

## Broncos Look to Repeat as MAC West Champions

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

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**Western Michigan Broncos (21-13 overall, 11-5 in MAC, 1st in MAC West last season)**

Head coach Steve Hawkins and his Western Michigan Broncos, after winning the MAC West title during the 2010-11 campaign, had to deal with a bit of turmoil during the off-season, but their expectations are as high as ever.

Key reserve Juwan Howard Jr., who left Kalamazoo at the end of last season and headed to Detroit to be closer to his family, officially announced he was not coming back to the WMU program in early October. He will sit out a year before playing for Ray McCallum at Detroit Mercy.

Hawkins would have welcomed Howard back, but says his team has moved on.

"It's been so long ago that I don't think it's impacting anybody now," Hawkins said of Howard's leaving campus. "At the time it certainly was something we all had to deal with, but it seems like it was last year as in last season. The team has been all the way through conditioning together, and the way we put guys through conditioning is meant to really challenge them so that they get used to going through tough times together.

"I don't mean this as a mean statement, but they only went through that with the kids we have

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on the team now. Anything that would have been there has been erased. We have our team now and they feel comfortable with who they have on the team."

It makes it much easier to get over losing a talented player like Howard when you have returning players like Flenard Whitfield and Demetrius Ward, both who were named to the preseason All-MAC Team. And point guard Mike Douglas is no slouch, either.

Whitfield, a 6-7, 230-pound senior power forward, is one of the strongest players in the MAC. He was second on the team in scoring last season at 13.1 points per game, tied for the team lead in rebounds per game at 6.4, shot 50.3 percent from the field and was fourth in the conference in offensive rebounds per game with 2.6.

Ward, a 6-3 senior guard, led the Broncos in scoring last season at 13.8 ppg. He also was seventh in the conference in 3-point percentage, connecting on 39.6 percent of his triples.

Though Ward and Whitfield received the preseason all-conference honors, WMU has all five starters back. Center Matt Stainbrook, a 6-9, 285-pound sophomore, scored 8.8 ppg during his freshman year and, as mentioned previously, tied for the team lead in rebounding with 6.4 per contest.

According to Hawkins, Stainbrook worked hard to get into shape during the off-season, after minor back surgery and the recovery period caused his weight to climb north of the 300 lb plateau.

"Matt's doing well. He had an abscess on his back in the middle of last season which caused him to miss a little bit of time, then it reappeared right at the end of the season," Hawkins said. "The only way to get that really taken care of was through surgery. He went home to the Cleveland Clinic and had the surgery done at the beginning of the summer, and that hampered his conditioning a little bit because he wasn't able to do anything for a month.

"The thing with him is that it's not just weight, it's what you do with it and how you carry it. He got up to 280 at some point last year and he just didn't carry it well. He's carrying it a lot better

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now. We're still hoping to get it down a little further, but he's doing well."

Douglas, a 6-foot senior guard, was a critical component of the Broncos' success last season. Douglas enters the season with 67 career starts under his belt, and finished last season third in the MAC in assists (4.94), third in free throw percentage (81.1), sixth in steals (1.62) and as the conference leader in assist-to-turnover ratio (168 assists, 74 turnovers, 2.27 ratio).

Nate Hutcheson, a 6-7 junior forward whose father, Mark Hutcheson, played college basketball for four seasons at Westmar College in Iowa, rounds out the returning starters. Hutcheson scored 7.4 points and pulled down 5 rebounds per game last season.

"I've got a great group of kids to work with," Hawkins said. "High character, high integrity kids that take their basketball very seriously."

Hawkins' Broncos were picked to repeat as the MAC West champions in the conference's pre-season poll. Regardless of where his team was picked, Hawkins thinks this season will be a step up for the Mid-American Conference.

"Because so many teams have so many players returning, the league as a whole is going to take a jump up this year," he said. "I hope we see that in our conference RPI raising with some of the wins, hopefully, we all will receive during the non-conference portion of the schedule."