

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

Tampa, Florida, USA

Benchmark International Arena

Akron Zips

Coach John Groce

Tavari Johnson

Amani Lyles

Shammah Scott

Evan Mahaffey

Bowen Hardman

Media Conference

Texas Tech 91, Akron 71

THE MODERATOR: Coach will make an opening statement. Then we'll take questions only to the student-athletes. We'll dismiss them, and then Coach will take questions.

JOHN GROCE: Thank you. Obviously, special group of guys up here. That's kind of my focus right now is the relationships that we've built as a staff and support staff and our community's built with these five guys is special.

What they've done in their careers from 100-plus wins in their career, which is an all-time record, the 29 wins this year, most in single season in Akron history, 31-game home win streak behind Duke. Second to Duke. 43 out of last 45 wins against MAC opponents, conference opponents, which I believe is the best over the last 45 games in all of college basketball.

So those are the basketball things. But what I'm going to take away more than anything is just the quality people these guys are that are sitting up here, how they've represented our city, our university, our athletic department, our basketball program.

I'm forever grateful for the opportunity to coach the five guys you're looking at up here that are our seniors and just



amazing, amazing privilege.

In terms of the game, I thought we had a real chance there when Watts fouled out. He was so effective, especially early parts of the second half. And then we just -- just wasn't quite able to capitalize on it.

Obviously, it was I think maybe a two- or three-possession game when we had a wide-open three with Lyles that he's obviously more capable of making. It just didn't go down. We were right there, and it got away from us a little bit at the end.

Give them credit. I thought their two guards were terrific, Petty and Anderson. And then obviously, until Watts fouled out, he posed some issues. But our guys kept playing, kept fighting, kept getting to the next play, and gave us a chance until late.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For all of you, starting with Bowen, the last place you guys want to be is right here, right now, and we appreciate you coming out. Talk about how important was it to win the MAC and to get in here?

BOWEN HARDMAN: Definitely, it's super important to all of us. I'll let the other guys speak too. We made history at the end of the day, right? It was a three-peat, first time in the league's history.

This one loss isn't going to take away from that. We went out and played really hard, gave it all we got and tonight they just were the better team. But we shouldn't be disappointed from this one loss.

EVAN MAHAFFEY: It was very important. At the beginning of the season, our goal was to get here, and we did. We didn't finish. Our second goal was to win here. But we're not going to take away from getting here and winning the MAC tournament. With this being my first year here, it was special for me to experience that too.

SHAMMAH SCOTT: It's very big. We were able to knock out a lot of goals. Three-peating in the MAC is something that has never been done before. We'll forever be remembered for that. I'm grateful for sure.



AMANI LYLES: It's a privilege to keep the season alive and play at the highest level. We don't take for granted we did it two times. We made history and did it three times. It's just a privilege to do it with this group of guys and to end the season off this way, I wouldn't ask for anything else.

TAVARI JOHNSON: It's definitely a privilege and a great way to go out with these guys, the senior group, to win a championship and make history. It's a testament of this group of guys and how hard we work to get here. To do it three times in a row is something special and something we won't forget.

Q. Guys, Amani made a lay-up with 6:53 left. You guys are down 5 and they go on a 15-2 run and the score ends up being lopsided when you guys were really in it for the vast majority of the game. What do you think happened in that sequence? Does that kind of add to the frustration the way the last seven minutes went?

AMANI LYLES: I don't remember it that much, but I feel like they got hot from 3, kind of just picked apart our defense, got a couple of easy shots and capitalized off our mistakes down the run. That's big. Every possession matters in this tournament and in these games.

They did a good job executing against our defense. Yeah, we did our best to get to the next play.

Q. My question for Tavari, four years with the program. You grew with the program, constantly improved each year. How special does it feel to leave your legacy with the same program and do things with this team that has never been done before in the MAC?

TAVARI JOHNSON: It's special for me. I had a great group of guys that taught me a lot when I was younger and allowed me to become the culture, learn from the culture, and spread it to a lot of the younger guys coming up next.

Yeah, it's a blessing and I'm forever grateful for things Akron taught me and I was able to accomplish with a lot of great people.

Q. Kind of a two-in-one question. Despite the loss, you had the entire arena behind you. Do you want to talk about how that momentum felt for you guys? To be able to have a lot of attention on you guys throughout the last week or so, talk about how good that felt for you guys as a team.

SHAMMAH SCOTT: Obviously, I feel like we have some

of the best fans in the country. That type of support all the way in Tampa means a lot. It brought a lot of energy to the game. Throughout the week, a lot of us have been here before, we weren't fazed about the attention we were getting. We were focused on trying to get a win.

Q. The community at University of Akron couldn't be prouder of you guys and how far you've come. Evan, you said you came here largely because of your brother. What is it like to share the court with him on the biggest stage in college basketball?

EVAN MAHAFFEY: It was special seeing him out there making plays. Something I'll never forget. At the end, we're walking off. I tried to soak up every moment I could of seeing him in the same jersey as me one more time. So moments like that, you'll never forget.

But I think with coming here, I developed a lot more brothers too. I think this group was one of the most special groups I've ever been around with our culture, with how together we were. It was something I'd never felt before. So with coming here to be with my blood brother, being around these guys, I wouldn't change it for the world.

