Last season the race for the MAC West regular season championship was very tight. In fact, four teams finished within one game of Central Michigan, who defeated Eastern Michigan by a single point, on the road, in its regular season finale to claim the MAC West crown. That win lifted the Chippewas to 9-7 in the conference while Western Michigan, Eastern Michigan and Ball State all finished at 8-8.

This season the West will look very different, but the title race should be just as close as there is no team with a clear-cut edge in talent and/or experience. Here is how the MAC media sees this season playing out in their pre-season poll:

1. Ball State

2. Central Michigan

3. Eastern Michigan

4. Western Michigan

5. Northern Illinois

6. Toledo

MAC Player of the Year David Kool has graduated, but there remains plenty of talent in the West. And, for the first time ever, a preseason All-Mac team includes a freshman…Central Michigan's Trey Zeigler. The pre-season All-MAC West team:

Jarrod Jones (BSU)

Trey Zeigler (CMU)

Brandon Bowdry (EMU)

Xavier Silas (NIU)

Flenard Whitfield (WMU)

Ball State Cardinals

Coach: Billy Taylor (4th season)

Record at school: 35-56

Last season: 15-15 overall, 8-8 in the MAC

Assistants: Bob Simmons, Mitch Gilfillan, Jay Newberry

While the majority of coaches in the Mid-American Conference are dealing with heavy roster turnover and trying to figure out which of their recruits they can count on to make an immediate contribution, Ball State fourth-year coach Billy Taylor is not in such a desperate situation. His Cardinals return four of its top five leading scorers, its leading rebounder and leading shot blocker.

One of those top five, 6-9 junior forward Jarrod Jones, was named to the pre-season All-MAC West team and is a strong candidate for conference player of the year. Jones averaged 12.2 points, 7.4 rebounds (third in the MAC) and 1.13 blocks (seventh in the conference) last season and, after a productive summer, should lead the Cardinals into the thick of the conference championship race.

“I like the makeup of our team,” Taylor said. “We’ve got a lot of experienced players returning this year led, obviously, by Jarrod Jones. He’s really had a great attitude and perfect work ethic over the summer in trying to improve his game. He’s really helped us in a lot of ways from an offensive standpoint and rebounding the basketball.”

Junior Randy Davis, a 5-11 guard, and senior Malik Perry, a 6-4, 240 pound forward, have a wealth of experience under their belts as well. Davis averaged 28.4 minutes per game last season and scored 10.3 points per game while shooting 44 percent from 3-point range…second in the conference. Perry played 22.6 minutes per game last season and, at 240 pounds, is a wide body that loves to mix it up down low.

“Randy Davis and Malik Perry have really provided some excellent leadership for us so far in practice,” Taylor said. “Randy has really built upon what he was able to do last year, really having a terrific run during MAC play where he played extremely well for us. The light really seemed to click for him, and I was really pleased with how he finished the season. Now he’s in a leadership role as a captain and he’s been very good with some of our young players, helping to encourage the learning process for our young guys.

“Malik Perry is a senior and brings toughness for our team. He’s been in the program now for four years, our only senior in the program, and he’s really gone through the entire transition process. He’s somebody that’s kind of survived it all, so he’s someone that’s going to be integral for us from a leadership and toughness standpoint.”

Ball State was once the most consistent and successful programs in the conference. With players like Curtis Kidd, Paris McCurdy, Bonzi Wells, Duane Clemons and Theron Smith leading the way on the floor the Cardinals won 20 games or more eight times in 14 seasons and did not have a losing record from the 1988-89 season through the 2001-02 campaign. However, the 01-02 team coached by Tim Buckley and led in scoring by Theron Smith that went 23-12 was the last Ball State team to win at least 20 games. This year’s Cardinals should break that streak, and compete for a MAC West title in a division that has no real clear-cut favorite.

“We lost a lot of players on the MAC West side, some very, very talented guards and really good inside players,” Taylor said. “So the West will clearly look different, but there is definitely some terrific talent coming in to replace some of those players lost. It should be exciting and I think the MAC West, like always and like every MAC race that I’ve been a part of so far, the history has proven the MAC West and the overall MAC race is always very tight. It’s usually very balanced and comes down to the last one or two games of the season.”

Ball State has a difficult non-conference schedule, and will log some serious frequent flyers miles.

“We go up to the Great Alaskan Shootout and get an opportunity to play against St. John’s in the first game there,” Taylor said. “That will be terrific for our team and our program to have a nationally televised game against St. John’s and Coach Lavin. There are a lot of other terrific teams up there so we’ll be getting a significant challenge there. We have our series that we continue to play against Butler, and from an in-state standpoint that’s probably the biggest rival that we have. So getting an opportunity to go down and play Butler in Hinkle will be fantastic, we’re certainly excited about that.”

