Prior to the start of the 2010 football season, Miami senior defensive back Jordan Gafford was asked what he thought of his RedHawks chances to compete for the MAC East title after a one-win 2009 season. He did not mince words.

“Across the board the gap from first place to last place is very slim,” Gafford said. “That presents every team a great opportunity to end up in Detroit playing for a MAC championship. One of our coaches phrased it this way, he said ‘the outhouse to the penthouse is a short trip.’ I think in the MAC that’s a very true thing.”

When his football career is over Gafford might want to take up fortune telling.

His RedHawks did make the trip from the outhouse to the penthouse, and when the finals seconds ticked away in Kent State’s 28-6 win over Ohio University, Miami was able to make its travel plans for Detroit and the Marathon MAC Championship Game.

RedHawks head coach Mike Haywood spoke of changing the culture of the football program at Miami, and you would have to say he was able to do exactly that. It started with a season-opening loss at Florida in The Swamp…a game the RedHawks actually led after the first quarter and, in the end, made a nice showing of themselves. In fact, Miami’s only two duds

this season came out of the conference – a 51-13 loss at No. 24 Missouri and a 45-3 blowout loss at the hands of cross-town rival Cincinnati.

Other than that the RedHawks won seven of eight in the conference (losing only to Ohio, 34-14 at home) and rolled over Colorado State in non-conference play, 31-10.

On Oct. 23, with that loss to Ohio, the RedHawks fell to 4-4 overall, 3-1 in the MAC. While Miami was turning some heads, at that point no one was really looking at the RedHawks as a legitimate division championship contender. In fact, up until the final two weekends of the season no one was really touting Miami…the thought was that Temple, who looked like the class of the division with a seemingly unstoppable two-pronged rushing attack of Matt Brown and Bernard Pierce, was going to handle its business at home against Ohio and need only to defeat the RedHawks in the final week of the season to punch its ticket to Detroit to take on Northern Illinois.

Ohio shocked Temple at Lincoln Financial Stadium in Philadelphia and seemed to be in the driver's seat heading into its season finale at Kent. We all know what happened from there.

Miami had quite a favorable schedule in the final month of the season, facing Buffalo, Bowling Green and Akron before the final game at home against the Owls. But for a team coming off a one-win season, there is no such thing as an automatic victory. However, Haywood's charges won those four games by a combined score of 87-47, including an easy 23-3 win over Temple, to put all the pressure on Ohio.

One can only hope the national media, the members of the Football Writers Association of America, the Associated Press staff, etc. know what Haywood was able to pull off this season. Not mentioned yet is that Miami starting quarterback Zac Dysert suffered a regular season-ending injury the week leading up to the Akron game, and backup Austin Boucher had to take control of the RedHawks offense for the final two games.

Haywood has changed the culture at Miami. Wins and losses aside, the biggest thing he was able to do was get his young RedHawks to believe in themselves. They knew they could win football games this season, regardless of what happened last year. Haywood's coaching job was phenomenal, and he deserves more than just a passing mention in the national Coach of

the Year awards. As the man in control at what has come to be known as the “Cradle of Coaches,” Haywood proved that he fits right in.

“Because we’re trying to change the culture of Miami football we’re working to change our young men in a social aspect, and guys are improving significantly,” he said. “We’re changing the culture from an academic aspect and we had no young men that had to go to summer school this year to be eligible, which is a significant improvement from the first year. Now we have to change this into wins. We talk to our players about being a relentless, dangerous football team and not looking at the scoreboard. If you’re dominating the man in front of you we should be successful when the 60 minutes is up.”

Dysert will be working with a new offensive coordinator, Morris Watts, who was promoted from quarterbacks coach to the offensive coordinator position.

Haywood brought Watts in to revamp Miami’s offense and focus on the running game.

“I had the privilege of working with Morris when we were at LSU together and he does a tremendous job,” Haywood said. “I think one of the things we’re establishing this spring is the ability to run the football. Previously we didn’t do a very good job of running the football, but Morris put a lot of emphasis on it, along with the play-action pass, getting everyone involved and I think he did a tremendous job with that.”

“I think we’re going to prove a lot of things to a lot of people because we’re going to come out with a chip on our shoulder,” he said. “We are working hard and not worrying about anything other than the next play. I think that will make a big difference.”

Defensively the RedHawks will be very young, but will have one of college football’s most experienced and successful defensive coordinators, Carl Reese, calling the shots. Reese was Mack Brown’s defensive coordinator at the University of Texas from 1998-2003, where his attacking defense led the nation in total defense in 2001. Prior to his tenure at Texas Reese was the defensive coordinator at LSU.

“It all starts with the leadership on the team, with the coaches expecting a lot out of the guys and not letting them be comfortable with a season like that,” Gafford said. “We have guys in our locker room that want to win and are willing to work hard to change the direction of the program.”

“I want to be a relentless team, and that means working hard every day. Every play you have to want to beat the guy across from you. You have to show up every day, day after day after day, working as hard as we can to change this program.”