Q. Evan, I was going to ask you about Eric. A couple of huge moments for him. The tip-in with 9:42 left, it's an and-one. Watts fouls out. And then to follow up on my question to Amani, they got that run going kind of on the front end of it. It looked like maybe you had a clean block. Ends up being two free throws for Anderson. What did you think in those moments? What did you think of Eric's role there?

EVAN MAHAFFEY: Proud of him. With him being a freshman, seeing him come into the game and make those plays like that, it makes me really excited for him and also for what's next for him and the people here at Akron.

I think when you have younger guys like him and Sharron coming in and making big plays like that, it means a lot to the program and also builds their confidence because they're on these stages and being unfazed.

As a big brother, you're in the game and you're happy, but you're even more happier because you're seeing them make those plays. Excited for him. And that block looked really clean to me. I was just happy that he contested it like that.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, fellas.

We'll take questions for Coach.

Q. You talk about the middle 8, the 4 at the end of the

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

first half, 4 at the beginning of second half. You got it down to 5, you were rolling and they come out and hit two big 3s right away. You're playing catch-up. If you could have gotten it down to 3 or 2, it would have been a different ball game?

JOHN GROCE: May have been. You don't know. We were able to close it to a two-possession game with 7 to go. But you're right. I thought we really closed the first half strong and took it from a 12-point deficit to 5. Had a lot of momentum.

Start the second half, they countered with a couple ways they were running their offense to combat how we were defending. It's why I went to the early time-out. Then we changed coverages to combat what they combatted. So we made adjustments there.

When you shoot 70 percent like they did in the second half, it's going to be difficult to win. Having said that, we've got a 3-point shot, down 5, with 6:50 to go.

The score certainly, as Nate said, there was a reflection of how competitive it was for about 34 minutes or so. But give them credit. I thought they really stepped up when Watts fouled out. Because Watts was posing us some problems and we had to change coverages quite a bit in the second half just to try to keep them off balance. In large part, it was due to him.

Once he fouled out, you're thinking, man, we got a chance here to maybe capitalize on it and give their guys credit. Especially those guards. And then I thought Moseley was big. He's not a double-figure scorer in terms of points per game, but he sure was impactful today. He finished 7 for 8 from the field. I mean, he was -- I thought his buckets were timely.

Q. Coach, you had constant praise from the Texas Tech coach. Do you want to talk about what that means for you as a team being able to get so much love from your opponents like that?

JOHN GROCE: I've got a lot of respect for Grant not only as a basketball coach, but how he does it as a person and his teams always play -- I said that coming into the game -- competitive, tough. He's won every place he's been.

I just really admire the way that they've adapted post Toppin. That's not easy to do. I think it tells you something about their culture. But hats off to those guys today. I thought the last seven minutes, in particular, obviously, they were hitting on all cylinders.

Unfortunately, we just -- the other part of it too is people,

the match-up and all that. I will say this. It's who plays the best the day you play them. They were better than us today. For 34 minutes we fought, scratched, clawed. Two-possession game. We needed to play a little bit better today.

Collectively, individually, all of us needed to be a little bit better. We did some good things for sure. But the margin for error is small. You've got to -- I thought our missed lay-ups in the first half, the gentleman here was alluding to the end of the first half. It's 5 at half and I'm thinking my gosh, we missed probably four, five lay-ups in the first five minutes of the game at the rim.

Now, obviously, they've got size and length and they're coming and breathing down your neck a little late and making you think about it and all that. Still, they were shots that we normally convert. A little bit higher efficiency rate than what we did in the first half. That didn't allow us to capitalize maybe on some of the good offensive possessions we had where we had the ball right at the basket and just didn't convert.

We probably needed to convert a few more of those today.

Q. Coach, you probably have seen every game that Texas Tech has played this year. That team took Florida to the bitter end last year. How much has it changed with Toppin in the game and now he's out of the game?

JOHN GROCE: You look at their statistics and, quite frankly, there are statistics that aren't as good with Toppin out. Then there's some that are maybe a few of them that are better.

I think they obviously became a little bit more perimeter oriented. Fortunately for them, you look at the 3-point shooting capability of Atwell and then the way that Petty and Anderson can not only create certainly for themselves but for others. And then the difficult shots that they make off both catch and bounce and timely ones.

So those guys have really, I think, stepped up their production, in my opinion. Obviously, I mentioned earlier the play of Watts. They're a good basketball team, obviously.

Q. Coach, I want to ask about Tavari. Four-year guys in the game today are rare. How special is he in talking about building the culture in the future and growing with the program? Is his mentality something that can be spread through other players for years to come?

JOHN GROCE: Obviously, it's unique in this environment. Lyles would be in the same boat. He's a four-year guy who came in with Tavari. Those guys left their mark on the program in so many ways. With the young guys in particular, the way they've led.

They'll tell you guys like Enrique Freeman taught Lyles the way. Guys like Xavier Castaneda taught Tavari the way. Those guys did a good job of working with the young guys, preparing to pass the torch to them.

That is unique in today's environment that quality players like those two guys being around four years, both on pace to earn their degree. They've had such a good impact. Again, not just the production and the stats you guys all see in terms of team wins and what they've done individually, but on the culture as well.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

JOHN GROCE: Thank you.

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