Last season the Ohio Bobcats went on a magical run through the conference tournament and into the second round of the NCAA Tourney, ending at the hands ofTennessee with a trip to the Sweet 16 on the line. Kent State, with six seniors on its roster, blew through the regular season and had the top seed in the conference tournament, but faltered against the Bobcats. Who will play the role of the regular season bully this season? Who, if anyone, will go on an amazing post-season run? There are quite a few question marks in the MAC East as the season begins.

Kent, with 20 wins or more in 11 of the last 12 seasons, is as unknown as everyone else. When you lose six seniors you have quite a bit of work to do. Ohio was chosen by the media as the top team in the East this season, but what will the Bobcats do to replace the high-scoring Armon Bassett?

Akron lost a lot of talent to graduation, but has one of the most highly-regarded recruits in MAC history, 7-foot center Zeke Marshall, back for his sophomore season and much improved according to his coach. The only thing for certain this season is that pretty much anyone can win the East this year, and if you took any of the teams out of the East and put them in the West they would probably be the odds-on favorite to win the division.

In the preseason poll the MAC sportswriters gave Ohio the nod to win the division. Here are the final poll standings:

1. Ohio University

2. Kent State

3. University of Akron

4. Miami University

5. Bowling Green State University

6. University of Buffalo

Here is the pre-season All-MAC East team:

Brett McKnight (Akron)

Scott Thomas (BG)

Justin Green (Kent)

Julian Mbunga (Miami)

DJ Cooper (Ohio)

Akron Zips

Coach: Keith Dambrot (7th season)

Record at school: 139-62

Last season: 24-11 overall, 12-4 in the MAC

Assistants: Rick McFadden, Terry Weigand, Lamont Paris

Rarely has a basketball recruit arrived at a Mid-American Conference school with as much hype as 7-footer Zeke Marshall, one of the top 10 post recruits in the nation and a top 100 overall player according to most scouting services. Marshall was considered a recruiting coup for the University of Akron and head basketball coach Keith Dambrot.

Marshall, if he would have chosen to skip college, would have most likely been drafted because

of his body (legitimate 7-footer with a 7-5 wingspan), but would have been a project due to his lack of NBA-ready strength (Marshall only weighed 210 pounds). But he chose to play with the Zips and, despite a stellar freshman season, is one of the reasons Akron is picked to compete for the MAC East title.

Dambrot brought Marshall along slowly. He started his young center in 28 games, but Marshall averaged just 16.8 minutes per contest and averaged just 5.1 points and 3.9 rebounds per game. He did, however, thrive on the defensive side of the court, blocking 59 shots to lead the MAC and shatter the school record for blocks by a freshman (the previous mark was just 25) and blocked six shots in a game twice.

Unlike most teams in the East the Zips return a decent amount of experience, having lost just two seniors to graduation. However, Dambrot and his staff will be relying on a bevy of newcomers to solidify the roster and provide quality minutes as the season progresses.

“We feel like those young kids are going to come on,” Dambrot said. “The interesting thing is that most people have picked us down (in the league), but we have a good nucleus when you consider guys like Brett McKnight (6-6 Sr. Forward), Nikola Cvetinovic (6-8 Jr. Forward). We think our big guys are as good as any in the league. We have two senior guards in Steve McNeese (6-2 Sr.) and Darryl Roberts (6-0 Sr.) and we have a little bit of a question at the small forward spot. We can play Brett McNight there, Brett McClanahan (6-4 Jr.) has played well there got us so that’s what we’ll do until we get some of those young guys going.”

Newcomers include Alex Abreu, a 5-9 point guard from Puerto Rico, Josh Egner, a 6-7 freshman forward, Dakotah Euton, a 6-8 freshman forward and Michael Green, a 6-6 freshman forward…all Dambrot recruits. The Zips have also brought in a pair of transfers, 6-6 forward Quincy Diggs from New Oreans and 6-5 forward Chauncey Gilliam from Maryland-Baltimore County.

