



The stage is set for a rematch of last year's MAC Championship game as the Akron Zips will take on the Ohio Bobcats for the automatic bid into March Madness on Saturday night at Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland. This is both the expected outcome and the right outcome. Akron and Ohio have been the best teams in the MAC all season long and should be the teams to decide the champion.

The Zips didn't have an easy go of it against Kent State to get into the title game. The Golden Flashes brought an A-plus effort level with them to the Q on Friday night, but ultimately fell short 62-59. It was a back and forth game that featured a lot of defense, some flashes of brilliance on offense, and a whole lot of Zeke Marshall. The senior forward registered a triple-double with 18 points, 10 rebounds, and seven blocked shots.

As good of a game as it was, both teams had their flaws. Kent State's leading scorer Chris Evans didn't score for the first 19:54 of the game, before a thunderous dunk that brought a collective "ohhhh" from the crowd. Evans ended with just six points on a 1-of-11 shooting performance. Akron's troubles came at the free throw line, where they shot just 44.9 percent, bricking 16 of 29 attempts.

Randal Holt was a star for the Flashes, dropping 18 points and adding five assists. Holt was 7-of-14 shooting, but the rest of the Flashes combined to shoot 25 percent as a team. Demetrius Treadwell and Nick Harney were the other Zips in double figures. Treadwell scored 14 points and added 12 rebounds. Harney chipped in 11.

It was a character win for the Zips, who clearly struggled in the absence of floor general Alex Abreu. Abreu, arrested last week on drug trafficking charges, was the team's point guard prior to his arrest and left coach Keith Dambrot scrambling to find a replacement. The Zips' half court offense looked very disjointed throughout much of the game. Their free throw struggles were

exacerbated by the fact that Abreu, at 81 percent on the season, was one of the team's top free throw shooters.

While the Zips escaped against their archrival, the Ohio Bobcats had little trouble disposing of the Western Michigan Broncos in the second of Friday's two semifinal matchups. After the two teams split the first 16 points of the game, Ohio went on an 11-0 run to take control. They went into the halftime break with a 17-point lead.

To Western Michigan's credit, they battled back and even got the game within two at 48-46, but Ohio was just too much to handle. The Bobcats won 74-63 to advance to the championship game and get their third crack at Akron this season.

As usual, DJ Cooper stepped up in a big game, scoring 21 points and adding 10 assists. Reggie Keely and Will Offutt also had double digits for the Bobcats, with 12 and 14, respectively. The Broncos' best player, Shayne Whittington, was held to just six points, but did rip down 12 rebounds. Freshman guard Darius Paul had 16 and senior forward Nate Hutcheson also had 16 in the losing effort.

The Akron Zips will take the floor for the seventh straight time in the MAC Championship Game and will look to go 3-for-3 this season against the Ohio Bobcats on Saturday night at 6:30. Last year's game was epic, as it came down to the wire in Ohio's 64-63 win. The Bobcats rode the momentum into upsets of Georgetown and South Florida in March Madness, while the Zips went to the NIT and had revenge on their minds.

The Zips won both previous meetings this season, an 86-72 dominating effort at home, and an 88-81 overtime win in Athens, in which they erased an 18-point first half deficit that led them to be down by 11 at half. In both of those games, however, the Zips had Alex Abreu, who had 37 points and 18 assists against Ohio this season. Furthermore, Abreu was very familiar with counterpart DJ Cooper, who was just 11-of-29 shooting in the two regular season meetings.

In the championship game last season, Cooper went off for 23 points and started to get national attention as one of college basketball's best kept secrets. Abreu did not miss from the floor and was also 6-of-7 at the free throw line with 19 points and seven assists. Without Abreu, it's going to be very difficult for the Zips to both match Cooper's production and contain him. That will be

one of the big keys to this game.

The Zips and Bobcats both finished the second 14-2 in conference play. Akron's losses were to Buffalo and Kent State, while both of Ohio's were against Akron. The Zips spent a lot of energy yesterday beating Kent State, while Ohio had some trying moments, but mostly did what they wanted to do against Western Michigan. Fatigue shouldn't play a factor, but Akron will have to match Ohio's energy level for all 40 minutes.

Both fan bases will represent well and it should be a tremendous atmosphere inside the Q. For those who cannot make it downtown for the game, the game will be shown on ESPN2, beginning at 6:30 p.m.