

WMU Claims MAC West Lead; Kent and Miami Separate From Pack

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

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Saturday, Feb. 12 will probably be the day everything changed in the Mid-American Conference division title races. It was a wild day with a couple of shocking results, and in the end the familiar MAC basketball powers found themselves in very advantageous situations.

The MAC West has been turned on its ear. Ball State has been on top of the division all season, getting out of the gate at 5-0 in conference play. But now, with limited games remaining, the Cardinals find themselves looking up at someone in the standings for the first time this season. Ball State went into Akron and was hammered by the Zips, 75-60. Western Michigan, who has been nipping at the Cardinals' heels for weeks, finally moved in front of them in the standings courtesy of an 85-83 victory over Ohio University.

Ball State had a first half to forget in Akron. With the Zips playing suffocating defense in the first half, the Cardinals shot just 38.5 percent (10-of-26) in the first 20 minutes as Akron went into the intermission leading 33-25. Ball State made a run at the Zips in the second half, cutting the Akron lead to a basket at 37-35 early in the period, but the Zips responded with a 14-0 run to put the game away. The Zips led by double-digits the rest of the way.

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Ball State killed itself with turnovers, coughing the ball up 14 times (to just eight for Akron) and was out-scored in points off turnovers 14-2. Akron also grabbed 16 offensive rebounds and had a 20-6 advantage in second chance points. Freshman Jarrod Jones paced Ball State with 19 points and eight rebounds, but Steve McNees led five Zips in double-figures with 16 points.

The loss dropped the Cardinals to 14-10 overall and 6-5 in the conference, a half-game behind WMU. Ball State has lost five of its last six conference games.

Western Michigan took advantage of the Ball State loss with its win over Ohio. Flenard Whitfield was a beast for the Broncos, scoring 27 points and pulling down 11 rebounds while Demetrius Ward added 22 points and seven assists. The Bobcats have five players in double-figures, led by D.J. Cooper's 17.

The game was as close as you can get. There were 11 lead changes and nine ties. Breaking down the team situational scoring shows how close this game actually was – the Bobcats won points in the paint (36-34), points off turnovers (10-9) and second chance points (15-14). The Broncos had the edge in fastbreak points, 5-3.

Ohio had a chance to win it at the end. They fouled Mike Douglas with :04 remaining to put him on the line with a chance to put the game away by hitting a pair of free throws. He missed them both to keep the score 85-83, but Tommy Freeman missed a running 3-pointer as the final horn sounded.

Western Michigan improved to 13-10 overall, 6-4 in MAC play.

In the East, Kent State and Miami were able to put some distance between themselves and the rest of the division with wins.

Kent went on the road and handled Northern Illinois, 84-77, despite 34 points from the conference's leading scorer Xavier Silas. Rodriguez Sherman led Kent with 25 points while Justin Greene added 18 points and eight rebounds. Silas got little help from his teammates as the other Huskies combined to shoot just 16-of-53 from the floor (23.1 percent).

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NIU was able to cut what once was a 17-point Golden Flashes lead to just six with 1:13 remaining, but could draw no closer.

“I thought our kids really fought and gave us a chance,” Huskies coach Ricardo Patton said. “We had about a three-minute stretch in the first half where we let Kent State go on a run and we could never battle all the way back from that. We out-scored them by two in the second half, but they are just too good of a basketball team to be in a nine-point hole against.”

Kent (17-7, 8-2) now leads the East by a half-game over Miami (13-12, 8-3) and has won six games in a row. The Golden Flashes swept its five games against MAC West competition.

Miami was able to keep pace with a come-from-behind 68-66 win over Toledo. The Rockets, who have now lost seven straight, led 66-59 with 3:07 remaining, but the RedHawks closed the game on a 9-0 run and took the lead for good on a Julian Mavunga lay-up with :02 showing on the clock.

The big losers of the day were Buffalo and Bowling Green, who both fell on the road to teams with losing records.

The Bulls were handed a 78-65 loss by Eastern Michigan in Ypsilanti in a game where Eagles' forward Brandon Bowdry shot more free throws than the entire Buffalo team. Bowdry was 10-13 from the line while the Bulls hit nine of just 12 free throws. Overall, EMU shot 24-35 from the line. The loss dropped the Bulls to 15-8 overall and 7-4 in the conference, a game-and-a-half behind Kent.

Finally, Bowling Green lost to Central Michigan despite shooting a blistering 66.7 percent from the floor in the first half. Shooting 32.1 percent (9-28) in the second half led to the Falcons' defeat. Bowling Green led 39-31 early in the second half, but CMU kept chipping away at the lead. The Chippewas finally surged in front at 8:03 on a John Morris basket and took the lead for good with 7:34 showing on the clock.

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Dee Brown had 20 points for the Falcons while Trey Zeigler had 18 points and eight rebounds for CMU. Jalin Thomas and Derek Jackson added 17 each for the Chips, with 15 of Jackson's 17 coming in the second half. The loss dropped BG to 12-13 overall, 7-4 in the MAC.