“Dakotah Euton is a pick and pop guy from Kentucky who is not a great athlete but really understands how to play the game. Josh Egner from Massillon Jackson is a terrific athlete; he just has to learn the finer points of the game. Mike Green is kind of a combination of those two guys, he’s from Columbus. Quincy Diggs is a guy we think we’re going to have to teach a little bit. He has terrific ability but it’s the understanding of the game we have to teach. Abreu at the point is good offensively; we just have to work with him defensively. I don’t rule any of them out.”

Akron's leading returning scorer, Brett McKnight, a pre-season All-MAC East selection, averaged 10.0 points per game last season, along with 4.5 rebounds and 1.3 assists per contest. He will have to shoot the ball better this season; last year he shot just 39.7 percent from the floor and 27.6 percent from behind the 3-point arc.

"He has to score when it matters for us," Dambrot said of McKnight. "(Senior guard Steve) McNess and Cvetinovic are going to be our leaders, but Bret is going to be the guy we throw the ball to when it matters."

As for Marshall this season, Dambrot feels his young 7-footer is coming on.

"Last year we felt like he was about 20 percent of what he could be, and he got better," Dambrot said. "We feel he's about 60 percent now, and that's a drastic improvement. Now is he good enough to win championships with, I mean big-time championships? Probably not yet, but he's getting closer every day. His attitude and his effort and work ethic is going to get him closer and closer and closer."

The Zips season begins Nov. 12 with a home game against Milliken at James A. Rhodes Arena, followed by a trip to Dayton to face the Flyers Nov. 16. Akron also has challenging non-conference road games against Temple (12/12) and Minnesota (12/15) as well as taking part, with Arkansas-Little Rock, Stetson and Miami, Fl. in the Las Vegas Holiday Hoops Classic.

Is Dambrot optimistic about the 2010-11 season?

"I don't have any reason not to be, we've won every other year and it's not like we've got chopped liver back," he said. "We've got two guards that have been in the post-season every year, we've got a seven-foot center that's twice as good as he was last year, we've got a big forward that's strong as can be and Brett McKnight is one of the best scorers in the league. I think we're pretty good. We've got a lot of work to do but I think we're as good as anybody else for the most part."

Bowling Green Falcons

Coach: Louis Orr (4th season)

Record at school: 46-47

Last season: 14-16 overall, 6-10 in the MAC

Assistants: LaMonta Stone, Louis Twigg, Dennis Hopson

Bowling Green has the talent to compete for the MAC East title, but a lot will depend on 6-10 freshman center Cameron Black, a Kent Roosevelt High School graduate who opted for the Falcons over his hometown Kent State University. The Falcons have plenty of talent and experience in the backcourt, but are thin down low and will be hoping Black can step in immediately and make an impact. He averaged 16.4 points, 13.2 rebounds and 6.0 blocks as a high school senior, and has the kind of body that could handle the wear and tear of the typical grind-it-out MAC season.

“He’s definitely going to play, and he could start,” Falcons coach Louis Orr said of Black. “He’s going to play and, God willing, is going to play a lot. He’s done a really good job (in practice) and he’s a guy you could learn to trust because he has an IQ for the game. He’s not just a big guy that plays basketball, he’s a big guy that is a basketball player. He’s a hard worker, he’s got legitimate size at 6-10, 245 pounds, he’s got soft hands and can pass, dribble and shoot. He does a lot of good things.”

Orr has three returning starters, 6-7 Sr. forward Scott Thomas (13.2 points per game, 6.3 rebounds per game), 6-3 Jr. guard Dee Brown (10.6 ppg) and 6-2 Sr. guard Joe Jakubowski (8.3 ppg, 3.7 assists per game) but he did lose starters Otis Polk and Erik Marschall as well as Marc Larson, who averaged 20.7 minutes per game off the BG bench.

With just one senior on the roster, Orr knows he will have to get effective minutes from his younger players.

“We are a team that is young and inexperienced,” Orr said. “We have one senior and a number of freshmen and sophomores. But we have a lot of nice athleticism, I like the talent we have and we’re a high-energy team. We need to bring energy to the table. We’re a different team than last year, we’ve got a lot more speed and quickness…especially in our front line. The tempo of the game will be important to us because we’re going to speed it up and play fast.”

