If you enjoyed the 2010-11 MAC Basketball season, get ready for the sequel. Many of the main characters will be the same and, like Godfather II, the second installment has a great chance to be better than the original.

Perhaps no conference in the country has as much returning talent as the Mid-American Conference. Seven of the top 10 scorers from last season are back, eight of the top 10 rebounders, nine of the top 10 assist men, seven of the top 10 3-point shooters and eight of the top 10 shot blockers from the 2010-11 season are back this season.

The reigning MAC Player of the Year, Justin Greene, and the MAC Defensive Player of the Year, Michael Porrini, return to the defending regular season champion Kent State Golden Flashes. Four of the five players named to the All-MAC First Team are returning to action this season, two of the second-teamers and an astounding nine of 10 All-MAC Honorable Mention honorees.

"You look around the conference and there are a lot of really good players coming back," Buffalo coach Reggie Witherspoon, who received a contract extension during the off-season, said of the MAC. "I think all up and down, one through 12, it's kind of scary to see guys that had really good seasons are back, yet I think it's really, really good for our conference."

Ohio University coach John Groce, who has 11 of 14 players returning this season, thinks the returning experience across the conference will make for an interesting race in the standings.

"The biggest thing you look at, when you look at the rosters and the experience coming back, it's not even close that this is the best that the league's been since I've been here," he said. "I'm starting my fourth year and in terms of the players in the league, a lot of them are older guys. There's a lot of teams that started practice on Oct. 14 thinking they have as good a chance as anybody. That's one of the beauties of the MAC, there's a lot of parity. We've got several teams that are really good basketball teams, and it should be another interesting year for sure."

Defending regular season champion Kent State, who lost just one senior from a talent-laden roster, was picked to win the MAC East and the First Energy MAC Tournament by the 24-member MAC News Panel earlier this month, but Kent's division will be brutal as usual. The Golden Flashes had 132 points and 16 first place votes in the preseason poll, followed by defending First Energy MAC Tournament champion Akron with 104 points and eight first place votes. They are followed by Ohio University (94 points), Miami (80 points), Buffalo (62 points) and Bowling Green (32 points).

With a dominant frontcourt of Flenard Whitfield and Demetrius Ward, the Western Michigan Broncos were picked by the MAC media to capture the West title. The Broncos return all five starters from the team that went 21-13 and won the West last season under coach Steve Hawkins. WMU will miss key reserve Juwon Howard Jr., who transferred to Detroit Mercy during the off-season, but the Broncos have plenty of firepower on the bench, even with Howard leaving to join former Ball State coach Ray McCallum in Detroit.

In the poll the Broncos received 128 total points and 14 first place votes. Ball State was second in the voting with 111 points and nine first place tallies while Central Michigan (91 points, one first place vote), Toledo (76 points), Northern Illinois (59 points) and Eastern Michigan (38 points) rounded out the West.

Kent State University (25-12 overall, 12-4 MAC last season, 1st in MAC East)

The more things change, the more they stay the same on the tree-lined campus of Kent State. After the 2001 season head coach Gary Waters left Kent to take over at Rutgers, earning a significant pay raise. Stan Heath then hit the lottery, taking Watters' recruits to the Elite Eight in the 2002 NCAA Tournament and parlaying that into the head job at Arkansas, earning a significant pay raise. Next came Jim Christian, who made 20-win seasons commonplace at

Kent. Christian built on the program Watters built and ended up with the head coaching job at Texas Christian, with a significant pay raise. Finally Geno Ford, the former Ohio University point guard and member of Christian's coaching staff that took over for Christian and, a couple of years later, got the call from Bradley. Ford accepted the job with the Braves, earning a significant pay raise.

Either Kent State does not pay its head basketball coaches nearly enough or the University has accepted its role as a springboard for head coaches with higher aspirations. Regardless of the coaching turnover, Kent has turned into one of the premiere "mid-major" basketball programs in the country. This year it is Rob Senderoff's turn as he was an internal promotion off Ford's staff after Ford's contentious departure for Bradley of the Missouri Valley Conference.