Central Michigan Chippewas

Coach: Ernie Ziegler (5th season)

Record at school: 54-69

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

Assistants: Keith Noftz, Darren Kohne, Terrance Chatman

Trey Zeigler, a 6-5 wing from Mt. Pleasant High School in Michigan, could have played his college basketball at pretty much any school of his choosing. He chose to stay at home.

Zeigler decided to play for his father, Ernie Zeigler, as opposed to accepting the written offers

from Michigan, Michigan State, Arizona State and UCLA. With this decision he becomes the highest-rated recruit to ever choose to play at a MAC school according to Rivals.com.

Scouts.com had him rated the #7 shooting guard and #26 overall recruit in the nation. ESPN had him rated the #6 shooting guard and the #30 player overall while Rivals.com had him ranked #26 nationally. He scored 1,644 points and pulled down 648 rebounds in his career at Mt. Pleasant High School and averaged 24.3 points and 10.5 rebounds per game as a senior and, now that he has decided to be a Chipppewa, is the first freshman in league history to be named to the preseason All-MAC team.

Needless to say, Zeigler has quite a few expectations on his young shoulders as he embarks on his college basketball career. But, as his father/coach points out, he is only a freshman and will have a learning curve just like everyone else.

“I think Trey has been doing a good job here as of late transitioning to how we want to do things on a daily basis,” Ernie Zeigler said. “Early on, in the preseason, he struggled a little bit probably because of how I came at him…probably unwarranted in terms of making him go through some things from a difficulty standpoint. But he’s made an adjustment. We had our scrimmage the other day and he was extremely solid in that. He’s a very versatile player and he’s going to have the opportunity to, hopefully, be able to do a lot of things for us offensively and defensively. I think the challenge for him right now is that we need him to be much better defensively as we prepare for the start of our season.”

Trey Zeigler isn’t walking into a situation where he must carry the team. Central Michigan has four seniors who know what their roles are, according to Ernie Zeigler.

“Those four seniors, Jalin Thomas, Amir Rashid, Antonio Weary and Will McClure, have done an excellent job of carrying the torch that was handed to them from losing two all-league guards from last year,” Ernie Zeigler said. “And they really try to lead by example in terms of our philosophy. We want to be a good defensive team and those things. We’re trying to redefine ourselves and have a lot of new guys trying to find out how our rotation is going to be. I am excited about this team and this group of kids in terms of the depth and athleticism that we have now that we haven’t had in the past. Hopefully that’s going to allow us to become an even better defensive team as we embark on non-conference play.”

Even with the four seniors the Chippewas have a host of new faces as they embark on the 2010-11 basketball season.

“We’re a work in progress. We have nine new guys on our roster, seven of which are freshmen or junior college transfers,” Ernie Zeigler said. “We’re trying to, hopefully, have some consistency in terms of continuing to compete in our conference. Something we feel proud about here in building our program is that we’ve got ourselves to a point where we are able to compete at the top of our division and/or conference. With that being said I think our four seniors have done an excellent job to this point.”

Ernie Zeigler knows he is not alone in trying to put together a cohesive roster that integrates old faces with new recruits.

“We have all these new guys and I think all the other (MAC) coaches are dealing with it,” he said. “We only have four guys that have helped us win a Division I basketball game on our roster, and a fifth guy who played very sparingly.”

Back to the Trey Zeigler-Ernie Zeigler relationship. The coach knows he will have to wear two hats when dealing with his son…one as coach and one as dad. As for his son being named to the All-Mac West preseason team, Ernie Zeigler jokingly said his fellow MAC coaches might have done so to make things a little tougher for him.

“I think my counterparts did that to me on purpose,” he said with a half-chuckle. “We’re a team first and foremost and Trey is a freshman. Yes, he’s a very talented freshman, but he’s a freshman. He’s going to have his perils of dealing with transition and the ups and downs that come with that. People are going to have to be patient because he’s going to have his highs and his lows. Hopefully he can be somewhere in the middle and not have too many of each. But in terms of the pressure, the pressure is on me. I’m the head coach and it’s my job to get these guys going. Trey’s fortunate that he has four seniors that understand our philosophy, that understand our toughness and how we battle and grind it out. I think those four seniors are going to definitely be able to help him through the transition of becoming a Division I basketball player.

“One thing I told him early on is that all eyes will be focused on he and I and how we interact in

terms of from a team standpoint. I think he's understanding that and I think things are off to a good start in terms of our player-coach relationship versus father-son relationship."