The Falcons differ from most of the MAC in that Orr primarily puts his team in a 2-3 zone on defense while the majority of the conference plays man-to-man. Last season Bowling Green found mixed results with its zone…opponents shot 36.5 percent from 3-point range, placing the Falcons 11th in the conference in 3-point defense. The Falcons also allowed their opponents to grab just 32.1 rebounds per contest, placing them atop the MAC standings in that category. BG scored 63 points per game and gave up 65.9.

This season Orr, again, is placing a strong priority on rebounding the basketball.

“Rebounding is desire. There’s some technique involved and it’s quickness to the ball, and we have to rebound as a group,” he said. “We have to gang rebound with all five guys. The reality of it is we have more size from one through 14 than we did last year. We can put a lineup in where four of the five guys are 6-6, 6-7 or bigger. So the reality of it is that we’re a bigger team, and we’re quicker and more athletic. It’s just a matter of desire.”

Even though he has very little experience down low, Orr thinks the players that are returning from last year will be a big benefit to the Falcons.

“Most of our experience is our perimeter,” Orr said. “I think our six guys coming back, three starters and three reserves, are all on the perimeter. Our youth and the guys who have the least experience are in the frontcourt. In theory, having Joe, Dee and Scott back, who played around 30 minutes a game and started every game for us, that definitely is a positive.”

In the preseason Mid-American Conference writer’s poll the Falcons were picked to finish fourth in the MAC East. Orr doesn’t put much stock in polls, and hopes his team doesn’t, either.

“It’s all about where you finish. Preseason polls really mean nothing, they have no influence or bearing on what you do on the court,” he said. “Really, at the end of the day it’s all about where you finish and that’s what matters to us. We want to get better every day and the only thing that matters is where we finish at the end of the year and in the conference.

“If we need (being picked fourth) to motivate us then we really aren’t a motivated team. We have to believe in ourselves, in what we’re doing, and we have to believe in our team. Polls don’t win or lose games, polls don’t effect practice…it’s about coming to work every day to get better at practice and staying focused on your goals.”

The Falcons open the season 11/12 at Howard University and then faces a fairly brutal non-conference slate before conference play. Bowling Green will travel to Chrysler Arena to face Michigan on Nov. 18, will host Duquesne out of the Atlantic 12 on Nov. 22 before heading to East Lansing to play Michigan State Dec. 4.

Buffalo Bulls

Coach: Reggie Witherspoon (12th season)

Record at school: 144-183

Last season: 18-12 overall, 9-7 in the MAC

Assistants: Jim Kwitchoff, Kevin Heck, Turner Battle

Buffalo coach Reggie Witherspoon has been down this road before. Facing huge losses to graduation, including his top five scorers from last season, the 12th-year coach of the Bulls is in another rebuilding project…but he has a couple of high-profile recruits to ease the pain a little bit.

Cameron Downing, a 6-foot-9 forward from the powerful program at Memorial High School in Tulsa, will bring a big body with soft hands and a plus perimeter game to the table for Witherspoon. Downing averaged 18.9 points, 11 rebounds, 2.8 blocks and 1.6 steals during his senior season and was named the Tulsa World player of the year. He will be joined by 6-6 forward Javon McRea from Newark High School in Rochester on the Bulls roster this season. McRea averaged 20 points, 15 rebounds and 5 blocks per game as a junior at Newark, and also earned valuable experience playing on a traveling AAU team over the summer.

With returning forwards Titus Robinson (6-7 junior) and Mitchell Watt (6-9 junior) to give Buffalo a bit of depth up front. Both Downing and McRea were signed during the early signing period. In the late signing period Witherspoon added Auraum Nuiriankh (6-5 swingman from Charis Prep), Jarod Oldham (6-3 guard from Eisenhower H.S. in Decatur, Ill.) and Corey Radley-Ross (6-3 guard from Harding H.S. in Charlotte) to fill out the Bulls' roster.

Buffalo will have eight freshmen or sophomores on its roster this year and six upperclassmen, none who averaged over nine points per game last season.

Witherspoon isn't too concerned with his team's youth.

