

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Akron vs Arizona

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Seattle, Washington, USA

Climate Pledge Arena

## Akron Zips

## John Groce

### Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: All right, we'll take an opening statement from Coach and then take questions.

JOHN GROCE: Obviously we're excited to be here, be a part of March Madness get ready to compete tomorrow against a really good Arizona team.

Our guys, give 'em a lot of credit I think the two things that stand out about our team and I said this at the Selection Show party on Sunday, one is just the fact that they have been resilient. Obviously we were down 18th other day and the disposition and poise and composure of our group has been like that all year. Our group continued to fight and swing and battle and found a way. And that's kind of been their disposition.

The second thing I think is just the consistency of which we played with over the course of the last 20-plus games and a lot of that has to do with how they approach every day. I know sometimes the media it will be, hey, that's coach speak, but the reality of it is that these guys for the most part have just tried to go 1-0 every day. We have a saying in our program that the most important thing in our program is the next thing we're doing.

And obviously the fact that we've got some guys who were up here earlier that have been a part of success over an extended period of time and they have watched the guys before them, their predecessors and how they handle things, both on and off the court and the routines they have, etcetera, etcetera, that allows you to be consistent I think has been a big plus for us and the guys that have come back have done a great job of carrying on that tradition and handing it off to our newcomers.

So we're excited to compete tomorrow, obviously they're a very good basketball team, but we're, we've had a good week of prep and looking forward to the opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. Nate said last spring you told everyone that the offense was going to change and you guys would be shooting 30 threes a game, what went into that thought process?**

JOHN GROCE: Obviously style change and I'm thankful we got a bunch of guys that believed in us and our staff and the system that we were going to play because it was different than the last five years. We had a great run with a crew of guys, seniors, that finished as the all-time winningest class in Akron's history over a five-year window and Nate and Tavari, Shammah, Marvin, Amani, those guys were all, Evan Wilson, those guys were all a part of that and so they saw that.

But for them to believe in what we felt like we needed to do with this roster, we felt like we were going to be faster we felt like we were going to be deeper, more athletic, and that we wanted to change the style and we thought it fit this particular team really, really well.

Now at the beginning it didn't look great, non-conference as we made the style change. We went through some growing pains. But give the guys credit, they figured it out, they never wavered, and we just continued to get better as we put it in place.

**Q. Building off of that, when you tell your guys you're going to completely change, make a big change like that, tell your coach, tell the players, what do you remember the reaction being, was it --**

JOHN GROCE: You know, not really, obviously everyone, I would say this and you'll get a kick out of this talking recruiting or whatever, hey, you want to run or do you want to walk the ball up the floor, and they're going to say you want to play fast. Now a lot of guys think playing fast means shoot quick but you got to be in -- that's part of it, but you got to first of all work really hard to get good shots at that pace and you got to be in phenomenal cardiovascular condition. So they don't think about that sometimes.

But the guys worked really hard in conditioning, our



strength coach does a great job Austin Davis. Our trainer does a great job, Brian Knight. I've got a great staff. Those guys are terrific, and the guys bought in.

I think the relationships we have with our guys, especially the guys that you had up here, most of the guys were up here that were the returners, and there are a few in the locker room, those guys trust us and we trust them and we're in this together. We do it together, it's not a dictatorship by any means.

So we got input from them as we were moving forward with it but I was pretty convinced that it was the way to go with this particular team and really didn't have anybody fighting us on that. Obviously when you hear some of the things you just mentioned from tempo and threes and sharing and moving the ball and high assist rate, I mean those things tend to be fairly attractive. So it wasn't like pulling teeth to sell that.

**Q. Talking about the cardio and the tempo that the team plays with, Arizona also plays fast how do you think those two up-tempo-teams match up tomorrow?**

JOHN GROCE: No question they play fast. I shared this when I did an interview, I actually in studying some programs within the last few years, looked at theirs because their tempo and their pace stands out, right. They play extremely fast, whether it's make, whether it's misses, whether it's an opportunity to run and points off turnovers, their pace. It's been fun watching them previously even before the draw as well as a handful of other programs that tended to play that way.

So there's no question they play fast and a big part of what they do, at least from watching them, is they score and strike you quick in transition.

**Q. How have you guys been able to defensively to get over the lack of forwards? It's a unique style of play.**

JOHN GROCE: We've not changed our defense a whole lot. To be honest with you systematically. We've tweaked a few things here and there based on this year's personnel. But we've had a team defensively that's historically over our time at Akron been one or two in the league a lot. And if not, then maybe third. So we've always defended fairly well during that time period, aside from year one, and the guys really believe in that.

They know that in order to be consistent you have to be able to defend, rebound and take care of the ball. We say that all the time. Prime example of that was Saturday night where we shot the ball really well in the quarterfinals, the semifinal. We did not shoot it great in the championship

game, we made a few shots and plays late, but we really had to rely on our defense in the second half and our taking care of the ball. We had two turnovers the entire second half of the championship game.

So those things I think allow you to be consistent and fighting every day certainly to keep the main thing the main thing, which is to defend, rebound and take care of the ball, I believe when you're making a style change offensively that everybody's spotlighting and watching I think that's the challenge.

But again our older guys, I keep referencing them, they know if you don't defend, rebound and take care of the ball it's hard to play consistent. Because you might run into a game where you don't shoot the ball as well as you're capable of. Again, a prime example of that was Saturday night in the championship.

**Q. When Seth was up here he mentioned kind of the team having a fearless attitude and not being afraid of anyone. Is that something that kind of materialized from the guys themselves or something you instilled in them and how much does mentality like that help in a setting like this?**

JOHN GROCE: Probably all of the above in terms of how they have it. I will tell you it's one of the loosest groups I've coached in my career as a head coach. Loose, aggressive, confident, whatever, however you want to phrase that. There's times where our staff will tell you, we'll have to get them to dial it in a little bit and focus.

