



A year after *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and a year before man landed on the moon, we witnessed another moment in our history that, when you come right down to it, was probably just as culturally significant.

Its origin and contents are like the lyrics to your alma mater: two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun.

Launched in Pittsburgh (bizarrely), originally called the "Aristocrat," we know it by its iconic two-syllable moniker: the Big Mac.

Before long, the Madison Avenue oracles that are absurdly good at such things suggested that this 540-calorie experience was the only thing that could curb the effects of a phenomenon classified by doctors as a "Big Mac Attack."

Flash forward four-and-a-half decades to this Wednesday night, when we will be treated to a similar experience with an altogether different kind of Big Mac attack. One that requires all capital letters in the middle.

As we creep into the final two weeks of what has been a long college basketball season, we're about to witness one of the game's finest and most alluring aspects: a solid conference's two finest teams going head-to-head with the regular-season league title - and all the conference tourney advantages that go with it - at stake.

With most conferences splitting into superfluous divisions, games with this level of significance are a bit harder to find than they were 15 or 20 years ago. And yet on Wednesday night - 7:00 tip-off on SportsTime Ohio, no less - we'll get a Super-Sized helping.

The Ohio Bobcats and the Akron Zips, unquestionably the best teams in the MAC this year, will square off in Athens with more at stake than you might think, particularly since it's still February.

For big-time college basketball teams, the regular season is not unlike that of the NBA. You sit up and pay a modicum of attention for the rivalry games, but otherwise you can just hit the snooze button until Selection Sunday.

This year's Big Ten race, for example, is compelling to be sure, and the conference tournament promises to be something to behold. But even then, everybody's just going to be jockeying for NCAA seeding. There's no real sense of do or die for anybody until after St. Patrick's Day.

For the Bobcats and Zips, do or die starts Wednesday night.

The winner will almost certainly be the top seed in the MAC tournament, ensuring the easiest possible path to the title game. And while that doesn't guarantee a spot in the NCAA's big dance, it increases your odds significantly. And MAC teams need all the help they can get.

However they're seeded (sesame-seeded, if you will), both teams will head to Quicken Loans Arena in two weeks with massive targets on their backs and will both get the absolute best performance each opponent has to offer. Hence, the fixin's for a big-time upset will be on the table.

And unlike the behemoths in their conference tournaments, the Bobcats and Zips get one shot. They lose in Cleveland, to anybody, and they're done. No at-large NCAA bid for either, just one of those consolation NIT invites that absolutely nobody but ESPN2 wants. (Some feel that the Zips, now ranked in the top 25 for the first time in program history, have a shot at a bid even if they don't emerge from the Q victorious, but with their RPI in the 50s and not enough street cred to absorb the body blow of an upset in the MAC tournament, they're still on the tightrope.)

Thus, the margin for error for both teams is paper thin. Which is what makes Wednesday so ensorcelling.

It starts now. Wednesday night's winner becomes the favorite to carry the league's torch into March Madness. And, as exciting as conference-tourney upsets are,

it should be - make that **needs** to be - one of these two representing the MAC in March. Either Akron or Ohio has reached the field each of the last four years, and at least one of them has played in the MAC title game in seven of the last eight seasons.

They are, undoubtedly, the conference's two all-beef patties.

They've played one another for the conference crown twice in the past three years, with OU capturing nail-biting triumphs each time. Akron has something to prove, and landed its first blow three weeks ago with a 14-point win over the Bobcats at Rhodes Arena. A win Wednesday would anoint the Zips as unquestionably the finest team in the league and position them to avenge last season - if for no other reason that it will force OU into a much more difficult matchup in the MAC semifinals, also known as upset alley.

Conversely, if the Bobcats manage to force a season split, they'll reaffirm their belief that, even with the January loss in Akron, they still have the Zips' number.

Wednesday may turn out to be just an appetizer for another delectable basketball buffet at

Quicken Loans Arena in a couple weeks. But we certainly can't count on that. Mediocre as the MAC has been this year, it still has a remarkable balance that makes it perhaps America's median conference.

Wednesday night is what college basketball is all about - a hoops lover's feast, even if it's off the proverbial Super Value Menu.

It's not particularly shiny or sexy and isn't going to get a whole lot of attention outside of Ohio. But like that old ingredients jingle, it's both ingenious and memorable.

A bona-fide big MAC attack.

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