"We have a really young team, but we do have a nucleus of guys that have been around a little bit," he said. "We do have a big freshman class and things are going pretty good. Going back a few years we had a team with absolutely no seniors and it turned out to be a pretty good year and we finished strong. This team, we do have two seniors and one of them is a fifth year guy. But he hasn't played an awful lot. So we're young and inexperienced."

One of the things Witherspoon is concerned about is his young players learning how things are done in his program. For this he hopes to be able to lean on the two seniors on the team, Jawaan Alston and Byron Mulkey, as well as transfer Zack Filson who sat out last year but was with the team.

"We have three post players that have played in games now, one in his fourth year and two in their third years," he said. "And we had a kid who transferred to us and sat out last year, so he's in his fourth year although he's a junior. (Zack Filson) We have another kid who we red-shirted, he's in his fourth year although he's a junior. Now if you add up the minutes those two have played in games it's not a lot, but they got a taste of it. They've been through practice, the grind and the routine. The way we do things, they're a little more familiar with. That helps."

Buffalo was picked in the preseason MAC writer's poll to finish last in the East Division. Witherspoon puts exactly zero stock in preseason polls.

"I think there are a lot of teams that lost a lot of players, so it's tough," he said. "But what we think we know, we don't anyways."

Kent State Golden Flashes

Coach: Geno Ford (3rd season)

Record at school: 43-24

Last season: 24-10 overall, 13-3 in the MAC

Assistants: Rob Senderoff, Armon Gates, Bobby Steinburg

Kent State has won 20 games or more in 11 of its last 12 seasons. But, with six seniors lost to graduation, third-year coach Geno Ford will have quite a task in front of him if he hopes to make it 12 of 13. His Flashes rolled to the regular season MAC title with a 13-3 conference record last season, but was hammered by Ohio University, Ford's alma mater, in the MAC Tournament quarterfinals, 81-64.

Ford will have seven new faces on his roster this season, but with what is widely considered the top recruiting class in the conference coming in, it isn't like Ford will be sans weapons. Plus, Kent returns two of its top three scorers in Preseason All-MAC East selection Justin Greene (13.2 ppg last season, first on the team) and Rodriguez Sherman (10.6 ppg, third on the team). Greene also led the Flashes in rebounding last season while Sherman was the team leader in steals.

Ford knows his team will have to learn and grow together.

"It's a transition year for us and our roster has had a lot of turnover. We only return three guys that played (last year)," Ford said. "We certainly have some talent and at times we've looked really, really good. I think that we're going to be one of those teams that I don't know how good we're going to be November 15, but I think there's a chance on February 15 that this could be a pretty good basketball team. The key for us is to make that happen sooner rather than later."

Though the Flashes lost a lot of talent to graduation, the aforementioned recruiting class could step in and make an impact immediately. This freshman class is the best at Kent since Gary Waters' 1998 recruiting haul that brought Andrew Mitchell, Trevor Huffman, Demetric Shaw and Eric Thomas to the Kent campus. Those four were later joined by transfer Antonio Gates and ended up with an NCAA Tournament run that ended with a loss to Indiana in the Elite Eight.

It all starts with 6-6 forward DeAndre Nealy, a JUCO player from Mott Junior College who led all levels of college basketball last season with 7.6 blocks per game. Nealy was the top-rated NJCAA Division II recruit in the nation, but underwent two off-season knee surgeries and might not be ready for the season opener Nov. 12 against Iona in the World Vision Classic at Cleveland State.

"We're hopeful that he's going to get back soon," Ford said. "(Nov. 3) was the first day he was allowed to do any jogging and he did not have a lot of swelling afterward. Obviously there is a major difference between jogging and being in shape to get up and down the floor and playing with the explosiveness around the rim that he's used to playing at. I still think he's quite a ways away from being anywhere close to what he is as a player. Best case scenario we would be able to play him at that opening tournament, but it's hard to say. He's had two knee surgeries since June so you just don't know what you're getting."

While Nealy is out a number of new players will battle to keep the power forward spot warm for him. Justin Manns is a 6-11 redshirt junior while Robert "Scooter" Johnson (6-6) and Darius Leonard (6-9) are both incoming freshmen. All three will get minutes at the four until Nealy is ready.

