Western Michigan will travel to InfoCision Stadium in Akron for the third MAC Football contest on SportsTime Ohio this season. The Broncos, led by veteran coach Bill Cubit, have played just two conference games this season and by splitting those two games remain very much in the hunt for the MAC West crown. Akron, though winless this season, has shown tremendous improvement as the team gets more familiar with first-year head coach Rob Ianello's system.

The game kicks off at 3:30 Saturday.

"Akron is a dangerous football team. They've got talent, but it's a new system there and they're just trying to get used to it," Cubit said of the Zips. "They have talented kids and it's going to be a tough match-up and a tough road trip for us."

The Zips are coming off a rough trip to Peden Stadium in Athens, where Ohio rolled to a 38-10 victory. The Bobcats' first four possessions ended with scores (three touchdowns and a field goal) while the Zips' first four times with the football saw them go three-and-out. This is a recurring theme for Akron, who has been out-scored 156-60 in the first half this season, and actually went to its hurry-up offense in the first half.

“They were up 24-0 before they put ice in the Gatorade buckets so that changed our game plan,” Ianello said. “We thought, as a staff, the best thing to do at that time was to go to our two-minute offense, which we practice on a daily basis. We felt that changing the tempo of the game would be the best thing to do at the time, and we did generate some offense in that. We didn’t generate points because we ended up turning it over twice, but the three drives in the first half where we went two-minute we got three points.”

One of Ianello’s challenges this season has been to keep his team up-beat as the losses have mounted…even as they have done everything he and the coaching staff has asked of them.

“I think we’re disappointed and I’m hopeful I’ll see a determined team on the practice field this week,” Ianello said. “Any time you put as much in, and these guys have put a lot in and have done almost everything I’ve asked them to do, and we haven’t had the results that we’d hoped for but we still have a lot of football left. We have five games left, five games in our conference left, and there’s still a lot to play for. I’m anticipating a team that’s disappointed but ready to go out and improve to get better.”

Western Michigan is coming off a 44-20 loss to Notre Dame in South Bend. Against the Fighting Irish the Broncos failed to take care of the football, turning it over four times (two fumbles, two interceptions). Western Michigan was also victimized by the big play. Notre Dame, on its first play from scrimmage, connected on an 80-yard touchdown as quarterback Dayne Crist hooked up with all-America candidate Michael Floyd. All told the Irish hit on four plays of 32 yards or more that resulted in touchdowns.

Western Michigan has won just two football games this season while the Zips have yet to put a mark in the win column. Despite the struggles both coaches are pleased with their quarterbacks.

Alex Carder, the sophomore signal-caller for the Broncos, ranks second in the conference in passing yards per game. He has completed 153 of 251 passes for 1,567 yards with 10 touchdowns and nine interceptions. But the raw numbers are just a part of it.

“Alex is a real passionate, competitive kid that brings a lot to the table. He’s a tough kid, doesn’t back down from anything and sometimes that gets him in a little bit of trouble,” Cubit said. “But we’ll take that. I think all the good things he does…he’s a great leader with a strong arm. He runs the ball really well; I think he has five rushing touchdowns in the last two games. He’s a really excitable kid and I’m really proud that he’s our quarterback. He’s a heck of a player.”

Akron sophomore quarterback Patrick Nicely does not have Carder’s gaudy numbers, completing 91 of 190 passes for 928 yards with three touchdowns and seven interceptions, but Ianello thinks it is difficult to judge his quarterback because the team around him hasn’t given him a lot of help. In fact, Ianello threw pretty much every starting position on the team, except quarterback, open to competition this week during practice.

“I felt Ohio University beat us in every phase of the game. They out-played us, they out-hit us, out-efforted us. I thought we didn’t play very well but a lot of that had to do with them,” Ianello said. “I was disappointed with our game and we’re looking forward to coming home this week and playing a very good Western Michigan team and seeing if we can improve from our performance last week. A lot of positions on the team are open, but quarterback is not one of them. I think after the way we played on Saturday Patrick will be the starter.”

Cubit has been impressed with what Ianello has been able to do this season as a first-year coach looking to lay the foundation for his program.

“They have great coaches there and I know a lot of them either personally or from watching them work. It just takes time,” Cubit said. “They play hard and that’s the biggest thing, they’ll get their breaks and they keep plugging along. But we’re in the same boat because right now we’re trying to find ourselves, too, with a bunch of young kids.”

Ianello, who was hired on Dec. 10 after a short stint as head coach at Notre Dame following the firing of Charlie Weis, knows he has to be patient, but would like for his kids to feel what it is like to win a football game.

“There’s a transition period when you come in with a new staff it’s not just your offense, your defense and your special teams systems that are new. Your approach to the whole organization is new, as is your approach to everything you do with your football program on a

daily basis," Ianello said. "And sometimes these are things the guys are going through for the first time. As we grow with our program there won't be as many things guys are going through for the first time. When you establish a program you want to establish a way of doing things…this is the way we work in the weight room, this is the way we practice, this is the way we prepare for games, this is our approach to academics…all the things that go with building a championship program. As you go through tough times on the field, as we are now, you're still looking for tangible victories. And we are having tangible victories in other areas. Unfortunately, for our fans and for our players, we haven't had the tangible victories on the scoreboard."

The University of Akron has designated this contest as "Kid's Day." Kids tickets will cost only $5.00. For more information go to www.gozips.com.