

The Best of the MAC

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Tuesday, March 11 2008 7:00 PM -

MAC Madness invades The Q today as the MAC Conference Tournament gets underway this afternoon. Many local fans are pulling hard for the Akron-Kent State final. The two rivals have never met in the finals, both have good teams on opposite sides of the bracket, and played two great games already this year. In Jesse's latest, our resident historian takes some time out to look back at the five best teams in MAC history. Earl Boykins' Eastern Mich team? Wally's Red Hawks? The Kent team with Gates and Huffman? Who's #1?



Since the NCAA Tournament expanded to 64 teams in 1985, a total of ten Mid-American Conference teams have advanced at least a round deep into the field. Here are the five best of those teams.

5. Eastern Michigan, 1990-91: With four seniors in the starting lineup, the Hurons were expected to win the MAC at the beginning of the 1990-91 season and they did just that, going 24-6 and taking both the regular-season and tournament titles. The team's veteran core was led by point guard Lorenzo Neely, who had started as a freshman on EMU's 1988 Tournament team that lost in the first round to Pitt, and filled out by the high-flying Thomas brothers, Carl and Charles, and by MAC Player of the Year Marcus Kennedy, a be-goggled brick house of a 6'7" center who had transferred in from Ferris State.

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All of this experience made the Hurons one tough out in March. In the first round of the NCAA Tournament at the Carrier Dome in Syracuse, Kennedy's 22 points and 16 rebounds, Neely's 17 points, seven boards, and five assists, a 43-31 rebounding edge, and a defense that limited fifth-seeded Mississippi State to 35 percent shooting led to a 76-56 [rout](#) of the Bulldogs, the MAC's most lopsided NCAA Tournament win ever.

The Hurons then caught a break when fourth-seeded UCLA, with Don McLean and Tracy Murray, was knocked off by #13-seed Penn State, then of the Atlantic 10 Conference. Put in the unique position of being a MAC team wearing home whites in the second round, they took advantage, [squeezing by](#) the Nittany Lions in overtime 71-68 despite Kennedy (who scored a game-high 21) fouling out in the extra session.

Eastern's number finally came up in the Sweet 16 round against top-seeded North Carolina at the Meadowlands. The Hurons kept it close for a while, trailing by only four midway through the second half, but finally their own lack of depth and UNC's length and talent caused the roof to cave in. The Tarheels ended the game on a 32-10 run and won, 93-67. Carl Thomas scored 27 points in the loss and was named to the East All-Regional team.

4. Eastern Michigan, 1995-96: The 1995-96 Eastern Michigan Eagles went 25-6, spent part of February in the Associated Press Top 25, and won the MAC regular-season and tournament title. Their main strength was the three-man backcourt combo of Tony Tolbert, Derrick Dial and Cleveland's own Earl Boykins, who was 5'7" in the media guide and a good three inches shorter in real life.

EMU's ninth seed was the highest for a MAC team since Ball State in 1989. The first-round opponent in the RCA Dome was Duke, then in the midst of its mid-90's fallow period- "they don't have Grant Hill or Christian Laettner" Boykins pointed out- and the Eagles made them look silly, winning rather easily, 75-60. After battling to a 26-26 halftime tie, EMU [blew](#) the Devils back to Durham with 49 second-half points, shooting 69 percent in the process. Coach K's

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overmatched backcourt spent most of the game futilely chasing Boykins (23 points) and Tolbert (20) like the bobbies in the closing credits of "The Benny Hill Show". Eastern proved superior inside as well, with center Theron Wilson recording five blocked shots.

That was as good as it got for Eastern in the '96 Tournament, although the Eagles played well in the second round against Ray Allen and top-seeded UConn. EMU raced out to a 32-19 lead over the Huskies, but Connecticut cut the deficit to one at the break and wore down Eastern in the second half, pulling away to a 95-81 victory. Tony Tolbert was heroic in the losing cause, scoring 36 points.

3. Miami, 1998-99: The '99 Redhawks are the only team on the list not to win the MAC regular-season and conference titles- they finished first but lost to Kent 49-43 in the title game- but that is just about the only blemish on an otherwise superb catalog of accomplishments. Miami went 24-8 in '98-99, were the conference's last at-large team to date, and became the third MAC team of the decade to reach the Sweet 16.

The main assets of the O.G. Miami were the wiles of Coach Charles Coles and the superhero exploits of All-American and MAC Player of the Year Wally Szczerbiak. The 6'7" Long Island native averaged 24 points and eight rebounds and was abetted nicely by fellow senior and ex-Indiana Mr. Basketball Damon Frierson, who averaged 13 points per game in his role as Wally's "Robin".

But Wally didn't need a "Robin" in the tenth-seeded Redhawks' 59-58 first-round upset of the University of Washington. Szczerbiak took 33 of his team's 55 shots, made 18 of them, and finished with 43 points, a MAC record in NCAA Tournament play. Not only did Wally account for 73 percent of his team's offense, he also made the game-saving play on defense, when he blocked a last-second shot to preserve the victory.

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Szczerbiak didn't carry the entire load offensively in the second-round match-up with second-seeded Utah. Instead, he stuffed the stat sheet- 24 points, seven boards, and five assists- and two of his teammates chipped in with double-figure scoring efforts, as the Redhawks came back from an 11-point first-half deficit to stun Andre Miller and the Utes, 66-58. The win sent Miami to the regional semifinals for the first time since 1978.

