is that internal conversation you guys have while you're here?

OGNJEN STANKOVIC: Definitely. I think that we just stay cool, composed at the end of the day. We know how talented they are. As long as we just stay humble, right, have fun while we're here, I think that's the only thing we can do.

At the end of the day, we are going to compete. We are going to play at the highest level possible that we can. But I think we just focus on each other and go out and play one possession at a time.

Q. The three games of the MAC Tournament were all close, and they were hard-fought games. What experiences allow you to recover from that to get ready for Friday, and where are you guys now in that process?

AMANI LYLES: We understand that every possession matters, so we can't take plays off, especially at this level. So the small details matter. If you make a mistake, good teams will make you pay. So just cleaning up on the little things is our most important thing and valuing every possession.

Q. You're the tallest player on this team. You're playing a big team in Texas Tech out of the Big 12. How do you imagine using your size?

AMANI LYLES: I take pride in my physicality. I know the team needs it, and I'm going to just play as hard as I can. Obviously I know they play in a very physical league, but I'm up to the challenge. I'm not backing down from anyone.

JOHN GROCE: Obviously excited about the opportunity to compete tomorrow at 12:40 against a really good Texas Tech team. Excited for our guys. They've earned this opportunity. We've had a great year. Had good prep this week and going to be ready to go tomorrow.

Q. Coach, how does this seem different than other ones you've brought into the NCAA?

JOHN GROCE: Great question, I was just asked that earlier. I think this team is uniquely balanced. I really do.

If you look at our defense and offense, they're both ranked Number 1 in the league, and the league had a great year. We've got a lot of respect for our league, especially that top two-thirds and top third. So I think the balance makes it a little unique. We're maybe as balanced as any of the teams we brought into the tournament.

Then I think just our ability to pass. I just shared with someone prior to coming into here that I think of all the teams I've coached -- not just at Akron, but before that as well -- it may be the best passing team that we've had. So we're able to facilitate and run offense through multiple players because of that. So that makes us very unique as well.

Q. This is probably going to come down to backcourt play with the size. Tech is not huge, but they've got a couple of bigger guys. What do you see from your backcourt versus Tech's backcourt, especially at the point guard position?

JOHN GROCE: Great question, two great backcourts. I have to sometimes rewind the clip because I enjoy watching Anderson play in pick-and-roll just from a pure basketball perspective. Very similar to our kid, Tavari Johnson, in terms of three-level reads, reading the pick-and-roll well.

Obviously their guard play is tremendous. I feel good about ours as well. I think it's a real strength of our team. Obviously got to try to make some plays tomorrow. I'm sure they're going to do the same thing with their guards. I think when you're in the tournament, certainly guard play is a big deal. Obviously they've got really good guards, and I feel like we do as well.

Q. A lot of conversation before Selection Sunday about whether there should be two teams from the Mid-American conference in this tournament. Your brother is the coach of Miami, and we all know the story, they went undefeated and so on. Watching them last night, they won. In your mind, does that help validate the fact that the MAC is a multi-bid league this season?

JOHN GROCE: I would say this. It's about matchups. I think that's a big part of it. Happy for them they got it done last night. It's great for our league. I would say not just Miami, but the entire league, the top two-thirds, as I mentioned earlier.

When you look at the top three teams in the conference standings, we lost a combined five games between the top three teams. That's unbelievable. The way Toledo was playing at the end of the year, winning 6 out of 7 heading

into the championship game. I thought their level was really high.

Great, great year for the league. Happy for the MAC. Obviously happy for my brother that they got the win last night and thrilled for him.

Q. Can you elaborate on just the emotions that you felt watching your brother win that?

JOHN GROCE: Obviously trying to balance -- the most important thing right now is doing the right thing and preparing our team for tomorrow's game, right? I did get to watch some of it. I tried to tune in towards the very end.

But again, happy for him, his family. He's got a really good team. He's done a great job. And like I said, great for the league.

Q. You mentioned Tavari a little bit there. In kind of a basketball world where guards are so much bigger, you have 6'9" point guards out there, Tavari is 6 foot, Jaylen Petty is 6'1", smaller side. How do you see those guys, specifically for you, Tavari, kind of operate in a world where guys are longer now than they were ten years ago?

JOHN GROCE: Great question. You're talking about Petty as well as Anderson, Tavari and Shammah, very similar in terms of their ability to -- obviously they can make shots off catch and bounce. I think in today's game where you have guards that can do both, it's a big deal. Then obviously they can make reads in pick-and-roll and make their teammates better.

You look at the assist rate of those guys we're talking about, they have the ability to score and make others better, which is what great playmaking guards do.

Yeah, their size, maybe they're not 6'9", as you mentioned, but I think their impact is tremendous on their team as I've watched obviously with their guard play, as well as on our team.

Q. A couple of times during the season you changed your starting lineup or the rotation, I guess, the way everybody plays throughout the game. How has that helped your team go 29-5 and get to this point, making those tweaks?

JOHN GROCE: The question was about the rotation, and we do look at that. You and I have talked about that. I think that's really, really important.

I always give kudos to a guy like Shammah Scott, who I

think is one of the best guards in the country, certainly in our league. Great playmaker, two-time Sixth Man of the Year in the MAC. He's a starter. He really is. You look at his minutes and how he finishes games for us. I've got great confidence and trust in him and his ability to play make, his experience.

But his willingness to basically sacrifice and come off the bench for rotational purposes, so that we can rotate certain lineups that we think are the most effective, in particular, when we look at analytics as well as subjective feel with our team. So it gives us a depth in that rotation, where we're deeper than most teams. And there's no question that rotations are something that we look at heavily.

Give our guys credit. They've got to buy into that. I've said this all year. We've got eight guys really based on how they played in preseason practice and throughout the year that I could start any of the eight. Obviously you're not allowed to do that. You can only start five. But the willingness of those guys to give us some power and some depth coming off the bench has really helped our team tremendously and is a huge part of the success that we've had.

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