Senderoff is stepping into an ideal position. He is familiar with every player on the Golden Flashes' roster, having played a part in the recruiting of a number of them. He is inheriting a battle-tested team loaded with experience that also knows how to win big games. In fact, only Rod Sherman, a 6-3 guard that averaged 12.6 points and 3.8 rebounds per game, is gone from last season's team that made a deep run in the NIT Tournament.

Senior power forward Justin Greene was the 2010-11 MAC Player of the Year and favored to earn the proved unstoppable at times down the stretch. Greene did not have a strong NIT Tournament, however, and worked on conditioning during the off-season.

He will be joined by returning starters Michael Porrini (6-2 Sr. G) who scored 10.1 points and handing out 4.3 assists per game last year while also earning MAC Defensive Player of the Year honors, Randal Holt (6-1 Jr. G), one of the top perimeter threats in the conference that knocked down 66 3-pointers last season, and 6-11 Sr. center Justin Manns, an athletic shot-blocker who was prone to foul trouble last season, in the starting line-up.

Top reserves Carlton Guyton (6-4 Sr. SG), Eric Gaines (6-4 So. G), Robert Johnson (6-6 So. F) and Mark Henninger (6-8 So. F) all saw plenty of minutes last season and will give Senderoff plenty of weapons off the bench.

JUCO First Team All-American Chris Evans, a 6-7 Jr. forward, averaged 19.5 points and 8.2 rebounds per game last season while leading Wabash Valley (Ill.) to the national junior college

tournament, will compete for a spot in the starting line-up while Rutgers transfer Patrick Jackson, a 6-6 forward, will add some punch up front.

The Golden Flashes are poised to compete for the MAC championship and automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament this season, but Senderoff knows he has to keep his players in the moment.

"This team is 0-0. This team hasn't done anything," Senderoff said. "Our field goal percentage and defense now is non-existent because we haven't played anybody. All those individual awards those guys got from last year, nobody's giving them to them right now. Unless everybody in the league is willing to just give us the trophy I think we still gotta play all these games.

"I don't think it's necessarily where we'll improve from last year, but if we can replicate last year. Can we lead the league in defensive field goal percentage? Can we lead it in 3-point defensive percentage? Can we rebound well? I don't know where those things are going to come from. That's the challenge."

It should also be noted that last season, despite claiming the No. 1 seed in the First Energy MAC Tournament, the Golden Flashes fell to Akron in overtime in the title game. Senderoff knows that preseason No. 1 puts a bullseye on his team as well.

"I don't think that really matters all that much. It's complimentary to our team and our players and our staff, but I've been an assistant in the league long enough to know it doesn't matter where you're picked in this conference," he said of being picked to win the conference in the preseason poll. "The league is really, really good and I think there could be an argument for any of the teams on our side (the East) being picked in any order. At the end of the year we're hoping to be at the top of the league, that's our goal, but I have a feeling Coach Orr, Coach Dambrot, John(Groce) and Reggie (Witherspoon) ... they all have a feeling they can win the league. And I think everybody has a legitimate chance."

The Golden Flashes have a challenging schedule, but not nearly as challenging as in recent years when they have travelled to Duke and Kansas. Kent faces non-conference road tests at West Virginia (Nov. 15), James Madison (Dec. 6) and Utah State (Dec. 22) before kicking off conference play by playing five of its first eight conference games on the road...including a trip

to James A. Rhodes Arena in Akron on Jan. 21.

Senderoff and his team are ready to go.

"We're ready to play some games, I know I am," he said. "We're a little tired of playing against each other every day. We're looking forward to next Monday when we play Rochester in our exhibition game, then the week after that when we play West Virginia. I know we have a lot of work to do, but our kids are tired of playing against each other.

"The biggest challenge for me is getting our players to understand that this is a new season, that what we did last year is really absolutely meaningless in terms of whether or not we're going to be successful this year."