

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Seattle, Washington, USA

Climate Pledge Arena

Akron Zips

John Groce

Nate Johnson

Tavari Johnson

Shammah Scott

Media Conference

Arizona - 93, Akron - 65

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

JOHN GROCE: Obviously, we're disappointed. We didn't play as well as we would have liked. Give Arizona certainly some credit for that. I thought that what stood out to me, obviously, was some of our paint or rim decisions. They blocked nine shots during the game. We did a pretty good job of taking care of the ball with seven turnovers. That was a concern because I thought they turned them into live ball opportunities, when I watched 'em on film, about as good as anyone as we played all year.

So we took pretty good care of the ball. It was the rim decisions, their shot blocking and size at the rim that I thought we could have made some better decisions and maybe had a few more quality possessions, especially in the first half when I actually thought we played fairly well, other than those rim decisions and the rebounding, which is the second point.

Obviously, had 33 chances to get a defensive rebound. We got 18 of 'em back. So we needed to probably get about another six of those and we didn't. Give them credit. They have got good size. They're hard to block out. Could we have hit a little harder and better? Probably is my gut.

But lastly, I'll say this. This has been a really special



group. These guys have won 20 of their last 22 games. There's not a lot of teams in college basketball that have done that. But that's just maybe half of it. Obviously, the results have been good in what we are trying to get done. But it's the group itself. I told 'em that in the locker room, the character that they displayed all year, their resiliency, their consistency. It's a special group of guys. We've got good people in that locker room that really do care about each other that are great teammates. They care about winning on and off the court.

So I'm really proud of 'em. I love coaching 'em. I love being with 'em. Obviously, we're going to lose Seth and Evan and Isaiah, three big parts of our team that are great dudes, and we'll miss those guys as they challenged everybody in there.

We got to carry on the tradition of what we do and how we do it because there's certainly a standard of that at Akron that we all have a responsibility to uphold.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. For any of you guys, what made it so difficult offensively for you guys to try and find quality looks? Was it just more of the shots weren't falling or was it something that Arizona was doing specifically?

NATE JOHNSON: I would say it was more in the first half. Like Coach said, we had some questionable -- like, us going to the basket and not getting on two feet and shot-faking. But some of the shots we had were looks that we would take, and they just weren't falling, so that's really it.

Q. Nate, with next year being your senior year and with how this season went, do you feel like -- despite even the outcome today, do you feel like there's some confidence heading into next season?

NATE JOHNSON: Definitely. I mean, especially if having the same couple guys coming around me. I mean, I hope that builds confidence in them so that way next year we can come back and do it again.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, guys. We'll take questions for coach.



Q. You guys were able to hang out -- hang around through the first 20 minutes. That stretch to start the second half, what did you see change there the first couple minutes of the half that let them extend the lead?

JOHN GROCE: You know, again, I think obviously they have got great size. I was concerned about the rebounding going into the game. We got four out of 42 opportunities back. Certainly credit them. They're a good rebounding team. We needed to be better there, though, and control what we could control and dig out a few more than what we did.

Then to get 18 out of 33 back on the defensive back board, like I said, to get our goal there, we needed to probably get five or six more of those. We didn't do that. So I thought it was rebounding. The first half, I loved how we played offensively. I agree with Nate. I didn't think we made shots, one, and then two our rim decisions, we had six shots blocked at the rim. We just didn't make great rim decisions, great paint decisions.

The second half obviously we didn't play as well as we did the first half, and I thought they played, they certainly had something to do with it. I thought they played really well in the second half, rebounded it really well. I thought our defense wasn't tight enough. You saw them get some open dunks and plays in and around the paint and the rim where we just weren't, we didn't pull, we call it we didn't pull enough. So we didn't play as well in the second half. We played much better in the first half. I thought other than that the 9-0 start in the first half and the rim decisions, like we played pretty well. I was pretty pleased with how we played. Second half we just didn't play as well.

Q. You guys played no competition like Arizona in your non-conference schedule, do you feel like that maybe --

JOHN GROCE: Don't disrespect St. Mary's like that.

Q. I guess that's true.

JOHN GROCE: Don't disrespect them like that. I think they're still in the tournament, aren't they? Didn't they win? They're pretty big too. So let's don't disrespect them.

Q. Do you feel that didn't put you in a great position to see this defense?

JOHN GROCE: Not at all. I thought we played a really competitive schedule, one of the top third in the league, we do that every year. I thought St. Mary's was just as big or

bigger, quite frankly, if you look at their height, you would have to check KenPom on that, but I think it's pretty close. Certainly with Wessells and Saxon, those guys are two seven-footers, today Veesaar played as a seven-footer. Awaka plays bigger than what he is, very physically strong, tough on the glass and has had many double doubles throughout the year. So I think from a size perspective they were certainly comparable, both two really, really, really, really good teams.

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