



So far, the Mid-American Conference basketball season is shaking out the way it was expected to. The East Division, featuring Akron, Ohio, and Kent State is a three-horse race, while the West Division is up in the air. The Zips currently hold the top spot with a 12-4 record and a 3-0 mark in the conference. Right on their heels are the Ohio Bobcats and DJ Cooper, who are 12-5 and 3-0 in the conference under new coach Jim Christian. Kent State, who has an 11-6 record and a 2-1 conference record, has their sights set on Saturday's marquee clash against their most hated rival. Miami of Ohio, Bowling Green, and Buffalo round out the division standings.

Just one of the six teams in the West Division has an overall record above .500 and just one team has a conference record above .500. The Toledo Rockets, despite a 6-8 record, are atop the division by virtue of being the only team in the division with a 2-1 conference record. Western Michigan checks in second with a 9-8 record, but two conference losses in three tries. Central Michigan sits at .500, splitting their 16 games so far. Eastern Michigan, Ball State, and Northern Illinois are the bottom three in the West.

The conference's big three, Akron, Ohio, and Kent State have combined to post a 35-15 record. The rest of the conference is 59-82. With a little over half of the regular season completed, the non-conference games are out of the way and teams can focus on winning games to improve their seeding for the MAC Tournament, which will be held in Cleveland from March 11-16. Toledo will be ineligible for this year's tournament, so their goal during the regular season will be to secure a MAC West Division championship, as that will be the only hardware they can take home.

This past week in MAC play, home teams went five-for-six, with the lone home loss coming in

the Kent State-Buffalo matchup, as the road Flashes went back home with a 12-point victory over the Bulls. Akron took care of business in the James A Rhodes Arena with a 71-64 win over visiting Ball State. Ohio used a first-half barrage to put the game away early, outscoring Northern Illinois 45-18 in the first 20 minutes to coast to an 81-63 victory. Western Michigan held Toledo to just 19 points in their half en route to a 79-56 win in Kalamazoo. Miami of Ohio erased a four-point deficit to down the Bowling Green Falcons by a 63-60 score. In Tuesday night's only MAC matchup, Central Michigan held serve in Ypsilanti, downing Eastern Michigan by a 58-52 count.

All 12 teams in the MAC will be in action on Saturday, with most eyes focused on the 3 p.m. tip between Kent State and Akron. Since losing three straight in early December, the Flashes have won six out of seven, but lack a marquee win over that span. The six wins have come against a watered-down Cleveland State team, Arkansas State, St. Francis (PA), Fairmont State, Ball State, and Buffalo, with the lone loss coming against Toledo. A win over Akron would be big for Kent State, who has just one win over a top 100 RPI team this season and has played the 249th-ranked schedule.

The Zips enter this game playing good basketball. They have not lost in over a month, since an 80-73 defeat against the Detroit Titans back on December 15. Like Kent State, their schedule has been very little to write home about, with the highlight win being over Western Michigan. The Zips have only played away from home once in that span, a 15-point win at Northern Illinois last Saturday. The last meeting between these two was in the semifinals of the 2012 MAC Tournament. Akron moved on to the championship game with a 78-74 win and the Flashes are sure to be out for revenge in this one.

The energy level should be high at the Memorial A&C Center with ESPNU cameras in the building for this nationally-televised affair.

In other action, the Ohio Bobcats will put their 11-1 home mark on the line against the Toledo Rockets in a game that can be seen on SportsTime Ohio at 6 p.m. The Bobcats have gotten their offense going since the calendar flipped to 2013. In their four games this month, the Bobcats are averaging 80.5 points per contest, with an average margin of victory of 18.75 points per game. After losing five of seven in December, the Bobcats have certainly bounced back nicely and they'll look to continue that.

The Rockets head to Athens with a 2-7 mark on the road, though one of their road victories is

the aforementioned win at Kent State. It will be a tough task for the Rockets, who are allowing nearly 73 points per game on the road, to slow down the offense of the Bobcats. These two teams last met in the quarterfinals of the 2012 MAC Tournament, with Ohio moving on to the semifinals with a 65-57 win.

In the first tip of the day, the Miami Redhawks will head up to Ypsilanti for a 2 p.m. matinee with the Eastern Michigan Eagles. All eight of Eastern Michigan's wins have come at home, while Miami is just 2-6 away from Oxford. After opening conference play with a poor showing in an 11-point loss to conference doormat Northern Illinois, the Redhawks have won back-to-back games over Buffalo and Bowling Green. The Eagles, meanwhile, picked up their first conference win over Central Michigan last Tuesday, after starting 0-2. Scoring points is not a strength for either of these teams, as the Eagles rank 336th in field goal percentage and Miami checks in averaging just under 66 points per game.

The Central Michigan Chippewas will try to bounce back from consecutive conference losses with a 7 p.m. tip at McQuirk Arena against the Ball State Cardinals. After a respectable showing against Michigan on December 29, the Chips opened MAC play with a win, but have since lost two straight conference road games. Unlike their football counterparts, offense has been a struggle for the Cardinals on the hardwood. Over their last four games, they have averaged just 58.25 points per game. Ball State does carry a five-game winning streak over the Chips into this game. The Chips haven't beaten Ball State since January 13, 2010, in a very ugly 53-38 game.

In the other 7 p.m. tip, the Buffalo Bulls host the Bowling Green Falcons. Buffalo has lost five straight against Division I competition, while averaging just under 61 points per game. That doesn't seem to bode well against a Bowling Green defense allowing just 62 points per game. The Falcons, losers of six of their last seven, are looking for their first road win of the season, as they are 0-for in six tries. Three of the last four matchups in this series have been within four points and the teams have each won five of the last 10 matchups, so these are two evenly matched teams.

In the latest tip, 8 p.m., on Saturday's slate, the 3-12 Northern Illinois Huskies host the Western Michigan Broncos. If the trend of this season holds true, the Huskies won't win another game until February, as they have one win in each of November, December, and January thus far. This series has been dominated by the Broncos of late, taking a six-game winning streak into DeKalb.