

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

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

Akron Zips

Enrique Freeman

Greg Tribble

Ali Ali

Coach John Groce

Media Conference



officialated. So we asked Coach a lot about the run and what it takes to win in this tournament.

Q. This is for any of you guys. What team would you guys kind of compare Creighton to that you have played in your college careers?

GREG TRIBBLE: We compare them to Toledo. They have an elite offense. They run a crisp offense, and they can score at will. So you have to handle your defense and make sure that scouting and everything. So, yeah, I would compare them to Toledo.

Q. Enrique, obviously you've been here five years now, been a long career at Akron. What does it mean to you for your career to culminate in another trip to the NCAA Tournament here?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I mean it's truly surreal. I'm truly happy to do it with my teammates. I think we've been preparing all year for opportunities like this and it's super exciting to be able to get to play and compete. That's what we came to do, compete.

Q. Enrique, first of all, congratulations on the All-American nod yesterday.

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: Thank you.

Q. Your story is amazing. Does it sometimes amaze you as well that you've gone from walk on to All-American?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: Yeah, it amazed me when they say Enrique was just in there in the walk on tryouts blocking shots. So sometimes it is surreal, and it's amazing.

Q. I'm curious how transferrable is the experience of playing UCLA a couple of years ago. You guys were all in that game along with Mikal. How transferrable is that experience knowing you had to face a team that didn't see a lot of experience, kind of similar story line to this one.

ALI ALI: I think it just helps us kind of have a little

Q. Please state your name and media affiliation. If you are joining on Zoom, please use the raise hand function for questions. We will address questions in the room first and get to the Zoom, if time allows. First question for the student-athletes.

Q. Guys, congratulations, first of all. You guys were here before, and just missed. How much does that help ease things, number one, and obviously, this is going to be a team that's got probably the biggest bigs, the biggest length. How do you handle that? How do you neutralize that?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I think our experience in the tournament before is going to help us tremendously in this game. We can definitely, you know, pick up some mistakes we messed up on execution wise when we played UCLA. So I think that's going to help us in this game. And they have a really good forward. He's a really good defender, and he protects the rim really well, similar to my game. So we're just going to try to execute a good game plan to work around that.

Q. For all you guys, Coach has made a run with a MAC team in the tournament, got to the Sweet 16. Has he shared some of that with you guys? Are you interested to know what that journey was like for him?

GREG TRIBBLE: Yeah, obviously because we are trying to do the same thing, make a run in this tournament. Coach knows the ins and outs of the tournaments and how games are being played, how the game is going to be



familiarity with the bright lights. At the end of the day it's still a 40-minute game and we're going to have to go out there and play really hard and execute on both sides of the ball. So it's nice having that experience in your back pocket, but at the same time that was two years ago, so we know we have to show up Thursday.

Q. Were you guys at that try out that Enrique did? What do you remember of it?

GREG TRIBBLE: (Laughs). I just remember a skinny kid just flying around, blocking shots. And obviously me and Ali were freshmen at the time. That was our first year there. Then we saw him at practice and he was on the scout team and we was like hold on, he got under Coach Groce and Coach Ford and all them guys and they developed him and obviously you see the product they produced.

Q. It's been mentioned that you guys have been in this position before, some of the older players. How do you guys mentor the younger players on the roster to be ready for this experience and get ready for Creighton?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: Truthfully, we got a lot of good mentorship from the 2019-2020 team in Akron. So I'm just happy we got to give them a taste of what a championship feels like so they know what to chase after when we're gone.

Q. You guys talked about last time you played in the dance, there was a big wow factor. This time around, how do you make sure that you don't make this bigger than it is tomorrow when you hit that floor and you don't get enveloped by the bright light?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I think goes back to what Ali said. At the end of the day we are just two teams playing 40 minutes. Whoever plays the best basketball at the end is going to win the game.