But this group never lacks having fun, they never lack being aggressive and being confident, being loose. And I would rather have that, quite frankly, and then worry about trying to dial 'em in, which we've been able to do, because they care, obviously they care about each other, they care about winning, they don't want to leather teammates down.

But yeah he's right, and I do think that you want to be that way, right, you want to kind of go out and you want to play aggressive and try to be as physical and aggressive as you can be. I certainly think that helps. The more you're reacting or being reactionary I think it's more challenging.

**Q. You were talking about the defense and maintaining what you've been able to do in the past, playing up tempo on offense, what kind of challenges does this present to keep up defensively?**

JOHN GROCE: It's hard because at the end of the day to make the style change, you have to spend time on it. You also have to spend time on being good on defense, obviously. That's again been a staple of ours. So you

have to balance all that.

But, no, I think our guys know, obviously the other night we were down at halftime we were down as many as 18, we were down 12 at the half, that we had to slow them down defensively, and they know what good defensive numbers look like and they know what good defense feels like and looks like. So at the end of the day the guys want to try to win and compete in order to do that you have to defend. Our offensive style certainly has helped us immensely, I think it's helped us in terms of what we changed, not only in terms of how quickly we get down the floor and flow into offense, but also the way that we've attacked the glass.

So we've done some things differently that took some time to teach, but still the defense obviously is our cornerstone.

**Q. You haven't played from behind too much this year, in the championship game you still had two timeouts left against Miami, I think twice this year Yale and Miami we were behind big, you didn't call a timeout. Talk about the confidence you have in your team how mature they are to battle back on their own.**

JOHN GROCE: Yeah, no, obviously in that championship game I wanted to make sure we had at least one, if not two down the stretch as it was tight. As it turns out, I anticipated if we got a stop on the last defensive possession that we were more than likely going to use at least one if not two to get the ball into the front court.

But obviously a terrific rebound by Lyles, advance pass to Nate and Nate got out in transition and once that happened and we saw the primary break two-on-one with him and Zay, you know, you decide not to call it at that point because you're at an advantage numbers situation.

But you're right, we've tended to let those guys figure it out. We've got, again, a veteran bunch in some regard because you got guys that have returned that have been a part of what we've done previously and some of our newcomers obviously are transfers that are older players. Isaiah Gray obviously, Seth, James, those guys are older guys, Bowen, so that helps. I don't think they get rattled, they just kind of keep swinging. You saw that again on Saturday night.

In terms of the timeouts, that's almost a feel thing and an instinct thing and certainly changes from game to game.

**Q. Based on height alone Arizona has a seven-footer, is there kind of at that team that you guys have played this year just based on the height?**

JOHN GROCE: Great question. Obviously St. Mary's

comes to mind. I thought they were really big in non-conference play. But there's others as well. The game is interesting because it's really evolved from the time I started 30ish years ago as an assistant coach in terms of how it's played, and spacing and we could get into that, talk Xs and Os, if anyone knows me for a while. I won't do that to you.

But I think you see teams playing more five out, more four out, and obviously trickling down from the NBA you see front court players that play on the perimeter quite a bit and have perimeter skill level. So I think it's changed. It's changed some, for sure.

Sometimes when you get in those situations obviously if you're playing big, and we do this some too and have over the years, you're going to get X, but you might not be as good at Y. So if you play a little smaller, you might be better at X but maybe not quite as good at Y. So you know, like anything else you rob Peter to pay Paul, there's advantages and disadvantages to what you do with that. But it is what it is, it's not something we can control, we certainly recognize their size and they do a great job with their size, they do a great job rebounding it, they do a great job posting it.

**Q. Describe Nate Johnson as both a player and a teammate, and then what do you see from Arizona's big man Henri Veesaar when you evaluate the tape?**

JOHN GROCE: Okay, so first question, obviously Nate has been with us now four years, his growth as a person, student and player is awesome. It's why we do what we do, to create transformational experiences for our student-athletes and our teams and our players. I'm really proud of Nate and how he's evolved.

Nate's one of those guys obviously that plays from a basketball perspective both ends of the floor, but he's an unbelievable teammate, really good person, there isn't anyone that comes in contact with Nate Johnson that wouldn't like Nate Johnson. Nate cares about other people, he's unselfish. So he's certainly what we call an Akron guy, a guy from a character perspective that fits our locker room and our culture and obviously does from a basketball perspective as well.

In terms of Veesaar, obviously it appears just from watching earlier clips in the season until now that his, paraphrasing, stock is on the rise or he's improved greatly. You can just see it from watching some of the earlier clips and then the later clips in the season in preparation. Obviously he's a big part of what they do with his size, not only defending but also rebounding, and then offensively he can play inside and out and has a good skill level as we

were talking about the game changing to feature more five out, four out. He certainly has some modern style front court tendencies of today's game and is a very, very good player.

**Q. We talked a lot about the size of Arizona, but talk about a guy like Caleb Love who's been in this environment before who is prone to get hot in games like this, how do you stop a guy like that who has that kind of experience?**

JOHN GROCE: Well, I don't know that you do, because he has an uncanny ability to be able to get shots up on the rim. So you do the best you can to try to defend them and make it as tough on 'em as you can. We hear obviously we're from northeast Ohio and you hear LeBron say all the time, it's a make or miss league, referencing the NBA.

I think with a guy like him, like you watch him and I think what some people don't understand is the ability to be able to get a shot on the rim is a skill, not everybody can do that where you just hand a guy the ball and can get one up on the rim, and he has ability to do that, which obviously makes him extremely dangerous.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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