Since the NCAA Tournament was expanded to 64 teams in 1985 and prior to this year there have been 104 games between the second-seeded and 15th seeded teams. In these 104 games, the No. 2 seed has advanced to the round of 32 an overwhelming 100 times.

The University of Akron, the No. 15 seed in the Southwest Region of the 2010-11 NCAA Tournament, will look to overcome these long odds today when they lock horns with Notre Dame

, the No. 2 seed in the Southwest, at 1:40 p.m. in Chicago.

The Fighting Irish, ranked fifth in the nation after finishing the regular season second in the Big East Conference, pose a huge obstacle for the Zips...both literally and figuratively. A senior-laden squad with size, depth and balance, Notre Dame was one of the hottest teams in the nation at the end of the regular season. The Irish won 10 of its last 12 games and all five starters averaging over 9.7 points per game, led by senior guard Ben Hansbrough's 18.5 points per contest. Handbrough is joined by 6-foot-8 forward Tim Abromaitis to form one of the most dangerous perimeter-shooting duos in the country, but Notre Dame also has plenty of other ways to put points on the board. They are also battle-tested and boast six wins over ranked teams this year, including a 56-51 road win over Pittsburgh when the Panthers, a No. 1 seed in the tournament, were ranked No. 2 in the country.

Even with the strong supporting cast, Akron coach Keith Dambrot knows his team will have to

stop Hansbrough, the Big East Player of the Year, if it hopes to see the next round.

"He's a guy that's built on intangibles, which is probably the biggest compliment you can give a player," Dambrot said of the 6-3 senior guard, who transferred to Notre Dame after two seasons at Mississippi State. "Here's a guy that probably most people thought would be a role player in the Big East when he went to Notre Dame. When he got there, he turned into one of the best players in the league. It really shouldn't surprise a lot of people. If you saw the way his brother (current Indiana Pacer Tyler) played (at North Carolina), he plays just like his brother played except a different position."

Not a lot of people should be surprised the Zips are in the NCAA Tournament, either. Despite earning the No. 7 seed in the MAC Tournament, Akron was one of the pre-season favorites to win the conference title. The Zips were able to fight through the field in the conference tournament for a number of reasons, none more important than the emergence of sophomore Zeke Marshall, a seven-foot center that was one of the most heavily-recruited players to ever select a MAC school.

Marshall held Miami star Julian Mavunga in check in the first round at Quicken Loans Arena in the Zips double-overtime win, limiting him to 14 points in 50 minutes. He then was solid against Western Michigan, playing strong defense on mammoth center Matt Stainbrook and, at times, Flenard Whitfield. Then, in the championship game, he took over in the second half and overtime, blocking nine shots against Kent after halftime, including one in a wild final sequence that preserved Akron's 66-65 victory.

Marshall also has a lot of confidence in his teammats.

"I don't have any doubt we're going to be able to play well against them," he said when asked what he expected against the Irish.

Though expecting to play well is one thing, stopping ND coach Mike Brey's motion offense that has become almost second-nature to seniors Handbrough, Abromaitis, Carleton Scott, Scott Martin and Tyrone Nash is far easier said than done ... especially when you consider four of Notre Dame's five starters stand 6-8.

Abromaitis averages 15.3 points per contest and connects on 42.4 percent of his 3-pointers. He scored a season-high 30 points against Villanova two weeks ago, connecting on nine-of-13 triples in the process. He has also scored in double figures in all but five Notre Dame games this season.

Scott leads the team in rebounding, pulling down 7.1 rebounds per game to go with his 11.6 points. Scott posted seven double-doubles this year and scored a season-high 23 points against Gonzaga in December.

Martin (9.9 points, 4.9 rebounds) and Nash (9.7 points, 5.9 rebounds, 49.9 FG%) can also provide Brey scoring punch both inside and outside.

The Irish are making the 30th NCAA Tournament appearance in school history. Last season they were shocked by Old Dominion in the first round, 51-50, a loss Hansborough said still "haunts" the Irish. Notre Dame's last trip to the Sweet 16 came in 2003, and the Irish are 3-3 all-time against MAC teams in the "Big Dance."

"You don't have to beat them nine out of 10 times," Dambrot said. "We only have to play one great game, and they have to have one miserable game, and we can get a win."