"We've really focused a lot on that position and have three guys that are in there battling day in, day out at the four spot," Ford said. "Scooter Johnson is a freshman from Bedford, a very talented guy. And then Darius Leonard, a freshman prep school kid from North Carolina, gives us a stretch four guy who can shoot 3s, he can run the floor and is a very good athlete. The other guy is Justin Manns, who was a redshirt for us a year ago and is a junior. H he's about 6-10, 6-11 and is probably the best athlete on the team. Those guys are sifting through it and they're all going to play, but we're going to need some of those guys, especially early, to be good in those games so we aren't subbing out of necessity. We need to be subbing out of strength. That's what good teams do."

Even with the loaded freshman class, Ford knows Greene will be the proverbial straw that stirs the drink. Ford knows his leading scorer will have to make some adjustments to his game to succeed at his new role as team leader.

“Justin is the key to our year,” Ford said. “He cannot come back and be what he was a year ago. He was our leading scorer and he did shoot 55 percent from the field, 80 from the foul line, but he has to be better. He’s going to get double-teamed, which he didn’t get a lot of last year, and it’s going to be a deal where we need that from him on a consistent basis.

“He’s the one guy on our roster we can throw it to 10 feet and in and if he gets fouled he’s going to hit his free throws. We’ve got to get him the ball, he has to work harder to get open, he’s got to be in better shape than he was, he’s got to be a little more explosive than he was and he’s going to have to deal with being ‘the guy’ for the first time. In high school he played with Lance Stevenson, who went to Cincinnati, so he had a main scorer with him.

“We have some talented guys that we absolutely would not trade, but (Green) has to be more effective for us than he was just because people are going to game plan for him. And that’s going to be a big, big key to our year.”

Kent has a decent non-conference schedule, not like the brutal trips to Xavier, North Carolina, Pittsburgh and Kansas in years past. The Flashes will travel to Gainesville to take on Florida Dec. 12, host Morehead State (the team that knocked off Ohio State in the NCAA Tournament two years ago) Dec. 28 and host James Madison on New Year’s Eve. Ford is looking forward to getting things started.

“As you can imagine we’re experiencing a lot of ups and downs,” he said. “Some days we’re really sharp and look pretty good and other days not so much. That’s to be expected. We don’t look like the June version of the Los Angeles Lakers, but we certainly do not look like the worst team in the country, either.”

Miami RedHawks

Coach: Charlie Coles (15th season)

Record at school: 240-190

Last season: 14-18 overall, 9-7 in the MAC

Assistants: Jermaine Henderson, Ryan Pedon, Jason Grunkemeyer

Miami probably has the most athletic team in the Mid-American Conference. Charlie Coles, who is in his 15th season with the RedHawks, is charged with harnessing this athleticism and turning it into a productive basketball system on the court. And, a few weeks into the preseason, he knows he and his coaching staff have a significant task in front of him

“I like them from the neck down, but I don’t like them from the neck up. You’ve got to have both,” Coles said after a particularly bad day on the practice floor. “If we’re going to be a team that improves and plays well against a tough non-conference schedule and then a tough league schedule we’re going to have to get better from the neck up. Our kids are smart, they do good in the classroom. We don’t have no misfits and have very few at study table. Some teams have standing room only at study table. They got so many guys in there at study table they don’t got enough seats. We don’t have that. We’ve got some guys that can do a good job with college work, but, God we need to transfer that onto the basketball floor.”

6-8, 245-pound power forward Julian Mavunga is expected to be the lynchpin to the RedHawks offense. A preseason All-MAC East selection, Mavunga is a big body that can score down low and out on the wing. He likes to bang, but can put the ball on the floor and has the quickness to go around defenders. Last season Mavunga was second on the team in scoring, averaging 10.0

points per game (the departed Kenny Hayes led the team at 13.2). He also pulled down 6.3 rebounds per contest and shot 79.7 percent from the free-throw line.

Nick Winbush will also start in the Miami frontcourt. The 6-7 senior was third on the team in scoring last season at 9.7 points per game and, like Mavunga, is above average from the charity stripe, connecting on 85.1 percent of his free-throws last year. Winbush also led the RedHawks in blocks with 32.

