



Not sure if the news has reached all of Northeast Ohio, let alone the country, but heading into this Friday night's ESPN Bracket Buster matchup with North Dakota State, the Akron Zips are the rather unheralded owners of college basketball's longest current winning streak, having vanquished 17 straight opponents dating back to mid December. This remarkable run—combined with a 21-4 overall record and 12-0 mark in Mid-American Conference play—would seem to make Akron a more than viable candidate for an at-large bid to the NCAA Tournament this March, or at least a Top 25 AP ranking in the meantime. Instead, the unranked Zips will almost certainly need to win the MAC Tournament once again to find their way to the Big Dance, regardless of how the final five games of their regular season may play out. This is partly a consequence of playing in a mid-major conference that hasn't sent two teams to the Tourney since 1999. But for this year's Zips, in particular, a near miss may boil down to something far more unjust— a “clerical error.”

Way back on November 9, just as Akron was preparing to open up a new season with sky high ambitions, a press release trickled out to the local media, announcing that junior Zip forwards Demetrius Treadwell and Nick Harney—key members of Coach Keith Dambrot's squad-- would be ineligible for the first three games of the year. Both Treadwell (Euclid High School) and Harney (Benedictine High School) have had their off-the-court issues in the past, so it wasn't necessarily the announcement-- so much as the actual explanation—that raised eyebrows. As it turned out, the two 6-foot-7 standouts had done nothing whatsoever to warrant these suspensions. Instead, the penalty was a direct consequence of faulty paperwork—a clerical error made by some cubicle dweller in the University of Akron athletic offices. Somehow, Treadwell and Harney hadn't been properly certified as amateur players in the offseason, despite both men entering their third years in the Akron program. The oversight was caught by NCAA rules vultures, and the proper forms were quickly corrected, but not before the 3-game punishment was laid down.



At the time, this embarrassing flub was more frustrating than devastating. It was just November, after all, and Treadwell and Harney would be back a good month before the MAC season kicked off. And yet still, for fans well versed in the near perfection required of a MAC school to avoid the all-or-nothing Conference Tournament scenario, the absence of two starters in those three non-conference matchups looked like a potentially season-killing poison dart.

And sure enough, Akron lost 2 of those 3 games without Treadwell and Harney—both in overtime, no less—74-70 to Coastal Carolina on November 9 and 69-65 to Oklahoma State on November 15. Flash forward three months, and even in the midst of their current historic run, it's hard for the Zips not to look back at those two "coulda-been" games and cringe. The OK State game, in particular, represents a potentially enormous opportunity missed. Played on neutral ground at the "Puerto Rico Tipoff" tournament, the Zips led the Cowboys for much of the contest, despite having to insert freshmen Jake Kretzer and Deji Ibitayo into the starting lineup. In the end, the lack of size and depth normally provided by Treadwell (11 PPG and 7 RPG this season) and Harney (10 PPG, 4 RPG) was too much to overcome, as Oklahoma State barely pulled it out in OT.

Ignoring the fact that wins over Coastal Carolina and OK State would put Akron at an even more impressive 23-2 on the season, the biggest fallout from "Clerical Error Gate" was losing what would have been a key victory over a major-conference, Top 25 school. Oklahoma State—which also went on to win the Puerto Rico tournament—now sits at 19-5 on the season; good enough for a #14 ranking in the AP poll. A showcase win over a team like that is exactly what the selection committee looks for when deciding which bubble teams bounce into the Dance and which ones go NITing.



Keith Dambrot knows this all too well. Back in 2007, his Zips won 26 games on their way to a regular season MAC title, only to fall to Miami in the MAC Championship Game on a buzzer beating Hail Mary. That year, the Zips didn't even get invited to the NIT.

So, will this season be different? Will the buzz generated by the winning streak-- along with the NBA Draft whispers around 7-foot shot-blocker Zeke Marshall-- be enough to get Akron the respect it has sorely lacked in years past? Will Ohio U's excellent showing in last year's NCAA Tourney give more credence to the MAC, despite a relatively down here for the conference overall? Or will some lackey's boneheaded filing mistake eventually play a vital role in a magical Zips season going up in smoke? One thing is for sure: Akron needs to beat North Dakota State (20-7) on Friday at the JAR. Defeating a slumping Summit League team won't really help their at-large chances much at all, mind you. But losing to them? Well, that's something the committee definitely *would* notice.

*Akron vs. North Dakota State. James A. Rhodes Arena, Akron. 7pm Friday, Feb 22. ESPN2.*