The Chippewas have a grind before conference play starts. Not only do they have some tough opposition on their non-conference schedule, they must play most of them on the road.

"And the one game we have at home is Temple, and Temple is a ranked team in the ESPN/USA Today Poll," Ernie Zeigler said. "So we have Temple here at home to open our new event center, but then have the seven of our first eight away. We're fortunate enough to be in the Rainbow Classic in Hawaii, so we'll have a couple of neutral site games and then play Hawaii which will be a true road game. That will be part of that ESPN 24 hours of basketball. It's going to be a difficult challenge for a young team and the onus is going to be on our four seniors to hopefully get us off to a good start."

Eastern Michigan Eagles

Coach: Charles Ramsey (6th season)

Record at school: 25-39

Last season: 17-15 overall, 8-8 in the MAC

Assistants: Derrick McDowell, Carl Thomas, Andrew Moore

While everyone is looking at the experience returning at Ball State and the recruiting haul at Central Michigan, not many people have talked about Eastern Michigan contending for the MAC

West championship. That might be a big mistake.

The Eagles were 17-15 last season, but five of those losses came by two points or less. If EMU can win the close ones this year as opposed to coming up short a run at the division title is not out of the question. And with preseason All-MAC West selection Brandon Bowdry, a 6-6 senior forward, providing the scoring punch and attitude, the Eagles' chances are that much better.

Bowdry, an athletic scorer that attacks the rim on offense and crashes the boards on defense, was the only player in the conference to average a double-double last season. He scored 16.3 points and pulled down 10.0 rebounds per contest.

Eagles coach Charles Ramsey has two other seniors that should help solidify the young Eagles, a pair of 6-6 forwards Jay Higgins and Will Cooper.

"Brandon brings experience, and with that experience comes tenacity and toughness," Ramsey said. "He's been through three years of the MAC wars and his leadership has really taken a giant step forward, along with seniors William Cooper and Jay Higgins. Those two, coupled with what Brandon brings to us, have been tremendous."

The best competition in the pre-season has been for the point guard position. Junior L.J. Frazier, the expected starter, was lost for the season to an ACL injury so it has come down to junior transfer Darrell Lampley and sophomore Adrian Burton to battle it out for the starting nod. Lampley transferred from Lakeland Community College, where he led the league with 6.8 assists and scored 17.9 points per game, last season.

"Point guard has been a great battle thus far. Unfortunately we lost L.J. Frazier to an ACL injury so he'll be out this year," Ramsey said. "That now leaves us with a junior, Darrell Lampley, who is 5-10 and played his freshman year at St. Peter's, and a sophomore, Adrian Burton out of Detroit Cooley. It's been fun to see them compete every day, to soak up the information. It's going to be interesting to see out of those two who takes over."

Unlike most other MAC schools this year Eastern Michigan has no freshmen on its roster. There

are, however, five sophomores and seven total transfers. Competition for starting positions has been healthy during pre-season practice.

“The guys have been fun to be around and their effort has been tremendous,” Ramsey said. “We’re lacking execution but, when you add new guys, that’s probably the last thing you get. It’s fun to go to practice every day to see what we can build and what we can evolve into.”

Northern Illinois Huskies

Coach: Ricardo Patton (4th season)

Record at school: 26-62

Last season: 10-20 overall, 6-10 in the MAC

Assistants: Sundance Wicks, Will Smith, Todd Townsend

If Northern Illinois coach Ricardo Patton feels like he is starting from scratch, that’s because he basically is. With just five returning players with any varsity experience under their belts, Patton and the Huskies have to grow up together in a hurry. But not all is lost for the Huskies, as one of the returning players is a strong candidate for conference player of the year, Xavier Silas.

Last season Silas was second only to MAC Player of the Year David Kool from Western Michigan in scoring, averaging 19.7 points per game. He also was 19th in the conference in rebounding with 5.3 boards per contest and was fourth in the MAC in free throw percentage, hitting 159 of 196 for 81.1 percent from the line. Patton is expecting bigger and better things from his 6-5 senior shooting guard this season.

“Xavier had a really good year last year having sat out the year before. Certainly he experienced a setback when he injured his hand at Northwestern. But he’s had a great summer,” Patton said. “He’s a guy that works very hard and I’m hoping he has a great senior campaign, and I expect that he will. He’s put in the work for certain.”