“Winbush has been a really consistent player for us, he’s really working hard. Nick is the kind of kid who just plays, and I’ve kind of found out that I’ve got to let him do what he does best, and that’s play hard,” Coles said. “He’s going to make some mistakes but he is a good shooter and a good person. I’m hoping he has a great year and so far he’s done everything in practice. Mavunga, I cringe when I have to say this, but Muvunga’s got some talent, but I don’t like to use the word talent because talent resembles potential. Julian’s got to prove to the league that he can do it all year long in terms of being one of the league’s better players. But he does have talent and he’s done a good job. But that’s the strength of our team.”

Antonio Ballard, a 6-4 shooting guard/small forward, will also give Coles minutes in the front court…that is if he can stay healthy. Ballard played in all 32 Miami games last season, but has an injury history Coles thinks could be record-breaking.

“Antonio Ballard, who had his usual injury this year - he broke his hand - Antonio has the distinct whatever you call it of getting hurt in each of his five years,” Coles said, tongue in cheek.” I was kind of happy when he got hurt this year because I think that might be the only record that he can make and hold here at Miami in basketball. When he got hurt I was kind of sad because he’s very valuable to us, but I kind of said ‘wow, at least he’s consistent.’ But he’s out and the good thing about his injury is that he got hurt two weeks ago and he’s a tough kid. So if things go right he’ll be back in two weeks. I don’t know how much he’ll be able to help us the first two games. Against Duke it won’t matter much anyway and Towson will come in here pretty good.”

The Miami backcourt will have some depth and experience with Orlando Williams and Allen Roberts. Williams, a 6-4 sophomore, saw time in 30 games for the RedHawks last season, averaging 3.0 points per contest. Roberts, a 6-3 sophomore, averaged 12.4 minutes per contest in his 30 games last season, scoring 3.5 points and a rebound per game.

Chris McHenry, a 5-11 junior who signed with the RedHawks in June, could challenge for the starting point guard position. The transfer from Garden State Community College (who played at Howard as a freshman) is the kind of streak shooter that can take over a game. At Garden City CC he once connected on nine triples in a game, a school record, and hit a total of 80 3-pointers last season. He played 11 games as a freshman at Howard, averaging 9.6 points. His best game at Howard came against Wyoming, when he scored a team-high 29 points.

“We do have some ability, we do have some things but we’ve got the kind of team that, if we play together and give that maximum effort, I think we could really have something,” Coles said. “I think we would be hard to guard. Right now we don’t see that, but I hope we could get better because we do have some players. It’s not about not having players, it’s about those players wanting to play every day.”

Freshmen Jon Harris (6-8 from Twinsburg), Quentin Rollins (6-0 from Wilmington, OH) and Josh Sewell (6-5 from Louisville) will also get the chance to earn minutes on the floor for the RedHawks. Sewell, a 6-5 wing, scored 19.8 points per game as a senior at Trinity High School and has an advanced offensive set of skills. Rollins was a three-time All-Ohio player at Wilmington High School and averaged 19.5 points and 2.6 steals a game as a senior. Harris averaged 20,1 points and 13 rebounds a game as a senior at Twinsburg High School and was named the Northeast Ohio Conference Player of the Year.

Drew McGee, a 6-11 center from North Ridgeville, was a redshirt last season while Vincent Legarza, a 6-9 wide body down low, will also be in the mix for Miami.

To say Miami has an ambitious non-conference schedule is a large understatement. In fact, no team in the MAC will go through as brutal a stretch before conference play begins. After opening the season Nov. 12 against Towson the RedHawks will travel to Durham to play Duke at Cameron Indoor Arena Nov. 16. Miami then comes home to host a regional of the 2010 O’Reilly Auto Parts CBE Classic, with IUPUI, San Diego State and Wisconsin-Green Bay providing the competition. After that Miami travels to Columbus to play Ohio State Nov. 26, hosts Xavier Dec. 1, travels to Dayton Dec. 4 and then hosts Cincinnati Dec. 21. Miami will then close out its non-conference slate with a trip to Lawrence, Kansas to play the Jayhawks Jan. 2.

“With our schedule we’ve got to get ready and go get them,” Coles said.