Q. Enrique, when you look at your game, I mean, I think Zach Edey and DJ Burns were the biggest guys in the country. The only ones who had more post ups than you this year. How are you as effective at that part of the game given your size and what's perceived as advantages I guess as a five?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: Yeah, I think it's definitely my skill, and we do a good job, my teammates do a good job feeding me the ball. We have a great post action for cutting and everything. So as much as I can post and score, and my quickness, you know, my teammates put me in a good position to score, when they cut, 4-5 cut, all this

other stuff. It's truly how it works and just playing to what I'm used to.

Q. How much of an advantage do you guys feel it is to be playing so close to home in Pittsburgh?

GREG TRIBBLE: I feel like it's a big advantage, obviously. We got a lot of Zips Nation fans coming to the game, man. That obviously can fuel a run and intensity. We feed off the crowd. So, yeah, I feel like it's a huge advantage for us to have our fans so close in coming to the game.

Q. With the landscape of how college basketball is going with the transfer portal and NIL, how much more does this mean to you guys that you guys have stuck around for this many years?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I mean, it's like I'm saying the same thing, but it means a lot. I know we've been together for the last five years. We've seen each other grow from freshmen to seniors to like great men now, and the journey has been incredible. So I think for myself I'm just truly grateful for the journey. That's what it means to me. Like we've all put in a lot of work to get to where we are right now and we can continue to push forward and try to go win tomorrow.

Q. One of the bigger criticisms for the critics, you guys in the MAC tournament was shooting. I know John Groce has said that the mentality has always been take the best shot. Has anything else kind of changed going into this tournament?

GREG TRIBBLE: Nah, not really. We put in a lot of work. Everybody on our team puts a lot of work in in the gym. And we're just going to take open shots, take good shots that's in our wheelhouse. We'll start making shots. Just keep the confidence and just keep playing defense, and that's what I feel like we're going to do.

Q. Piggybacking off the transfer thing, you left and then you came back. Why was it important for you to come back to Akron?

ALI ALI: I think because these are the guys I first met, like in 2018, 2019. And I value relationships and stuff like that. So it was never ease to leave in the first place, and after the season and whatnot and talking to them and they were okay with me coming back and I think it was just only right to go out on my college career on a high note with the guys I started with.

Q. Greg, you're kind of the tip of the spear defensively for this team. When you look at Creighton on film and the way they kind of attack teams, I guess, from the

back court, what stands out to you?

GREG TRIBBLE: What stands out to me is they have a lot of shooting and they have a lot of good-sized players with skill. Obviously we gotta make it hard on them, try to make it uncomfortable, but it's going to be a great challenge for us, and we're just looking forward to going out there and competing.

Q. I'll sneak in another one. You guys experienced a late-game situation in the championship game that probably reinforced just how unexpected things can happen this time of year. Has there been more of an emphasis on late game situations, all those kinds of things this week based on what happened against Penn State?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I wouldn't say this week. We practiced that all year around. Coach puts us in a great position in practice to work on late-game execution, any plays, up down, up three, down three, do we foul. So we were very prepared no matter what game it was for late-game situations. And then, you know, when it comes down, coach has always said free throws win championships and he hit those free throws.

Q. You've won three games as a double-digit seed in your career and almost got a fourth against a UCLA team that had everyone back for a Final Four run. How do you get a team to not only prepare the right way but perform when it comes time to perform in those situations?

JOHN GROCE: I think with a singular focus, Matt, be to be honest, obviously those experiences, they are helpful from the standpoint that you've been there before and you can learn from those and apply them. But at the end of the day, it's about competing against a really good Creighton team, and it's about the game tomorrow. You know, what happened in 2010 or 2012 or 2022 or, you know, those years, they're relevant from the standpoint of maybe routine and how you approach the week, but in terms of the game tomorrow, they have nothing to do with the game tomorrow. You have to play the game that's in front of you with a singular focus. I thought our guys did that over the weekend in the MAC tournament, and it was a big reason why we had some success.

