As of this weekend, a total of six college basketball teams have won twenty-plus games in ten consecutive seasons, with one more on the cusp. Duke already has done it. So have the Florida Gators, the Gonzaga Bulldogs, the Kansas Jayhawks and the Creighton Bluejays. So have the Kent State Golden Flashes, who have clinched another Mid-American Conference regular-season title and will be looking for their fifth trip to the NCAA Tournament this month. Our guy Jesse is a big Flashes fan, and reflects on the run in his latest column.

"One of the reasons we scheduled Kent State was because of our respect for their basketball program. I told my team for the last two days that we were not playing a basketball team, we were playing a basketball program and a culture that is accustomed to winning..."

Mike Krzyzewski, 2006

As of this weekend, a total of six college basketball teams have won twenty-plus games in ten consecutive seasons, with one more on the cusp. Duke already has done it. So have the Florida Gators, the Gonzaga Bulldogs, the Kansas Jayhawks and the Creighton Bluejays.

So have the Kent State Golden Flashes, who have clinched another Mid-American Conference regular-season title and will be looking for their fifth trip to the NCAA Tournament this month.

I grew up in Kent, in a house three blocks off campus. I could be out the front door and in a Campus Loop bus in five minutes flat. Growing up I watched a lot of games at Memorial Gym back when there were no end-zone seats. I remember watching guys like Eric Glenn, Bill Toole, Jim Mangapora, and David Barnwell. I attended Kent in the mid-90s; I had a math class in Franklin Hall with D.J. Bosse.

In those days, NCAA bids were for other teams, back when Central Michigan had Dan Majerle, Eastern had Grant Long, Marcus Kennedy, and Lil' Earl Boykins, Ohio had Dave Jamerson and Gary Trent, Ball State had Parris McCurdy and Curtis Kidd, and we had, well... a bunch of guys. Kent was the home of the 13-14 season and the quick MAC Tournament exit. NCAA Tournament? Please. The Flashes had never even won an NIT game.

I never imagined one day Kent State would have this kind of program. I can't even say it's been a dream come true- because I never even dreamt of this.

Some of my memories of ten magical years:

- **Winning at Akron** in the 1998 MAC Quarterfinals. Kent hadn't won a conference tourney game since 1989, had gone 12-16 in the regular season, and Akron was the new hotness, the MAC East champ behind Jamaal Ball and Jami Bosley. Kent went into the JAR and beat the Zips, 95-88. I listened to that game on a radio at my gas-station job, and I could feel change in the wind, even from my perch at the Sunoco at Rts 224 and 44 in Randolph Township. That game was the springboard.
- **Ed Norvell.** He was supposed to be the athletic, dominant scorer the program needed to compete for a MAC title when he was recruited out of Detroit by then-coach Dave Grube in 1995. And he had the skills. But Gary Waters had a different vision of Norvell- as a defensive stopper who did the dirty work. With his

scoring average cut nearly in half by the change in role, Norvell could have pouted and rebelled. Instead he bought in and adjusted his game. In 1999, fueled by Norvell's defense, unselfishness, and senior leadership, Kent won it's first-ever MAC title. In the success that has followed, Ed Norvell has become almost a forgotten figure. But he shouldn't be. More than any other single player, he set the tone for ten years of success by thinking of the team and the system before himself. He became the Man by foregoing the chance to be the Man.

