Basketball coaches around the country have taken note of the special season that the Akron Zips are having. They'll get a chance to validate their top-25 ranking when they head to Athens to take on the Ohio Bobcats on Wednesday night. The 24th-ranked Zips take an 18-game winning streak into this clash of the MAC's two top teams and it's likely the last game that stands between the Zips and a #1 seed for the MAC Tournament.

Last weekend, the MAC participated in BracketBusters, an annual weekend where schools from mid-major conferences take on a non-conference opponent of similar strength. Overall, the 12 MAC teams went 5-7 on the weekend. On Friday night, Akron easily took care of North Dakota State with a 68-53 win. The MAC's other top team, Ohio, fell to Belmont 81-62 in a game they were never really competitive in, trailing by 17 at half. The other teams in the MAC East Division went just 1-3, as Kent State defeated Loyola-Chicago 70-63, Bowling Green lost to IPFW 88-75, Miami of Ohio lost in overtime to Southern Illinois, and Buffalo turned the ball over 24 times in a 65-64 loss to Manhattan.

As for the MAC West Division, they fared a little better, going 3-3. Western Michigan beat Pacific 67-62, Ball State and SE Missouri State lit up the scoreboard, with the Cardinals prevailing 85-82, and Toledo downed McNeese State 79-65. The losers were Eastern Michigan, who fell 57-54 to Missouri State, Northern Illinois, who lost 59-47 to Eastern Illinois, and Central Michigan, who trailed by 18 at half in an 86-75 loss to Youngstown State.

With BracketBusters out of the way, four regular season games for each team separate us from the MAC Tournament. And there's no bigger game than the one on Wednesday night between Akron and Ohio. The Zips dominated the first meeting between these two teams back on

February 2, an 86-72 win, with a balanced offensive attack that saw five players in double figures and a 39-21 rebounding edge.

Up until the Belmont loss, Ohio had put together a nice winning streak of their own, victorious in five straight after the Akron loss. Last season, both teams held serve at home and Ohio won the MAC Championship Game by a point. Last year's game in Athens was a complete performance from the Bobcats, who held the Zips to 16-of-49 shooting. They'll look for a similar defensive effort on Wednesday.

The Zips are a perfect 14-0 at home, including that win over the Bobcats, but all four of their losses have come away from the Rubber City. They are 7-0 on the road in conference. Like the Zips, the Bobcats are a terrific team at home, with a 15-1 record. Their lone loss at home came against Winthrop, in a game where they had 19 turnovers and missed 32 of 50 shots. The Convocation Center should be a very loud building on Wednesday night with some of the best fans in the MAC rooting their team on.

The Zips have cracked the RPI top-50, so a loss here wouldn't cripple their at-large chances for March Madness, but a win might almost secure them a bid, whether they win the MAC Tournament or not. For Ohio, who is 0-4 against top-50 RPI teams and just got blown out by Belmont in their BracketBuster matchup, this is a game that they really need to build some confidence.

This game tips off at 7 p.m, though it definitely should have a later tip since it's the main event and the rest of the MAC schedule looks more like an undercard.

The MAC West Division title may be up for grabs on Wednesday night in Toledo when the Rockets host the Western Michigan Broncos. Both teams have identical 8-4 conference records, though the Broncos have four more wins on the season. The Rockets are ineligible for postseason play this season, but they'd still be happy to be the outright division champs. Both teams are playing good basketball of late, as the Broncos have won eight of 10 and the Rockets have won seven of eight.

The Broncos had no trouble when these two met last month, winning 79-56 and holding a 37-19 rebounding edge. Like most teams in the MAC, however, the Broncos are excellent at home

and significantly worse on the road. The Broncos are 11-1 at home and just 4-8 on the road. The Rockets have defended their home court in seven out of nine games. These two teams have pretty identical stats of late and, with the exception of Toledo's tremendous free throw shooting, are pretty comparable overall. It should be a good matchup, though it will undoubtedly be overshadowed by the game in Athens.

Kent State is starting to click at the right time. After hovering around .500 for a couple of weeks, the Flashes are sitting at 15-12 and have won three of their last four. In their lone loss over that span, they took Ohio to overtime, so it was a strong effort. They'll host the Buffalo Bulls on Wednesday and look to continue their three-game home winning streak. This is a big game for both teams with MAC Tournament seeding implications. The Flashes are 5-7 in conference and the Bulls are 6-6. With home court seemingly meaning a lot in the MAC, getting a home game in those first couple rounds of the MAC Tournament is important.

The Flashes and Bulls have both shot the ball well of late. Both teams are above 47 percent from the field over their last five. Kent State scored 80 points in Buffalo last month in an 80-68 victory and a similar offensive output would definitely put them in a good position in this one. The Bulls are just 4-10 away from home, so this may be a tough spot for them.

Another team in the hunt for the third place spot in the MAC East Division is Bowling Green. They'll host Miami of Ohio on Wednesday night. The Falcons had a rare defensive lapse against IPFW on Saturday, allowing a season-high 88 points. The loss dropped Bowling Green to 1-11 on the road. The Redhawks come to Stroh Center towing a five-game losing streak and have lost nine of their last 10.

Miami won the first matchup this season 63-60. Each of the last nine matchups have been decided by single digits, so these teams play a lot of close games and this one should be no different.

Fresh off their 85-point performance, Ball State will have a chance to duplicate that number against Central Michigan. The Cardinals will take on a Chippewas team that has lost nine straight and has allowed 78.5 points per game over that span. Ball State's offensive explosion came after they had scored just 54.4 points per game over their first five February games.

Central Michigan won the first meeting this season 71-57 to snap a five-game losing streak against the Cardinals. But, the Chips are just 1-9 in true road games this season.

Eastern Michigan has a good shot at their second road win of the season when they travel to Northern Illinois. The Eagles have lost four of five and have averaged just 54.8 points over that span. As terrible as that is, the Huskies have scored just 50.4 points per game over their last five games.

The last four matchups between these two have featured combined final scores of 67, 107, 93, and 87. The first meeting this season was the epic 42-25 game where Northern Illinois scored four first half points. Expect another gem like that from these two on Wednesday.