This was supposed to be the season the Huskies put things together and became a team to be reckoned with in the MAC West. But four starters with eligibility remaining left the program, leaving Silas and four others, none that averaged more than 14.9 minutes per game last season, as the foundation of the program. This left Patton with eight new faces and a team whose tallest player, 6-9 junior Cameron Madlock, is at his third school since the 2008-09 season. Down low 6-7, 270-pound Tim Toler, a junior transfer from Danville Area Community College, will also be thrown into the mix this season.

“Cameron Madlock, at 6-9, he’s a guy that’s long and rangy and I think he’s a guy that gives us a different dimension,” Patton said. “Then you throw in Tim Toler, who is a wide-bodied guy that is very skilled and can step out and knock down a 15 or 16-foot jump shot. Those guys are both junior college transfers and they have some experience, albeit not in the MAC but they still have some games under their belts.”

The battle for the point guard spot has come down to 6-1 junior Brian Hall, who played 14.5 minutes per game for the Huskies last season, and Kyree Jones, a 6-2 freshman from North Carolina Tech Prep that was also recruited by Purdue, Indiana and Oregon.

“Brian Hall gives us some experience at that position, and he’s done a nice job early on,” Patton said. “He’s not a guy that’s going to knock down a ton of jump shots, but he’s certainly a guy that can run a team. Kyree Jones is a very talented young freshman and at the end of the day what he lacks in experience I think he can make up with his ability to score the basketball.”

The Huskies have a difficult non-conference schedule, but Patton thinks this could help his young team get ready for the rigors of MAC play. He also sees no reason why his team cannot contend for the MAC West title.

“I think we have as good a chance as anyone at this point,” he said. “I think every coach feels that way. Every coach goes into any new season very optimistic. There are certain things that have to go your way, you’ve got to get good bounces and there is some luck involved. Guys got to get healthy. But most of us realize, too, you have to be playing your best basketball in the latter months. I you look at our non-conference schedule, that’s something we’ve got to get through. It’s a very difficult non-conference schedule. We’re playing Missouri, DePaul, Iowa State, Northwestern here at home, and Bradley and Temple…so it’s a very difficult non-conference schedule with seven games on the road and only five at home. So we’ve got to get through that first and hopefully that will prepare us for conference play.”

Toledo Rockets

Coach: Todd Kowalczyk (1st season)

Last season: 4-28 overall, 1-15 in the MAC

Assistants: Angres Thorpe, Ryan Pedon, Jason Kalsow

Following the 2007-08 season, a season in which Toledo went 11-19 overall and 7-8 in the Mid-American Conference, the university dismissed men’s head basketball coach Stan Joplin. The Rockets have been in search of an identity ever since.

Joplin went 203-155 in his 12 seasons at the helm, 122-89 in the conference, but Joplin could never get over that last hurdle and earn a berth in the NCAA Tournament. In fact, 1980 was the last time the Rockets were invited to the Big Dance. They earned that berth by knocking off Bowling Green in the inaugural MAC Championship Game.

Gene Cross took over for Joplin, and in his two seasons won 11 games while losing 53. In the MAC the Falcons won just six games against 26 losses. Exit Cross, enter Tod Kowalczyk.

Kowalczyk brings a solid resume to the Glass City. He was the head coach at Wisconsin-Green Bay for eight seasons, and during those eight years the Phoenix were one of the most successful and consistent teams in the Horizon League. He had a 136-122 record ad Wisconsin-Green Bay, including a pair of 22-win seasons, and his players were successful in the classroom as well. In eight seasons under Kowalczyk every player at Wisconsin-Green Bay that completed his playing eligibility also earned his degree.

Kowalczyk has a big job ahead of him. Last season the Rockets posted a 4-28 overall record and lost 15 of 16 MAC games. Kowalczyk has six players back with varsity experience under their belts at Toledo, but only three have seen significant playing time.

Justin Anyijong, a 6-9 senior center/forward, averaged 9.4 points and 5.3 rebounds in 24 starts for the Rockets last season. Malcolm Griffin, a 6-4 sophomore guard, did a little bit of everything for Toledo last season averaging 7.1 points, 3.2 rebounds and 2.9 assists while playing 24.2 minutes per game. Mouhamed Lo, a 6-8 senior forward, averaged 6.5 points and 4.9 rebounds.

The other three returning players, Jay Shunnar (6-1 junior guard), Kevin Rohner (6-1 sophomore guard) and Drew Rodriguez (6-1 junior guard) saw very limited playing time in the 2009-10 season.

Toledo was picked in the preseason poll to finish near the bottom of the MAC West again, but Kowalczyk isn’t worrying about the polls.

“These guys have been beaten on enough over the last two years, the holdovers, so I don’t think that is something I would concentrate on,” he said when asked about the poll.

