One of the great NCAA Tournament stories of the past decade, the 2002 Kent State Golden Flashes were a whisker away from going to the Final Four as a #10 seed. After knocking off Oklahoma State, upsetting #2 seed Alabama, and then stunning Pitt in the Sweet Sixteen ... the Flashes ended up falling to the eventual champs, the Indiana Hoosiers, in the Elite Eight. Led by Trevor Hoffman and Antonio Gates, the '02 Flashes led us on the funnest local tournament ride since the 1986 Cleveland State Vikings. Jesse Lamovsky remembers that team in his latest.

Kent State was not an unknown commodity going into the 2002 NCAA Tournament. *Sports Illustrated* rated the Golden Flashes #15 at the start of the 2001-02 season, and although the early buzz faded in the wake of a 4-4 start as the veteran team adjusted under first-year coach Stan Heath, they were still a popular Cinderella pick by mid-March. And for good reason- the Flashes were 27-5 going into the 2002 Tournament, winners of 18 straight and 23 of 24. (The one loss was by a single point, at Buffalo in early January.) Kent had gone 17-1 in the Mid-American Conference, dominating what Jay Bilas has been known to call the most balanced conference in America.

The Flashes had a lot going for them. Their backcourt duo of Andrew Mitchell and Trevor Huffman were both seniors, Mitchell a fifth-year senior and a four-year starter at lead guard. Both were more than capable of being the primary ball-handler. Both could drive and shoot with range. Together they made up one of the best backcourts in the nation. The third scorer and the true x-factor was power forward Antonio Gates, who could bang down low, score off the dribble, and had a nice soft touch on his jump shot. Senior Demetric Shaw, a stocky, fiery 6'3" small forward, was the team's emotional leader and the trigger for its aggressive, man-to-man defense.

The experience was the key. Mitchell, Huffman, and sixth man Eric Thomas had played in six postseason games, NCAA and NIT, since 1999. (Shaw, a transfer from Tulane, missed the '99 season.) Kent's core already had a win in the NCAA Tournament, an upset of Indiana in 2001. This was a senior-driven team with outstanding guard play and a scoring threat inside- a team built for March.

Awarded a modest tenth seed in the South Regional, Kent tipped off the 2002 Tournament at high noon on opening Thursday against seventh-seeded Oklahoma State at the Bi-Lo Center in Greenville, South Carolina. OSU had been ranked in the Top 15 early in the season but hadn't played well at all down the stretch, so it was no particular surprise when the Flashes jumped out to a 30-15 lead and hung on to eliminate the Cowboys, 69-61. Most of the experts liked Kent in this game anyway.

The real eye-opener came in the second-round against second-seeded Alabama, the regular-season SEC champs. Lengthier and more athletic than Kent, the Tide was also young, had zero Tournament experience (Alabama hadn't been to the Dance since 1997), and had struggled to put away fifteenth-seeded Florida Atlantic in the first round. Right from the tip, the Flashes took charge, using their defensive pressure to take a 36-24 halftime lead. They poured it on in the second half, building a 24-point lead, and coasted home, 71-58. Trevor Huffman had 20 points and five assists; Antonio Gates grabbed nine rebounds and scored 18, a good portion on foul line-extended jumpers he bottomed out off feeds from a slashing Huffman. The Kent defense forced 15 turnovers, grabbed eight steals, and held Alabama to 38 percent shooting in the rout.

Having destroyed the nation's eighth-ranked team, Kent State now found itself in unfamiliar territory: the Sweet 16. Three other MAC teams had made it this far since the 64-team expansion in 1985- the Parris McCurdy-Curtis Kidd-led Ball State squad in 1990, Eastern Michigan in 1991 with Marcus Kennedy, and the Wally World Miami Redhawks in ‘99- but none had made it beyond the regional semifinals, although that Ball State team gave champion UNLV a scare before

losing, 69-67. The last MAC squad to reach a regional final was Ohio University in the Mideast in 1964.

