CLEVELAND – Ball State played about as well as it could have played, but against the back-to-back regular season MAC Champions and No. 1 seed in the FirstEnergy MAC Basketball Tournament, sometimes it takes a little more than your best.

The fourth-seeded Cardinals shot 56 percent in the first half and first-team All-MAC forward, junior Jarrod Jones had the best game of his career against the Golden Flashes, but Kent was able to hold off numerous surges by the Cardinals en route to a 79-68 semifinals win at Quicken Loans Arena.

"I thought in the first half Ball State played at a really high level," Kent coach Geno Ford said. "We've been one of the top defensive teams in the conference all season but we couldn't seem to get them stopped. Some nights you just have to find a way to win, and that requires out-scoring the other team. I thought that's how we won. We got the lead in the first half, then in the second half both teams were able to grind a little better defensively. We just made some more plays, especially late, that were big offensively because we were starting to get some stops."

Both teams shot the lights out in the first 20 minutes of play. The Cardinals hit 14-of-25 from the floor while Kent knocked down 21-of-35 from the field. There were two lead changes and six ties in the first half, with Kent's largest lead at 10 points and Ball State's just one, 30-29, at the

9:15 mark after Jauwan Scaife knocked down a 3-pointer.

Jones and Kent power forward Justin Greene had a classic battle down low all game, and in the first half Greene, the 2010-11 MAC Player of the Year, had a slight edge, scoring 14 points and snaring six rebounds in 16 minutes of action to Jones' 10 points and three rebounds in 14 minutes.

Kent led 48-43 at the half, and Green vs. Jones would heat up even more in the final 20 minutes.

The Cardinals played level with Kent for the first 10 minutes of the second half, and even pulled to within one point when Randy Davis stole an errant Kent pass and went coast-to-coast for an uncontested lay-up. But even with multiple chances to tie or take the lead down the stretch, Ball State could not get over the hump. At the 6:18 mark with Kent clinging to a 62-61 lead, Michael Porrini made a game-changing play for the Flashes. He drove across the top of the key and fired a no-look left-handed pass to Rodriquez Sherman, who had snuck uncovered along the baseline. Sherman flipped the ball in off the glass to increase Kent's lead to three at 64-61.

Jones would pull BSU back to within a basket at 65-63 with 4:34 remaining in regulation, but Kent would close the game out on a 14-5 run.

Jones got the better of Greene in the second half, scoring 12 points and pulling down eight rebounds in the final 20 minutes compared to Greene's six and six, but Greene finished with his 13th career double-double (20 points and 12 rebounds) and fifth in a row.

"It was a battle. He's first-team all-conference, he's a good player," Greene said of Jones. "I just tried to match his intensity and help my team get a win. He didn't have a real good game the first time we played, so I knew he was going to come out firing. And he did. He hit a few jump shots and got to the basket a few times. I just wanted to contain him because he's a good scorer."

Porrini also had a huge night for Kent, scoring 15 points, grabbing nine rebounds and handing

out eight assists. In Kent's two games at Quicken Loans Arena in the tournament, Porrini has scored 28 points, snared 19 rebounds, assisted on 15 baskets, collected six steals and blocked a shot.

"(Porrini) is probably the best competitor that I've ever coached," Ford said. "He competes in practice. When he goes to walk-through it goes up a couple of notches. That's Mike, he doesn't do anything half-speed. Sometimes, earlier in the year, he had to learn when to put the foot on the gas pedal and when to ease off. But he's an attack guy. He comes at you and doesn't take days off. He doesn't take plays off. Some nights he's better than others, but it's never for a lack of intensity or mental concentration."

For Porrini, the only numbers that really matter are the ones on the scoreboard when the final horn sounds.

"I'm just out there playing basketball like the rest of my team," he said. "We all want to win; no one wants to go home. In the tournament we feel we had two steps in the way. Now we have one more with Akron (Saturday), so no matter what I have to do, no matter what my players have to do...regardless. It's win or go home.

"We gotta step up, we gotta play the best that we can and the best that we've played all year."

The Flashes and Zips have split their two meetings this season, with both teams winning at home.

"It's going to be a big challenge. In the end they know us, we know them. We just played them last Friday," Ford said of meeting the Zips with the tournament championship on the line. "I could have Rod Sherman do the scouting report tomorrow and there's no reason to coach pregame. One of us will play well, and whoever it is will be jumping around with a banner at the end and the other team will be miserable."

Sherman added 13 points for Kent (23-10) while Carlton Guyton chipped in 12 and Justin Manns 10 with eight rebounds. Overall Kent out-rebounded Ball State 40-22, with 15 of those

rebounds coming on the offensive end.

Jones finished the game with 22 points and 11 rebounds while Jesse Berry scored 14 for Ball State (19-13). Davis added 11.