ESPN college basketball columnist Pat Forde recently took a few heavy-handed shots at the Mid-American Conference in his weekly column (I guess you could call it a column. As usual it is a long, incoherent assortment of pointless ramblings concerning NCAA basketball. Forde must be responsible for a certain number of words each week, so he throws a bunch of speculative drivel in, seemingly to add to the column's length).

It's quite obvious Forde has nary a clue about Mid-American Conference basketball. The whole gist of his MAC analysis is that the conference is weak for some reason, and he doesn't see it getting better any time soon. What stunning insight.

Let's take a look at what ESPN paid Forde to write, shall we?

The heading of the section on the MAC is "Why does this league stink?"

"Gone are the days of Antonio Gates and Kent State making it to the Elite Eight.

The MAC currently is rated the No. 18 league in the land by Jeff Sagarin's computer (and 21st in the RPI). That's a fairly precipitous fall from even the modest position the Midwestern collection of colleges once held."

This, my friends, is an example of poor sports writing. The reason many people view sports journalism right up there with the comics when it comes to writing quality. There is no

introduction to speak of, nothing to get the ready for the point of the piece. Forde just uses an example and takes off.

And what is with his example of previous MAC greatness? Forde uses Antonio Gates and the Kent State team that advanced to the Elite Eight in the 2002 NCAA Tournament. Yes, that was a solid team and Gates was a solid player, but when talking about basketball and picking examples of players from the past wouldn't it have been a lot more effective for Forde to choose a player that actually went on to success in the sport he is discussing? How about Wally Szczerbiak? Or Bonzi Wells? Ira Newble? Gates is one of the most well-known NFL players in the country. If the reader was not familiar with Gates' days as one of the best college basketball players in the nation, he or she would be immediately confused.

And what's the deal with using Jeff Sagarin and his computer as the definitive authority on college basketball? There is a whole lot more to college basketball than raw data that is fed into a computer and seeing what it spits out. If you have that much confidence in Sagarin's computer it is my contention that you probably do not know as much about college basketball as you should.

"From 2000 to '05, the MAC average was No. 11 in Sagarin's ratings. From 2006 to the present, that rank is No. 16. And this season, it's all the way down to 18 -- just behind the Summit League and just ahead of the Big West (not to be confused in the slightest with the Big East).

Sagarin does not rank a single MAC school in his top 100 -- there simply isn't a single entity in the 12-team league to get overly excited about. As recently as 2007-08, the MAC had five in the Sagarin top 100.

In 2002, Kent State (34) reached the Elite Eight with Antonio Gates playing power forward. In 1999, Miami (Ohio) (35) made the Sweet 16 behind Wally Szczerbiak. In 1990, Ball State (36) advanced to the Sweet 16, where the Cardinals nearly upset eventual national champion UNLV. The next season, Eastern Michigan (37) made it to that round.

So this is a league with some history. But it now has become a mystery."

Forde points out that the MAC is ranked behind the Horizon League by Sagarin. Sorry, I have to question this. MAC and Summit League teams have squared off eight times this season, with each conference winning four and losing four. However, the MAC's four losses were by Ohio (a 12-point loss to Summit League leader Oakland and a 10-point loss to third-place IUPUI), Toledo (a 13-point loss to fourth-place IPFW) and Central Michigan (a three-point loss to fifth-place South Dakota State...a team with a winning conference record).

The games the MAC won were Miami by a point over IUUI, Ball State with a 19-point win over Southern Utah, Western Michigan knocking off South Dakota State by three and Akron with a four-point win over Oral Roberts, the second-place team in the Horizon.

What does this mean? It tells us that the Horizon beat up on the MAC bottom-feeders while the MAC teams were able to handle the top teams in the Horizon. Maybe Sagarin's computer had a virus or something.

"Maybe the general population decline in the industrial centers of the upper Midwest has had an impact on recruiting. Maybe schools have felt the budgetary crunch of playing football at the highest classification and it has affected the basketball bottom line. Maybe there are too many aging facilities, mismanaged athletic departments and uninspiring coaches.

Whatever the root cause, MAC basketball is floundering. And there's no reason to believe that will change anytime soon."

What kind of crap is this? What does he base his speculative garbage on? Has there been a study or something that proves the decline in industrial centers has a negative impact on recruiting? If this is the case, why has Ohio State been so successful? Or Wisconsin? Purdue? Cincinnati? Pitt?

And the budget crunch line is laughable. Honestly, does Forde think Kent spends so much money on its football team that the basketball team suffers? What about Miami, the 2010 MAC champion in football...are we supposed to believe the RedHawks threw an exorbitant amount of cash at its gridders, leaving its cagers out in the cold?

In one breath Forde talks about aging facilities, in the next he talks about the athletic departments perhaps spending too much money. Talk about having your cake and eating it, too.

I especially loved the line about "uninspiring coaches." This is a league with Charlie Coles, Keith Dambrot, Reggie Witherspoon, Geno Ford, Louis Orr and a host of other colorful characters roaming the benches. Forde could not have possibly watched any MAC hoops this season because MAC coaches may be many things...but "uninspiring" is not one of them.

Finally Forde claims that MAC basketball is "floundering," and that there isn't a reason to think this is going to change. According to www.freedictionary.com, floundering is either 1. Moving or making clumsy attempts to move or regain one's balance; 2. Moving clumsily or in confusion. So what is Forde implying? Is he saying that MAC basketball teams are clumsy and confused? Or are they struggling to get their balance back?

And, finally, his assertion that the MAC will not stop "floundering" any time soon. What could he have possibly based this on? In the last couple of years a few very-touted players, guys like Zeke Marshall and Trey Zeigler that were thought of highly across the nation, decided to call MAC schools home. A lot of MAC schools are loaded with young talent...players that are contributing now while waiting for their time to take over. You know why Forde said there is "no reason to believe that this will change any time soon? Because he's not looking for one.

The Mid-American Conference is not the ACC, Big Ten or Big East...and it never will be. But MAC basketball is as strong as it has ever been. The division championship races have been exciting all season, the talent level in the conference is as strong, if not stronger, than at any time in the conference's history. The division championships are unfolding, and I expect the First Energy MAC Championship Tournament to be a barn-burner.

Maybe Forde would like to head to Cleveland to see things for himself...this way, the next time he wants to share his thoughts about the MAC, he will at least know what he's talking about.