- **Coming home** from my second-shift job and finding out that Kent had beaten Wally World and Miami in the '99 MAC title game. I hadn't had access to a TV or radio and had no idea of what happened in the game. I couldn't even allow myself to imagine winning. When I was told Kent had won, I couldn't believe it- we were actually going to the Big Dance.
- **Kent's first-ever** NCAA Tournament game in 1999 against Temple. Even though Kent lost, just seeing our team, the blue-and-gold uniforms on CBS was amazing. I drank it all in- figuratively and literally. I watched the game with a roommate, and I kept turning to him and saying, "Dude. It's Kent State in the NCAA Tournament! They're in the bracket. Greg Gumbel is talking about them. How cool is this?"
- **The NIT run** in 2000, when Kent waxed Rutgers, dominated Villanova on the road, and got to within a game of Madison Square Garden before a narrow loss to the Crispin brothers, Calvin Booth, and Penn State in their place. Kent was the top RPI team not to get an at-large bid in 2000. The Flashes could have called it a screw-job- like a certain school ten miles or so to the west might have- but they sucked it up, went out and kicked butt. That run epitomized to me what Kent basketball is all about- don't complain, just take what you can and get on with it.
- **The Indiana Tournament game in 2001**. Kent was behind most of the way, but behind great second-half defense and unconscious performances by Trevor Huffman and Andrew Mitchell, roared back late to take the lead. With 18 seconds remaining and Kent leading by four, Drew froze a Hoosier with a behind-the-back dribble-shake and drained the jumper to make it 76-70, and everyone knew that Kent State was going to advance in the NCAA Tournament. One of those days you think you'll never see, and I saw it. I proceeded to lose ninety bucks in a poker game. It was still a great night.
- **The entire 2001-02 season.** After a 4-4 start, Kent won 26 of the next 27 games and turned a very good Mid-American Conference into its personal playground. The Flashes were a machine that spread fear and awe throughout the league. There are few occasions in which your team is just flat-out better than everyone else, and everyone else knows it. I didn't take it for granted. I held tight to that season. Still do. Years like that just don't come around very often.
- **Being at the Gund** for the 2002 MAC title game against Bowling Green. It

was a tough game- BGSU was a very solid club with the inside-outside combo of Keith McLeod and Len Mottola-and Kent finally pulled away in the second half to win 70-59. I remember the PA announcer pleading with the fans to leave the court after the game, and being ignored. People were pouring out four years worth of affection and appreciation, and it couldn't be stopped on cue.

- **The Alabama second-round game** in 2002, when Kent destroyed the Tide 71-58- and it wasn't even that close. Huffman driving and dishing to Gates for the jumper from the elbow, over and over again. Alabama was the regular-season SEC Champion, the eighth-ranked team in the country, had Mo Williams and Rod Grizzard and Erwin Dudley- and Kent just toyed with them. I remember yelling that Alabama was nothing, that Bowling Green with Keith McLeod was better than they were.
- **Having a house party** for the Sweet 16 game against Pitt. It was a great game, and everyone was into it. The entire house would roar with every Kent bucket and groan with every Pitt counter. Kent should have won it in regulation, but with 25 seconds left, an Antonio Gates and-one was waved off and called a jump-ball- one of the worst calls I've ever seen in the NCAA Tournament. The Flashes shook it off, stopped Pitt's chance at a last-shot win, and took it in overtime. It was pure tenacity and guts. A lot of underdogs make it to the Sweet 16. To get there and advance makes you fully legit.
- **The Elite Eight.** I really thought Kent was going to beat Indiana that night. It had already been proven that Coverdale and Fife couldn't check Mitchell and Huffman. They'd lost Kirk Haston, and we'd gained Antonio Gates. And Kent *was* better. The Hoosiers went 15-of-19 from downtown, they were playing a virtual home game, and the Flashes were still within seven late. Maybe it was the Indiana game in 2001 that ultimately did us in. The Hoosiers were the only team in the Dance with first-hand knowledge of what Kent basketball is all about. And they had a grudge.

Que sera sera

.

- **Back to the Dance** in 2006. When the Flashes won the conference regular-season title and defeated Toledo in the MAC title game, it marked the program as more than a four-year flash-in-the-pan. To get back to the Dance without Huffman, Mitchell, Gates and Co. was a major step forward. If there had been any doubt before, it was erased now- Kent was not a team, it was a program.
- **The Duke game** in 2006. Yeah, the Flashes lost, but they played well, competed, and all in all represented stylishly in the ESPN game. When it's in Cameron Indoor, you can't ask for much more.

- **The St. Mary's game**. It was the last ten years in a nutshell- tough, hard-nosed defense, laying it out for 40 minutes, never giving up, never saying die, making money plays, and winning. And St. Mary's is a good club. But the Gaels weren't ready for what the Class of the MAC brought.

There's nothing in the life of a sports fan quite like witnessing something great that you'd never foreseen or even imagined. That's what Kent State basketball is to me. I consider myself blessed to have experienced these last ten years.

How about another ten years just like it?