

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

Thursday, March 21, 2024
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA
PPG Paints Arena

Akron Zips
Coach John Groce
Enrique Freeman
Greg Tribble
Ali Ali

Media Conference

JOHN GROCE: Obviously didn't quite go the way that we had planned or wanted it to. Give Creighton a lot of credit. I thought they were really challenging to guard. I felt that way coming into the game. I thought it was important that we had valuable possessions on offense and scored. And I thought we got some pretty good shots. We made them early. Didn't make as many of them in the second half, but I thought they were good ones, and the game got away from us just a little bit there. But give them credit. They're a good basketball team, but I'm really proud of these guys, proud of our whole team, but in particular, senior class and what they've meant to our program, in some cases five years, four years, two years and one year between the five guys. And what they've done for our program, and it's not just the winning. You know, obviously that's the part that you get to see is the three championships over five years and the win percentage and all that that these guys have been able to attain. But it's bigger than that to me. It's the people that they are, the people that they've become, the leaders that they've been, the way they are on campus, the way they treat people, the teammates that they've been, their work capacity, their commitment to being great, their commitment to each other, how much they care about each other, and how much they care about winning. And in a day and age where our society can tend to be the opposite of that or 180 of that or there's selfishness and all that with teams, and the fact that we didn't have any of that makes this group really, really, really special. It's been a real privilege to coach them and to work with them. Like I said, Kaleb one year, Sammy two years, Ali four and Reque and Greg five. Just very, very thankful and feel very blessed. Wished we'd have played a little bit better



today, but right now I kind of have an attitude of gratitude for these three guys and Thornton and Hunter, who aren't up here.

MODERATOR: Questions for student-athletes.

Q. Enrique, you went from getting dragged to open tryouts and now in March Madness, I don't know if anybody's told you, I'm sure you know, though, most double doubles, third in NCAA Division I history. How does that feel to kind of finish this part of your story?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I mean, obviously the accolades feel nice, but like Coach said, I'm just in real good gratitude with how this team, throughout the entire season, throughout my entire time here, we worked very hard, and I think we did something very special in Akron, and I'm glad we were able to put on for the city.

Q. Ali, what does it mean for you to kind of finish off your story coming back to Akron, you get back to March Madness and finish it out with your guys? Obviously not the way you wanted the game to end, but your story as a whole, talk about the ending for you.

ALI ALI: Obviously not the ideal ending that we wanted, but I got to go out with the people that I care about the most, you know, outside of my family back home. Honestly, like, these are like my brothers. I don't really got too many friends back home. These are the guys I'm around a lot. So if I'm going to lose, I'm going to lose with them. If I'm going to win, I'm going to win with them. That was a big part of coming back knowing I would regret it if I didn't finish out my college career with these guys in the locker room.

Q. What worked in the first half? What did you think would work with your game plan? Just speak about the start you guys had.

GREG TRIBBLE: I felt like we were making a lot of shots in the first half which led to -- they can't get out in transition as much if you are making shots. And I feel like in the second half we weren't making as many shots and we



started gambling and they're a really good team on offense, and once they start getting open shots it's hard to stop them from making shots. So they were just real good in transition, and we just didn't have good transition defense tonight.

Q. Enrique, just that first half, the end on an 8-0 run that extends 28 to 8, I believe. Kalkbrenner, Alexander, Scheierman are all involved. How difficult was that match-up, and for you in particular, Kalkbrenner?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: He's a big player. He has good size, but I think match-up wise, we did a good job. I thought the entire game tried to take away their good tendencies, but overall I think they just caught us in transition and they're really good at the three-point line. So they hit some good threes.

Q. Enrique, can you talk about what the banging inside and drawing him defensively outside with the threes, what was that pace like for you and did it take a toll as the game went on, the frenetic first six minutes?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I mean, I don't think it took a toll. I just think I got in foul trouble and we decide to put Sammy on him. But that's what bigs do. We go down there and we're physical, try to catch them outside the post. I know I had a good post position and he struggled when I was using my moves. So it's just basketball.

Q. From talking to you guys, I know that you thought mental toughness really carried you through the Mac tournament and here, but you didn't play your best. I'm sure you guys think that today wasn't your best. So what do you think kind of just prevented it from being -- reaching your full potential as a group when it comes to the talent and experience you guys have?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I think -- potential wise, I think our team is reaching our potential. You know, I think our entire season there was ebbs and flows throughout the entire season, but in this game, some games you get out shot. Simply it. I don't think any of our guys quit. None of our guys didn't stop playing hard. Everybody gave their best efforts until the shot clock went off. So all we can do is take a look at the drawing board and hopefully those freshmen, juniors and sophomores come in next season and see that and use that as an opportunity to learn.

Q. Enrique, you came out and banked in a three-pointer to begin and I think you took like eight of them. I don't know. Maybe John didn't design it that way, but what was going on there with you shooting the threes and just how did you feel about that?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: You know, he plays in the paint a lot. So we tried to stretch out the floor a little bit more. And everybody believes in my three. I've been working very hard on it. And I just knocked down a few, so they had to change coverage, and we decided to attack a different way.