That '78 team had seen its season ended at the hands of the University of Kentucky, and so did the '99 version in the Midwest Regional Semifinals. Keying on the supporting cast, the Wildcats conceded Wally his points (23), but held his teammates to a total of 20 on 6-of-28 shooting and won going away, 58-43. Szczerbiak was rewarded for his efforts with a place on the Midwest All-Regional team.

2. Ball State, 1989-90: Ball State won consecutive MAC titles in 1989 and '90 and advanced in the NCAA Tournament both years, and an argument can be made that the first season was the superior of the two: after all, the 1988-89 Cardinals had the better record (29-3 to 26-7) and Tournament seed (#9 as opposed to #12) than the 1989-90 team, were ranked late in the season, and were coached by the rotund maestro, Rick Majerus.

Despite some of the inferior measurables, the 1989-90 Cardinals, coached by Dick Hunsaker, get the nod. They had almost everyone back from the previous season, including the dynamic trio of forward Parris McCurdy and guards Curtis Kidd and Billy Butts. They had also been joined by another primary scorer-sophomore guard and Muncie native Chandler Thompson. Most importantly, they didn't just stop at one NCAA Tournament victory.

The twelfth seed in the West Regional, Ball State [pulled off](#) a first-round upset of fifth-seeded Oregon State at the Huntsman Center in Salt Lake City in dramatic fashion. With two seconds left and his team trailing 53-51, McCurdy took an in-bounds pass, knocked in a buzzer-beating baseline jumper while being fouled, and made a free throw at 0:00 to win the game. Despite his heroics, McCurdy shot

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just 3-for-11, and Kidd and Butts also had off-days. But Chandler Thompson didn't- he poured in 24 with 13 rebounds, the only man on either team to score more than 11 points. The Cardinal defense held the Beavers to 31 percent shooting and dogged Gary Payton into a 3-for-12 performance before the trash-talking All-American fouled out with two minutes left.

After gathering the requisite golf-claps for their opening-round shocker, Ball State was expected to go quietly in round two against fourth-seeded Louisville. Instead, in the battle of the Cardinals, the birds from Muncie proved superior, jumping out to a 36-23 halftime lead, extending the lead to 17 early in the second half, then hanging on for a 62-60 victory. BSU won the rebounding battle 36-27 over the taller Cardinals and held Louisville to 38 percent from the field. Thompson and Billy Butts scored 15 apiece, making up for a combined 5-for-18 performance from McCurdy and Kidd. For the first time since the Tournament expanded to 64 teams in 1985, the MAC had a team in the Sweet 16.

Ball State's West Regional Semifinal against UNLV goes down as probably the [best loss](#)

ever suffered by a MAC team. At first the Runnin' Rebels dominated, taking an eight-point halftime lead, and were ahead 55-44 with 14 minutes left. Then Ball State turned the screws. Hampered by the Cardinals' physical defense and Anderson Hunt's foul trouble, UNLV saw its advantage begin to shrivel. With 12.6 seconds remaining and UNLV clinging to a 69-67 lead, Greg Anthony missed the front-end of a one-and-one, giving Ball State a chance to tie or win. Coach Hunsaker called a play for McCurdy; instead, the ball wound up in the hands of reserve guard Mike Spicer, who vacillated between shooting and passing and did neither. His weak lob was pulled down by Stacey Augmon, and Ball State's bid fell short. The Rebels registered Tournament-lows for points (69) and shooting percentage (35 percent) in their close shave. A week-and-a-half later, they annihilated Duke 103-73 to win the National Championship. In defeat, Chandler Thompson would be named to the West All-Regional team.

1. Kent State, 2001-02: Name the MAC team record, and the 2002 Flashes probably own it. They won more games (30) and more conference games (17) than any other team, and also advanced further in the NCAA Tournament (the

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Elite Eight) than any conference member since the field expanded to 64 teams in 1985. I'll admit to being biased, but there would seem to be little question, even to a non-KSU homer, that this is the best MAC team of the last two decades.

For Kent, it all started in the backcourt, manned by a pair of seniors in Andrew Mitchell and Trevor Huffman. Both players were experienced, could break down defenses off the dribble, could shoot from outside, and could distribute the ball and make their teammates better. 6'3" forward Demetric Shaw was the emotional center of the team and a two-time MAC Defensive Player of the Year. The final piece to the puzzle was Antonio Gates, a 6'5" power forward who could score in multiple ways and became the team's go-to guy during its NCAA Tournament run.

More than its historic regular-season domination of the MAC, it was the NCAA Tournament that marked Kent for immortality. The tenth-seeded Flashes dominated both Oklahoma State and second-seeded Alabama in the first two rounds, winning by scores (69-61 and 71-58, respectively) that were hardly a true measure of how one-sided these games were. In beating the Cowboys and Crimson Tide, Kent became the first MAC school since Ball State in 1989 and '90 to advance in the NCAA Tournament two consecutive years.

Unlike the Cardinals, however, Kent's latter run didn't end in the Sweet 16. In a marvelous, pulse-pounding South Regional Semifinal at Rupp Arena, the Flashes defeated Pitt 78-73 in overtime, scoring the game-winner on an acrobatic lay-up by Huffman with 57 seconds remaining in the extra session. For the first time since 1964, a MAC team was within one game of the Final Four.

But it wasn't to be. The Indiana Hoosiers, with vengeance on their mind from their 2001 first-round loss to Kent, made sure of that, bombing away to the tune of 15-of-19 from three-point range and defeating the Flashes, 81-69. Both Huffman and Gates earned South All-Region honors, the capper to a historic season for the Golden Flashes and MAC basketball alike.