What Kowalczyk actually is worried about is returning the Rockets to basketball prominence again…and doing it his way with his kind of players.

“We decided to take high school kids and some transfers and not take junior college guys,” he said. “We’ve got three very good players sitting out this year so I think we’ll be able to turn this thing around a lot quicker than people anticipate. When you talk about building a program people decide to do it different ways. With us we want to do it with good guys from good families that understand they’re here to get a great education from the University of Toledo.”

Kowalczyk feels like his players are responding.

“We’re getting better and I think the guys are buying in to what we’re trying to do,” he said.

Back to the preseason polls; after mulling it over Kowalczyk actually did want to make a prediction of his own. The preseason MAC poll has his Rockets finishing fifth in the West. Kowalczyk’s thoughts?

“I can tell you this; we’re not going to finish in that position,” he said. “We’re going to work hard to get this team better and we’ll turn it around much quicker than most people might anticipate.”

Western Michigan Broncos

Coach: Steve Hawkins (8th season)

Record at school: 124-99

Last season: 18-15 overall, 8-8 in the MAC

Assistants: Rick Carter, Tim Herrmann, Jeff Dunlap

All summer Western Michigan coach Steve Hawkins has been answering the same question.

“Around Kalamazoo the most asked question is ‘How are you going to replace David Kool?’ And I think the answer to that is balance,” Hawkins said. “I don’t want to compare this group of kids to our 2004 championship team, but I will make this part of the comparison…that team was very balanced. I’m not saying we’re as good as that team, but that team was very balanced. You had no idea, coming out of a timeout, the opposing coach had no idea if we were going to go to Mike Williams or to Ben Reed or to Brian Snyder or to Bobby Madison, Levi Ross, Regge Barry. And this year, right now, I don’t think the opposing coach would have an idea whose number we would call either. And the reason I know that is because I don’t know yet whose number we’re going to call. We’re still sorting through that, when we need a basket whose number we’re going to call. But I do think balance will be this team’s strength. It could be its weakness, too.”

Hawkins is probably taking the best approach he could take. If a coach gets a player like Kool in his program once or twice in his career he will usually be happy. Kool, a 6-3 guard, left WMU as the school’s all-time leading scorer with 2,122 points (the previous record was held by Manny Newsome at 1,787 points). He was selected as the 2009-10 MAC Player of the Year and holds the conference record for free-throws made in a career. In other words, Kool is not the kind of player you can just “replace.”

And Hawkins has the roster to balance things out. Unlike most MAC programs he returns quite a bit of experience.

Ten Broncos on the 2010-11 roster saw game action last year: 6-7 junior forward Flenard Whitfield (33 games, 11 starts), 6-7 sophomore forward Nate Hutcheson (33 games, 22 starts), 6-0 junior guard Mike Douglas (33 starts), 6-0 senior guard Alex Wolf (29 games), 603 junior guard Demetrius Ward (33 games, 1 start), 6-3 sophomore guard David Brown (27 games), 6-10 sophomore center Shayne Whittington (16 games), 6-4 sophomore guard Brandon Pokley (16 games), 6-7 junior forward/center Muhammed Conteh (23 games) and 5-9 junior guard Ed Thomas (5 games).

Even with a balanced approach a team needs a leader, and Hawkins thinks he has one in Whitfield, who scored 10.1 points and pulled down 5.2 rebounds per contest last season and was named to this year's preseason All-MAC team.

"He really came on strong in the second half of conference play last year, really became a low post force," Hawkins said. "Last year I felt like he might have spent a little too much time on the perimeter early in the year facing the basket. He's had a great summer, he's had a great off-season and worked on inside as well as outside. So we want to use him in both situations. He can be pretty effective at 15-17 feet and obviously can be effective around the basket. So we want to be able to do both.

"And the big thing we need out of Flen is energy. He's an energy guy and if he brings high energy he's tough to keep off the offensive glass. He's got a 'beast-like' mentality. The final thing is that he's got to understand that David Kool is gone and he is probably our best returning player and he's got to stay out of foul trouble because he's had a tendency to get into foul trouble over the last couple of years."

Hawkins has been impressed with the improvement Douglas has shown as well.

"Mikey really had a great sophomore year for us and we're a different team with him in the game," he said. "He's able to really push the ball, he sets the tempo. There's an old saying, 'the speed of the leader's the speed of the game.' And Mikey's kind of our leader when it comes to tempo on the floor. He's another one that had a good off-season and improved his shot from the perimeter, which he needed to do."

Key recruits Juwan Howard Jr. (6-6 forward) and Kennis White (6-3 guard) should see plenty of playing time as well.