Q. This game only came about two hours away from home. Pretty good faithful showing from the Akron crowd, and at times in the first half, pretty energetic. How did you guys try to ride that momentum from the crowd, as well, and what was it like just to see the Akron faithful here?

GREG TRIBBLE: It meant a lot. Obviously, our fans, they care about us. They show up to every home game. That's why we were so good at home this year. I mean, it just feels good to see some familiar faces in Pittsburgh, and we just tried to feed off of that. And that's it, really.

Q. For you three guys, you guys came in before the pandemic. You guys have been in Akron for five years, Enrique six as a student, obviously. If you could take us back to when you were kids to now as kind of grown men or adults, what's that been like, this full experience of college basketball with two tournament appearances?

ENRIQUE FREEMAN: I mean, like I said yesterday, the journey has been amazing. Super grateful for the journey. I wouldn't ask for it to go any different. I'm very proud of what I was able to accomplish here and all of us were able to accomplish here. And I just -- I'm happy that we're able to leave on a legacy. Akron basketball, Akron culture. We've done a lot of winning, and we want to just pass on the torch. Those guys in 2019, 2020 passed the torch to us. Time for us to pass the torch.

ALI ALI: I would say I'm definitely appreciative of the run we've had the last four or five years, and just looking back, like, obviously as a kid, middle schooler, high school, like for me, not having a DI offer, senior year starting like Groce coming in giving me one chance, and no one else giving me a chance coming out of high school. So I think just coming into this tournament has been the story of our lives, always been underdogs. So I mean, I'm just grateful and appreciative for all the people I've met on the way.

GREG TRIBBLE: I'm just thankful for the opportunity of Coach Groce and the coaching staff for even believing in me to come to this university. Just teaching the younger guys, just don't take it for granted. You know, obviously, we put in a lot of work to get to where we're at now to do as much winning as we have, and just teaching them, that's what it's all about. Just teaching them that you just can't

take it for granted. You gotta work hard every day.

MODERATOR: Thank you, student-athletes. All right. Questions for Coach Groce.

Q. Coach, did the first half kind of go according to plan or was there a big deviation from what you thought?

JOHN GROCE: Until the last couple minutes. I thought that was the biggest juncture in the game. We were up 34-31 with about two minutes to go in the half and then they went on an 8-0 run. I thought that was the biggest two minutes of the game. So give them credit. We had a couple possessions there where we didn't get matched up in transition. The guys alluded to that. You know, we had a questionable shot, you know, couldn't quite get the ball a couple of times where we wanted to get it. But for the most part, other than those two minutes, we played the game plan to precision, quite frankly. We really did. Terry was talking about Freeman's eight threes. I actually was hoping he'd get 15 up.

Q. Coach, you started off the game with Enrique Freeman up top taking those eight threes throughout the game. You had Sammy Hunter in the post. Is that something you guys had planned for?

JOHN GROCE: A lot of it's based on how Kalkbrenner plays defensively. In my opinion, he makes them go defensively. So the guys are certainly smart, give good effort. But you're talking about the three time Big East Defensive Player of the Year. He's big, as Rique said. So I've got confidence in Enrique and Sammy to shoot the ball from the three-point line and beyond. So that was part of it, trying to get him out of the paint a little bit. Give them credit, Greg made a change, like good coaches like him do, and changed his coverage a little bit. But I thought Ali was effective in the first half. I thought the pick and roll game was effective in the first half. I thought we did a lot of really good things. Until their run the last two minutes, as the original question was asked there, I don't know if it could have went much better.

Second juncture of the game that I thought got away from us was the start of the second half. We just weren't -- weren't quite as effective as we were the first 18 minutes, and then we were playing behind from there.

Q. John, given Enrique's journey, how tough is it, then, subbing him out with 1:23 to go knowing you're not going to have him again?

JOHN GROCE: Tough. It's not just because as good of player as he is. That's part of it. But it's the person he is,

the leader, the teammate, how coachable he is, his work ethic, how much he cares about other people. I've nicknamed him the unicorn for a reason.

Q. Coach, in that second half, when the offense isn't executing, seems like shots are finding any and every way to not fall. What's the message to your team?

JOHN GROCE: Well, my whole deal, and it is every game, it's the quality of the shot that's important to me. I believe in them that they can make good shots. So I'm more concerned about the quality of the shot we're getting. I thought turnovers would be big for us, and you can look at the stats. We only turned it five times the entire game, which is great. I thought defensive rebounding would be an advantage for us. They got us a little bit on the glass there during that one stretch that I was a little disappointed in. We missed a block-out on Mason Miller and a couple guys there that ended up during that stretch of two or three minutes when I talked about the bad start a little bit to the second half where it kind of got away from us a little bit. I thought that offensive rebounding by them was a part of that. But, you know, yeah. Obviously you want to make shots. Right? Who doesn't want to make shots? We've taken a lot of pride in having a lot of mental toughness of being able to play through stretches. We had a semifinal game in Cleveland where we scored 16 points in the first half and had 13 turnovers and we were only down ten because our defense was so good. Then we scored 50 in the second half and shot the cover off the ball.

