Now that Cleveland State's dream has flamed out like Travis Hafner's shoulder after five at-bats, we can turn our attention to the most anticipated week of the year for college basketball fans in the Best Location in the Nation.

Starting Thursday, clear your schedule, put the kids to bed early, and stock up on whatever you usually stock up on before doing something awesome.

'Cause as Mark Morrison would say, it's time for the Return of the MAC.

Renewing a tradition dating back to when Miami University product Travis Prentice was the Browns' leading rusher and adorable little Eastern Michigan grad Earl Boykins came home to average 5.3 points per game for the Cavs, the Mid-American Conference will converge upon Cleveland this week for a bacchanalia of mid-major, ESPN2-caliber basketball.

Though Kent State, a good 40 miles out, is the closest member school to downtown, the MAC and Cleveland really fit each other perfectly. If the MAC were a Chicken McNugget, Cleveland would be its barbeque sauce.

While the Big Ten would hold up its unctuous, Leaders/Legends nose at the notion of considering Cleveland as its tournament host, the MAC has fully embraced Northeast Ohio like that creepy uncle at the family reunion who wears a gold chain around his neck and for some reason is always really happy to see you.

There's no better evidence for this appreciation than the MAC's season-long tagline teasing the conference tournament: "All Roads Lead to Cleveland."

Right on.

To hell with LeBron and *Forbes* magazine. These guys actually *want* to be here (or at least their marketing departments tell us they do) and they're going to fight like hell the minute they hit town.

To the MAC teams jaunting along the Ohio Turnpike or rattling up I-77 this week, Cleveland is their Emerald City. They arrive at the gates like Dorothy with nothing but a mongrel dog and a dream, knowing that this is the only place it can come true.

In addition to using C-Town as its Twister mat every March, the MAC has established its offices here – making it the first organization to actually move its center of operations to and not from Cleveland since Sterling-Lindner in 1857.

In return, Cleveland has served as a rock of stability for the MAC over these past 12 years, further boosting the conference's somewhat wavering credibility. Prior to coming to Cleveland, the MAC offices were located in somebody's cousin's basement and it held its conference tournament in Ballrooms A & B at the Marriott by the Toledo airport.

Things were even worse before that, when the MAC tournament bounced around between random cities that had nothing in common other than they had absolutely no connection to the MAC or any of its schools: Columbus, Detroit, and – dig it – Ann Arbor.

Cleveland has served as a safe, steady harbor for the MAC, which has certainly bolstered its reputation as a conference to be reckoned with in basketball (and field hockey, come to think of it) over the past decade or so.

It's a lesson many big-time programs have learned repeatedly, but every couple years in March, it comes up again: he who takes the MAC lightly does so at his peril.

We need look back only a year to the mighty Bobcats of Ohio. After putting together an improbable (borderline miraculous, really) run through the MAC tournament, the Bobcats became the lowest NCAA tournament seed from the MAC (14) ever to win a game in the big dance when they rocked third-seeded Georgetown like a hurricane, winning by a comfortable 14 points.

Of course, Portage County is still glowing from Kent State's trippy run to the elite eight in 2002. Going in as a 10 seed, the Golden Flashes stunned No. 7 Oklahoma State, No. 2 Alabama, and No. 3 Pittsburgh before falling to a hot-shooting Indiana squad in a regional final – one win short of the Final Four.

While the most appealing aspect of college basketball in March is its unpredictability, to expect any such achievements by a MAC team this year would be – ahem – ill-advised.

Like everything else associated with Cleveland, the MAC is having a down year. Four of the MAC's 12 teams have already lost 20 games, including a refreshingly horrible Toledo squad that went 1-15 in a decidedly mediocre conference and 4-27 overall.

This disappointing trend is also prevalent topside. Unfortunately, this is the first time in recent memory that the MAC has no teams that you could even attempt to argue deserve an at-large bid.

Kent State, the tournament's top seed and the only MAC team bringing 20 wins into the ruckus,

is ranked 83rd in the latest RPI – a good 40 slots below even borderline at-large territory. The next three highest are Miami (105), Akron (127), and Ohio (156). If the Golden Flashes don't end up winning it this week, we could very possibly be looking at the MAC champion being forced into playing one of those humiliating "play-in" games.

On the other hand, the good news is that no MAC teams will be forced into playing one of those humiliating "NIT" games.

But maybe this year's MAC champion can pick up the torch that Cleveland State left smoldering somewhere on the I-480 bridge and give Cleveland something to cheer about next week. Vicariously perhaps, but these days we've got to take what we can get. As does the MAC, quite frankly.

Since 1953, 64 MAC teams have played in the NCAA tournament. Twenty-one have won a game. Five have won more than one in the same appearance. Two have come within a victory of the Final Four (Yes, the '02 Flashes weren't the first: in 1964, an upstart Ohio team stunned Louisville, then fourth-ranked Kentucky, before falling to Michigan in a regional final).

No MAC team has ever been seeded higher than fifth, and that was 32 years ago. It's been 12 years since two MAC teams have made the NCAA tourney in the same year, a Halley's Comet-type phenomenon that's happened only five times. So there's still a long way to go before the MAC can take that important next step toward someday arrogantly sitting back with a cigar and a chalupa on Selection Sunday expecting seven or eight tournament bids.

Through its postseason history, the MAC has been consistently democratic. Like well-trained kindergartners, they share and take turns. Twelve different schools have represented the MAC in the NCAA tournament, but only seven times has a MAC team qualified to the tournament in back-to-back seasons (most recently, Kent State in 2001 and 2002).

Does a lack of a dynasty and perpetual parity mean the MAC is too mired in mediocrity to be taken seriously? To some extent, that's probably true. But somehow I don't think Gonzaga's dictatorial reign over the West Coast Conference does much for the overall reputation of the league.

Put it all together and you've got a virtuous conference that reflects the well-mannered Midwest and is a perfect fit for ego-less Cleveland.

So let us welcome them this week as they march hopefully into town from all across the Midwest, completing their long treks from Muncie, Indiana; DeKalb, Illinois; and Ypsilanti, Michigan. Throughout the winter, they've endured long, dark bus rides through the snow and rain and are coming from places where neither the weather nor the economy is much better than it is here.

And just like us, over the past four months, they have all embarked on long, winding journeys along their own Yellow Brick Roads, some spotted with disappointment, all filled with hope. But now their quests have reached their climax.

All of their roads led to Cleveland – the place where their dreams can come true.