



The Mid-American Conference has always been overlooked in my opinion. In all sports the talent level is better than most of the country might think and most schools in the MAC have above-average training facilities. Although the MAC is made up of a diverse group of schools, their programs are similar pretty much across the board.

There is a lot to like about the MAC. In men's basketball the conference games are very intense and the teams play sound fundamental defense. In football there is the opportunity to see a ton of talent, talent that will end up playing on Sundays, in a medium-sized venue. Baseball, wrestling, swimming, softball, etc. ... most matches, meets or games are quite competitive.

And, in my eyes, the facilities are great because they add to the atmosphere. In fact, my favorite arena on the planet was in the MAC.

During my career I have seen college basketball games all over the country. My travels have taken me to at least 40 different arenas, and that's probably a conservative estimate, and the best place to watch a basketball game, best sightlines, atmosphere and crowd was found in the MAC.

Bowen Field House on the campus of Eastern Michigan blew me away.

During the 1995-96 basketball season I covered Kent State men's basketball. In the first round of the MAC Tournament the Golden Flashes had to travel to Ypsilanti to face Eastern Michigan, the top seed in the conference. This was the EMU team that was loaded with talent, players like Earl Boykins, Theron Wilson, James Head, Brian Tolbert and Derrick Dial.

How good was EMU that season? It pounded Duke by 15 points in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

From the moment I walked into Bowen Field House I was in love. It was hot and seemed a lot smaller than the 5,400 capacity it claimed. And the fans were right on top of the floor, students directly behind the benches and seemingly sitting right on the baselines. There was a slanted roof that looked extremely low over the floor that was solid enough to not let any of the noise escape.

One could tell the students were in love with that team, and the noise built to a crescendo late in the game when all the starters were pulled for a final ovation.

It was the last time this talented group was going to play in front of these fans and not only did the fans want to show their appreciation to the players, the players wanted to show the fans how much they meant to them. As each starter was pulled late in the game they all made a point to recognize the student section.

After the 1996 season Eastern Michigan University pulled the plug on Bowen Field House being the home of its basketball program, moving it into a the new Convocation Center. EMU hoops had become a big-time MAC program and it was deserving of a new state-of-the-art facility. But, as frequently happens when teams leave old buildings behind, it just is not the same.

The Convocation Center is a beautiful, modern facility. It has everything a player or fan could

want...except atmosphere. Don't get me wrong, EMU students and fans can make the Convocation Center rock, but it will never be like Bowen.

The Palestra in Philly is a dump that reeks of history. It's a great place to watch college basketball. The University of Dayton Arena is the top college basketball venue in Ohio, better than the Shoemaker Center in Cincinnati or the Schottenstein Center in Columbus.

The Dean Smith Student Activities Center, or Dean Dome, in Chapel Hill, N.C. is a palace that feels more like a living room than arena and Assembly Hall in Bloomington, Ind. is an intimate venue for a big-time program. But, for my money, Bowen Field House will always be the standard for what college basketball should feel like. Though it still stands it is sorely missed.