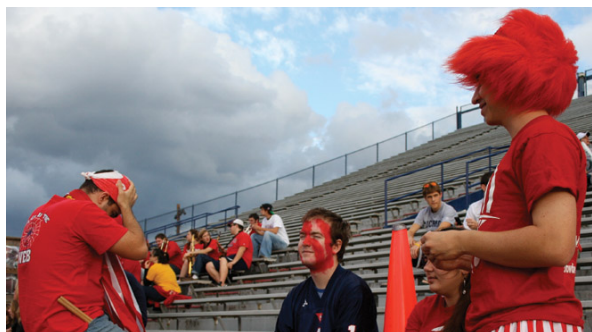


## Attendance a big problem in the MAC

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

Friday, September 17 2010 2:58 PM - Last Updated Saturday, September 18 2010 8:58 AM

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Ohio is a football-crazy state. Part of its national reputation revolves around high school football and historically significant high school programs like Massillon, where every male baby born in the local hospital gets a football placed in its crib. Just last week there were over 10,000 fans at Ely Stadium in Elyria to watch Elyria Catholic take on Elyria High School for the first time in history.

It is like that all over Ohio, with high school games drawing huge crowds as towns big and small pretty much close down on Friday nights during football season. For five years I worked as a sportswriter at a newspaper in Western Pennsylvania and, trust me, as much hype as Western Pa. high school football gets there is no comparison to the talent level, as well as community frenzy, that surrounds prep football in the Buckeye State.

Which leads me to something I simply cannot understand...why do Mid-American football programs at Kent, Toledo, Akron and Bowling Green have so much trouble drawing fans to their home football games? It isn't like we are talking about Division II or Division III football, we're talking about major college football right in our backyards, yet there have been times in the past when the people actually on the field have out-numbered the people in the stands. This is not an exaggeration. And it's pretty sad.

Kent has 45 players from Ohio on its roster, many from neighboring communities like Stow, Cuyahoga Falls and Hudson. There are representative from football-crazy burghs like Orrville, Leavittsburg and Napoleon. Yet Dix Stadium is frequently nearly empty when the Golden Flashes take the field.

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How is this possible, with over 20,000 college students living less than two miles from the stadium? Why do the students not show up? There are a few reasons for this. First, Dix Stadium is nearly a mile from campus down desolate Loop Road. There is nothing between the small group dorms and the stadium, just trees and a few apartment complexes.

And the university as a whole has done a pathetic job of marketing the football teams to the students. There is virtually no incentive to either make the walk or grab one of the campus busses out to Dix. You can't really tailgate in the parking lot, the school has set up a so-called tailgate party in the Kent Fieldhouse, but would you rather hang out on artificial turf in a controlled atmosphere or out in the parking lot, grilling and having a good time?

Former Kent athletic director Laing Kennedy had what I thought was a great idea. Back in around 1996 or '97, when the university went from natural grass to field turf, he talked about creating a new gameday atmosphere at Dix Stadium. He had visions of a walkway through the woods between campus and the stadium, with cabana-type bars and the like along the way. That was a great idea, but never went anywhere.

Akron also has never drawn fans, and even with the brand new InfoCision Stadium now in place, just 10,046 fans (and I was told this was a very generous total) were on hand to see the Zips take on Garner-Webb last week. In Week One, when Syracuse came to Akron, just 15,969 showed up to watch the Zips take on a football program of some prestige. That is pretty pathetic.

It is not just the local schools either, attendance is a league-wide problem. There have been 16 Mid-American Conference home games thus far this season, and the average attendance has been just 17,075. The highest attendance this season has been Villanova at Temple at Lincoln Financial Stadium in Philadelphia. There were 32,193 fans in attendance, and a good number of these were there to see the defending FCS national-champion Wildcats. The lowest attendance, 9,110, came last week when Liberty traveled to Ball State. The Cardinals have drawn crowds of 9,110 and 10,753 this season, leaving me to wonder how this is possible. I mean, is there really that much else to do in Muncie, Indiana?

Hopefully things will turn around. The MAC has quite a few talented football players this season, players that will be playing on Sunday in the near future, and the level of player in the conference seems to be increasing every year. However, the schools and the conference have to play a part. There needs to be bigger and better marketing campaigns as well as stronger

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media blitzes from the individual schools' sports information departments. The MAC entering into an agreement with SportsTime Ohio this season is a huge step in the right direction.

Ohio is a football-crazy state, now let's hope that translates to more fans in the stands.