Kent's Regional Semi opponent at Lexington's Rupp Arena was rugged Pitt, a 29-5 outfit that had made it all the way to the Big East Championship Game before losing in double-OT to Connecticut. Once again Kent jumped out to a commanding early lead, but the Panthers, behind the guard play of Julius Page and Brandin Knight, fought back, swallowing up a six-point halftime deficit and taking the lead midway through the second half. From there it was a dogfight. Several times Kent made runs that seemingly put them in control, only to see Pitt claw back to tie or retake the lead. The Panthers actually had a shot to win the game at the end, but Kent's defense forced a wild three-pointer from Page that bounced off the rim, sending the game to overtime tied, 66-66.

The overtime period, like the second half, was nip-and-tuck. The teams traded baskets until, with 57 seconds left, Huffman kissed a driving lay-up high off the window to give Kent a 72-71 lead. When a Pitt jumper failed to drop, it became a matter of hitting free throws, and the Flashes swished six of six to salt it away, 78-73. For the first time ever in the expanded tournament, a MAC team would play for a chance to go to the Final Four.

The Elite Eight opponent was a familiar one- Indiana, who the Flashes had beaten for their first-ever tournament win the year before and who two nights earlier had come back from an early 29-12 deficit to stun #1-seeded Duke, 74-73. Most of the principal players from the 2001 Kent-Indiana tilt were on hand for the re-match, which looked like a good thing for Kent. Especially inviting was the IU backcourt tandem of Tom Coverdale and Dane Fife, which had been outscored 33-11 by Mitchell and Huffman the previous year. But there were a couple of big factors working against the Flashes this time around:

The location: The previous year, the Flashes had beaten Indiana in San Diego with the help of a supportive crowd which liked Kent's underdog status and maybe its Charger-esque uniform colors as well. The crowd in Rupp Arena for the '02 Regional Final was anything but neutral: it was about 10-to-1 in Hoosier red. Seemingly the entire state had gassed up RVs and trekked across the Ohio River to Lexington in support of Mike Davis's team. Had Duke beaten Indiana two nights earlier, those fans would have been either a.) Gone, or b.) Rooting against the Blue Devils

The history: Indiana hadn't forgotten the 77-73 loss to Kent in the previous year's Tournament, which nearly ended Mike Davis's coaching career before it began. The Flashes encountered the one opponent in the entire bracket that had a personal score to settle with them. The wary Hoosiers had caught Kent's act before. They were ready this time.

The South Regional Final opened inauspiciously. After Kent took a 3-0 lead, Indiana answered with four straight three-pointers, forcing Stan Heath to take a quick timeout with the score 12-3. It was the start of an almost unbelievable shooting exhibition by the Hoosiers. While the partisan crowd roared with every swish, Indiana bottomed out its first eight three-point attempts and blew out to a 34-14 lead before the stunned Flashes regrouped and cut it to 40-28 at halftime. But after fighting to within eight early in the second half, Kent had its doors blown off by another Indiana three-for-all that made it 59-39 Hoosiers midway through the half.

Indiana had gone 14-of-38 from downtown in its first three Tournament games, so Coach Heath centered his defense on stopping Jared Jeffries and the rest of the Hoosier big men- and Jeffries was, for the most part, neutralized. But most of IU's early treys came on wide-open looks, and when Kent finally got out on defense, it didn't matter- the Hoosiers hit them anyway.

Kent, veteran tough, refused to quit. The Flashes went on a 13-0 run to cut the lead to 59-52 with seven minutes left. Just as they had done the entire game, the Hoosier responded with a three-pointer, this one by Dane Fife that made it a ten-point game. A Jeffries block and subsequent stuff made it 64-52, and that did it. Indiana, shooting a season-best 64%, won 81-69. All five starters made three-pointers for the Hoosiers, who drained 15-of-19 overall from downtown. Coverdale and Fife combined for 31 points, including eight-of-ten on threes. Huffman, blanketed all night, finished with just eight points; Gates scored 22 with eight rebounds, on the way to being named to the All-South Regional team.

The Flashes' 30-6 season in 2001-02 capped off a remarkable four-year run for the program. From 1998 to 2002, Kent State went 100-31, won three Mid-America Conference Tournament Championships, played in seven NCAA Tournament games, going 4-3, and in its one "off-year", went 25-9 and advanced to the third round of the NIT. Kent had never appeared in the Tournament or even won an NIT game before 1999. Today, the program is a consistent winner and perennial contender. But it will probably never get any better than it did for a few weeks in March of 2002.