Q. Kind of piggybacking off of what he said, these guys have played here and they talked about that wow factor when they were playing against UCLA. Do you think that helps tomorrow in that there's a been there done that? How do you make this so it's not bigger than it already is?

JOHN GROCE: Yeah, they're pretty old, obviously. They've been around a while. They've played the big games. They've seen the good, the bad, the ugly, the ups and downs of all this that you have to fight through because that's the reality when you're together over a five-year window. You're going to see it all. It's a long period of time and really unheard of in today's college basketball environment. So because of that, I think it's applicable. I mean I think it's helpful, but again, we have to play well tomorrow. I mean it's about the game at 1:30 tomorrow, and I think they understand that I've tried to instill in them that we can learn from our past and move, okay, but to dwell on that is a complete waste of time, has nothing to do with tomorrow's game at 1:30. We've gotta execute our game plan. We have to play well, and the team that does that the best tomorrow is going to win tomorrow.

I know it sounds like a similar answer to what I gave Matt there, but that's how we really feel about it, and that's what we've tried to instill in them over a five-year period is just to get locked in on the present moment, who we're playing, our practice today, and that's challenging for anybody, especially 18 to 22, 23-year-olds, but those guys because of our leadership and their experience, I think that's where it matters. They've been able to keep us really grounded and locked in on one game at a time in the locker room, and that's huge. So that's where the leadership of like Tribble and Ali and Enrique comes into play.

Q. John, you guys spend so much time recruiting. You're in high school gyms, scouring the transfer portal, et cetera. And you have a kid walk into your gym for a tryout and become an All-American. What's the lesson there?

JOHN GROCE: Wow. For me, when I kind of hear that, and obviously I've been a part of it -- and I always tell people, with Freeman's story, if the Lord blessed me with 50 more years to do this, I don't know if it would ever happen again. It's so unique. It's almost like a unicorn deal. And if you knew him like we do, who he is as a person, student. He already has a bachelor's degree. He's getting ready to finish his MBA. He's on student-athlete council. The person he is, and you guys don't get to see that. You get to see him play, and I think he gives off that vibe when he plays. If I was watching him play, trying to be as objective as possible, I'd say that looks like a great dude, you know. And he is. It's amazing. His mom's a Cleveland City police officer, great woman. She raised him well. And his humility, coachability, work capacity. I mean it's not only is the story unicorn like. I always tell people that he is the unicorn, because of who he is as a person, what he's done as a student, and obviously whatever he's been able to accomplish as a

player, which is what all you guys see. But to go from a walk-on tryout to Defensive Player of the Year two years ago to All-League to MAC Tournament MVP twice to MAC regular conference MVP this year to an All-American is nothing short of amazing. I mean it really is. And credit to him and who he is as a person and his work capacity.

Q. Greg was saying that he remembers the tryout as just a skinny kid with elbows flying around. What is your recollection of that first tryout with Enrique?

JOHN GROCE: Well, you saw him. I came in with my cup of coffee, sat down. We have a student body wide tryout every year. And he was every and you noticed his size right away. He was about 6-7 ish plus at that time, long gangly, motor moving, blocking shots instincts were there. But at that time he was about a buck 80 dripping wet, you know. He was thin, skinny, as Greg alluded to. So he's changed his body. You know, when he first started, he was almost exclusively an interior player. Now he plays inside and outside. He's improved his free throw percentage. He shoots threes. I mean he's just -- it's amazing his growth and evolution from year to year he's added something to his game to make him an even better player. I think he shows his hunger, his desire, and once again, his humility.

Q. Coach, I asked the players what team that they played this season would they compare Creighton to. Greg spoke out and said that was Toledo. I was curious what team you would compare Creighton to?