Ohio Bobcats

Coach: John Groce (3rd season)

Record at school: 37-32

Last season: 22-15 overall, 7-9 in the MAC

Assistants: Jamall Walker, Ramon Williams, Dustin Ford

Last season Ohio University basketball coach John Groce was given what every college basketball coach in the country wants…a team that is much better in February than it was in November. In fact the Bobcats played like an entirely different team as the regular season ended and the conference tournament began.

Groce's Bobcats were treading water at around .500 before things really started to click. Freshman D.J. Cooper grew up in a hurry and took control of the Bobcats on the floor, and the result was something no one could have expected. In the first round of the MAC tournament Ohio knocked off Ball State, 85-77 in overtime. Then the Bobcats rolled over the regular season MAC Champions, Kent State, 81-64. This was followed by a 54-42 win over Miami in the MAC semifinals, then an emotional 81-75 win over Akron in the MAC Championship Game with a trip to the Big Dance on the line.

It did not end there as the Bobcats defeated Georgetown, 97-83 in the first round before, finally, being knocked out by Tennessee in the second round.

All did not remain magical for Ohio, however. Armond Bassett, who led the Bobcats in scoring in six of their final seven games – including the amazing tournament run – was arrested for assault in May and is no longer with the team. Bassett led the team in scoring last season at 17.1 points per game and was a solid rebounding and defensive guard.

Cooper (5-11 sophomore) was selected to the All-MAC East preseason first team and will now be expected to score even more with the loss of Bassett. Cooper averaged 13.5 points per game last season, led the league in assists (5.89 per contest), steals (2.51 per game) and was second in the conference in assist to turnover ratio (2.2).

Groce knows teams will be prepared to deal with the cat-like quickness of Cooper this season, and has been pleased with his sophomore point guard's off-season work.

"He's improved a great deal," he said of Cooper. "I think the thing we've tried to prepare him for is the fact that we need him to be better than last year because people are going to scheme and game plan against him. He's no longer an unknown."

The Bobcats have a pair of high-scoring seniors back in their frontcourt as well. DeVaughn Washington (6-8) and Tommy Freeman (6-5) both averaged double figures in scoring last season (Washington at 11.3 and Freeman at 10.5)and both do other things to help their team. Washington pulled down 5.4 rebounds per game last year and had 33 steals while Freeman led the MAC in 3-point shooting percentage, connecting on 47.7 percent of his triple tries.

"I really like our guys, really like our team. We've had several practices now and they've really, for the most part with very few exceptions, have competed at a pretty high level," Groce said. "We're in a situation similar to what we were in last year. We have some young guys that are going to get thrust into roles very quickly that we might not have foreshadowed. So it will be interesting to see how those guys get indoctrinated once they get thrown into the fire."

Groce added a solid recruiting haul to his roster as well, bringing four freshmen that could make immediate impacts to Athens - Nick Kellogg (6-3 guard from St. Francis DeSales High School), T.J. Hall (6-6 forward from Gainesville High School in Florida), Ethan Jacobs (6-10 center from

Tipton High School in Indiana) and Ricardo Johnson (6-4 wing from Holmes High School in Kentucky).

“He’s adapted well. He’s learning two positions, which is sometimes difficult for a freshman, “Groce said of Kellogg. “Learning to play the one and the two…and has embraced what we’re trying to do both offensively and defensively.”

Groce has liked what he has seen from the rest of his roster as well as they go through practice to get ready for the season. He also puts no stock in the MAC media picking his Bobcats to finish first in the East in their preseason poll.

“Everybody’s lost quite a bit, certainly on our side,” Groce said. “The teams are going to look different, there are a lot of unknowns for us, and certainly if you talk to the other coaches in the East Division they’d probably tell you there are some unknowns for them as well. All of us lost some significant guys. The league already has a lot of parity to begin with, and now you add that factor and I think that’s why you see a lot of closeness in all of the teams and how they’re ranked or predicted.”

He also has reminded his returning players that the page has turned from last year and the magical run the Bobcats went on to close the season.

“Last year it was a special finish,” Groce said. “Those guys have to understand that even though those memories will last a lifetime; this year has absolutely nothing to do with how we ended last year. I think they’ve embraced that.”