So you want to make shots. I do think if you can rebound and take care of the ball and defend, you're always going to have a chance. But this was a little unique today. Their offense, as the guys were alluding to, was just prolific. Saw it on film coming into the game, felt that way during the game. My opinion hasn't changed on that. Just have a lot of answers offensively. They've got size at the rim and a guy that can score in the post. They've got multiple play makers, great passers. And they shoot the ball from three very well. You're not going to find very many nights where you've got all four or five of those guys that shoot threes for them to all be off in the same night. And then they run good stuff.

So I knew it was going to be a challenge to stop them. Again, I thought the key would be could we keep scoring, and obviously we were able to do that for about 18 minutes but weren't quite able to sustain that for the remaining 22 minutes.

Q. Coach, you used the word prolific to describe their offense. Was there an offense this season, whether it be regular season or MAC tournament or nonconference, that prepared you for what they bring

with Kalkbrenner and Alexander and Scheierman?

JOHN GROCE: No. I mean, I think they're as good of an offensive team in terms of their personnel, their blend of size, shooting, play making, what they run offensively. They're as good of an offensive team as we've went against in my seven years at Akron.

Q. You've been in this situation before after being eliminated in the NCAA Tournament. Just curious, what do you say to your team afterwards in the locker room?

JOHN GROCE: I just told them how proud I was of them. I addressed the game briefly, and obviously didn't go the way that we wanted it to or envisioned or planned for it to. Give Creighton credit. But just told them how grateful I was for what I just said at the outset of this; five years, four years, two years, one year, in particular those seniors, and really all of them. You know, I enjoyed being with them, coaching them. They are a great group of guys. As Freeman has said multiple times, we don't have a bad apple in our locker room. That doesn't mean we don't go through times that are tough. We all do, right? You guys do, we do. But it's the people you do it with, how much you care about each other. We had good people in there, and it made it super enjoyable, and I'm just grateful to have had the opportunity to coach them. Those guys will always be a part of not only the Akron family, but my personal family. You know, I love them. They're great, great, great guys.

Q. John, Enrique said he was happy to be able to leave a legacy. How would you define the legacy?

JOHN GROCE: Well, that's a complicated question, right? Because what you see is the winning, you know, the winning percentage overall, league play, the best in the league, the championships, the banners, all that. And that's certainly a part of it. But I think it's more of -- and a couple of the young guys just spoke after the older guys had a chance to speak in the locker room about how grateful they were that guys taught them what hard work looked like. You know, what leadership looked like, what being a great teammate looked like, what being at a do-both place, meaning, we expect you to get it done academically and earn your degree and make progress towards degree while also playing at a high level, what that looks like. You know, all these guys you saw up here, plus Hunter and Thornton, exemplified that on a daily basis. And so they were able to see all that and feel all that. So to me it's bigger than all the winning. That's certainly a part of it. But again, it's who they are as people, who they are as students, the fact that they can get over themselves and care about somebody other than themselves, you know, just a special group.

Q. Obviously, the loss is still fresh, but all three guys touched on passing that torch in the legacy of Akron basketball. What does the future of Akron basketball look like in your eyes?

JOHN GROCE: Well, for us right now, obviously, I'm trying to process this one, right? But at the end of the day, we want to continue to fill our locker room with people that care about each other and care about winning. That's what those guys would tell you. It's really not any more complicated than that. Do you care about each other, really care for each other, take care of each other, and do you care about winning ahead of personal agenda? Right? Sounds obvious, sounds easy. It's not. You know, so that was their mentality. I think the younger guys saw that. And we want to continue to build on that.

Q. I know you'd prefer to be joining him in the round of 32, but do you have any message for your old friend and rival Keith Dambrot?

JOHN GROCE: I'll do that probably a little later. I haven't had a chance to do that. So I've been occupied with what we're doing right now.

Q. Can you tell us what you might tell him or talk to him about later on?

JOHN GROCE: Usually he and I -- I said this earlier, we'll text or we'll call and I'm happy for him, obviously, and what he's been able to do. I think you look at the last time that they were in the tournament, I think, was the '70s. Is that correct? Yeah. So it's really -- it's awesome, you know, what he's been able to do. And I'm happy for him and Donna with the retirement, and Keith's a big reason why I ended up come to go Akron. I said that earlier, was because of Keith and all the success that he had had and the battles that we had when I was at Ohio, and the familiarity with Akron and Northeast Ohio because of my time in the state at so many Ohio universities. And so, I had great familiarity with Akron and was attracted to that. But in large part because of Keith.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach. Appreciate your time.

JOHN GROCE: Sure.

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