JOHN GROCE: He probably said that because Toledo, they do a great job offensively. They're such a tough cover. He does a great job with his team. But I don't know that we've played one offensively and defensively in concert like Creighton. They're elite offensively. Obviously they're Top-25 in the country in both offensive efficiency rating and defensive efficiency rating. They've got great experience. They're the 8th oldest team in college basketball. The majority of their guys have played together for a long time, just like our guys have. Everybody talks about our age. Scheierman, All-American. Obviously Alexander, really good talented scorer. They get great play at the point guard position. Miller can really shoot it. They get great minutes, you know, obviously from their guys that come off the bench like we have. And then Kalkbrenner is a difference maker defensively. You know, obviously three-time Big East Defensive Player of the Year. Devan, my GA, said to me the other day, now Coach Morrow said to me, he said, there's only two other players that have ever won it three times. He said, and you've probably heard of them. Their names are Patrick Ewing and Alonzo Mourning. I said, yeah, I know who those guys are. So that's the type of impact he has defensively, you know. I've

always had great respect for Scheierman. We scheduled South Dakota State a few years ago and I was glad that he wasn't on the roster. Now here we got karma and now I gotta coach against him tomorrow at 1:30. I think he's a really, really really gifted player with great positional size as a perimeter. And obviously they're well coached. Greg does a really good job. So it'll be a great challenge both ends. I think Kalkbrenner makes them go defensively and I think they all kind of work together in concert to provide you with, as you're watching, an elite offense.

Q. Coach, you talked to me on Sunday about how much respect you have for coach McDermott and his program and what he's been able to do. Talk about how your team matches up with Creighton coming into this game.

JOHN GROCE: Obviously we're looking forward to the challenge. I do think from an experience perspective we're similar. I alluded to that there earlier. Obviously we have Enrique. Kalkbrenner is terrific. They have really good perimeter players. We do as well. I think it's obviously, for us, and I'm not going to let you in on all the secrets of what we're trying to do offensively and defensively with the game looming tomorrow at 1:30. But it's going to be a challenge to guard them. Obviously they're just as good defensively. You know, ironically their stat sheet in terms of their KenPom rating, what they are offensively, what they are defensively, very similar to UCLA two years ago with those numbers, although different styles. So once again, I watched UCLA, and I told you guys in this same setting two years ago when I watched them I saw a team that had went to the Final Four the previous year, had all those guys returning, and I thought they were capable of doing that again, what would have been a second time. They ended up getting beat in the Sweet 16 by North Carolina in 2022. But I feel a very similar feeling watching Creighton play, again, because of age, experience, their ability to get it done on the offensive end as well as the defensive end, and then obviously, like I said, they've got a very good coach.

So they're a very, very good team and we'll have to play well tomorrow at 1:30.

Q. So the tournament in Pittsburgh is hosted by Duquesne. Obviously, he took over for Coach Keatts at Akron. What's that relationship like and what do you make of him sort of achieving the goal of getting Duquesne to the tournament this season?

JOHN GROCE: Yeah, no, I've got great respect for Keatts. I tell people all the time one of the reasons I was attracted to the Akron job back in 2017 had a lot to do with the success that he had had over a long period of time, a lot of

great battles. We had hired a couple support staff positions when I was at Illinois based on his recommendation, people that had been at Akron. Great respect for him as a coach, person. We communicate through texts primarily. We'll talk as well. But, you know, Keith is a huge part of Akron. You know, the city, the university, what he did there. You know, he's one of ours.

So we're excited for him and his team and what they've done this year, their opportunity in the tournament, and very thankful for, you know, what he means to Akron basketball and our program and always will.

Q. I'm curious, with Enrique and obviously at 6'7", 206, like he's not traditionally built like a five that you would play through the post with as much as you guys do. How have you incorporated that as a main fixture of your offense and how has he evolved into building as effective as he is?

JOHN GROCE: Yeah, no. Great question. I think it kind of goes back to what we were talking about there earlier. His evolution from being strictly interior to now playing on the perimeter, shooting threes, free throw shooting, driving the ball, getting involved in pick and rolls, dribble hand-offs. All those things happened as a part of his maturation process over five years to get to where he's at now where he's a little bit more dynamic and versatile, if you will. So he can do a little bit of both, but, yeah, no. His motor, I think, you know, he's just fast twitch. His motor. He's relentless in terms of his effort on the glass, and he just impacts the game and then effects the game defensively as well. You know, in the semifinal game on Saturday, I believe it was, he had seven blocks. So he just does a little bit of everything. He's able to affect offense, defense, rebounding. He can play inside. He can play outside. So I think his versatility is what's made him the player that he is today versus where he was five years ago.

Q. It looks like expansion is probably coming, at least in a mild form. Is the hope, at least among your brethren in the MAC, that there's going to be room for more, quote, Mid Major programs than just trying to give the seventh or eighth or ninth team in the Power Four conference that there's extra bids?

JOHN GROCE: You mentioned the word hope. I think that's appropriate that, you know, obviously we hope that for sure. And you know what's interesting, I've gotten to the point when I was younger, I worried more about maybe that stuff. Obviously my antenna is up. I want to be educated. I want to know what's going on. Our athletic director does a good job of filling me in on all that. He's really sharp and knows what's going on on a daily basis. But I've almost gotten to the point as I've gotten older that I

don't know if I can really control that. Conference realignment, who's going where, like just coach your team, man. I keep telling myself that, my internal voice. Obviously we're hopeful that occurs with all the change. I think about all the change that's happened from when I started until now over this 30-year window. It's been drastic, right? So you either improvise, adapt and overcome, the Marines slogan, mantra, or you're going to get trampled. I mean there's no need to complain about it. A lot of it you're not going to be able to control. But certainly, to answer your question, that is our hope.

Now, we'll see, right, if that develops and happens.

Q. So you obviously won the MAC tournament on an interesting finish against a big rival. Did you find you had to refocus the team after that or did the veteran leadership kind of take care of that for you?

JOHN GROCE: Well I'm glad you brought that up because there's been obviously a lot of attention on that. And I don't think anyone would debate like, hey, the foul or whatever, right? They'd like to have that back or whatever. But I mean, some people give me the impression they're clairvoyant, like they know what would have happened in the next six seconds. That's impressive, because when he caught the ball it was going to be five on four. How do you know that we don't score that way? Maybe. Maybe not. How do you know we don't call timeout when the ball gets in the front court, there's two seconds to go and we have two or three side out specials and we don't score on one of those? How do you know that? Maybe. Maybe not. So I think the criticism that he's gotten publicly, whether it's through media, social media, whatever that is, I'm not sure that's real fair. Obviously you'd like to have it back. There's no dispute, you know, hey, whatever you want to call it, silly foul, whether they would make that. I get that. But to pinpoint that as the story or the reason, I mean, I don't know if that's fair to him, to them and I don't know if it's fair to our guys. We've talked a lot about Freeman and the five-year run and all the winning and the three championships and Greg Tribble stepping up and actually had to make the two free throws. Like to me that's more of the story. But that's just me.

In terms of refocus, you know, again, with these guys being as old as they are, it's such great experience, those guys truly have bought into try to be one and 0. And I know that sounds coach speak, cliché, all that. They really have. Why? I think it's challenging for young guys to do that but we've had these guys around for a long time and I think they believe in the recipe and the formula that they've kind of trained themselves and led the young guys with that in mind and I think it's the reason as I said last weekend we had some success. It's been really good to us. For us to

think about anything other than what we need to get done today to prepare for a great Creighton team tomorrow is futility. It's a waste of time. So that's our focus right now. And may certainly help with that, right. So when the coaches aren't around you gotta have good leadership in there when you're not around. And we have great leadership with these seniors.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

JOHN GROCE: Thank you.

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