The University of Akron (23-13 overall, 9-7 in MAC last season, 3rd in MAC East, First Energy MAC Tournament Champions)

Akron coach Keith Dambrot has to be thrilled with how this off-season has shaped up. With all the adulation and attention rival Kent State has received, it seems like no one is talking about the team that knocked the Golden Flashes off in the MAC Tournament championship game last season...Dambrot's Akron Zips.

Though Akron lost its starting backcourt of Steve McNess and Darryl Roberts to graduation, Dambrot has plenty of horses back in the fold, as well as point guard Alex Abreau who showed a great deal of promise running the point during the Zips' MAC Tournament run.

The backcourt will have to work itself out, but the frontcourt for Akron could be the best in the conference.

Zeke Marshall came to Akron as one of the most highly-touted recruits in MAC history. The seven-footer came into his own last season, capping a strong sophomore year by blocking nine shots in the MAC Tournament championship game against Kent. Marshall is a wiry 218 pounds and needs to add some bulk to play at the next level, but he is physical enough to deal with most centers in the conference. He led the conference in blocks at 2.56 per game while shooting over 50 percent from the floor (50.4).

Marshall will be joined up front by Brett McClanahan, a 6-4 combo guard/forward that connected on 81 3-pointers last season and Nikola Cvetinovic, a second-team All-MAC performer last season who scored 11.7 points and grabbed 6.9 rebounds per game last season.

Quincy Diggs, a 6-6 junior forward, could see some time in the starting lineup as well, but he is an emotional player that sometimes lets his feelings get the better of him on the court. If Diggs can keep his composure he could be one of the bigger surprises in the conference. If he can't he could become a distraction.

Dambrot is content with his returning players, but admits his Zips are not as blessed with returnees as some of the other teams in the East.

"We have some experience in our program so I don't want to cry the blues, but we have less back than most people have back," Dambrot said. "I have a whole lot of respect for our division, and the other half is going to be better also. Western Michigan and Ball State have a lot of players back, Central Michigan has a great player back and there are a lot of great players in this league this year."

In the seven years he has been at Akron, Dambrot's Zips have played a similar style of basketball. They have typically worked the ball inside and kicked the ball out to their shooters when the defense collapsed. This year Dambrot, with the talent he has on his squad, knows he might have to change things up.

"We've always been one of the leading 3-point shooting teams in the league and have shot a lot of 3-pointers. That isn't necessarily our focus," he said. "We've always been an inside-out team since I've been here. It just so happens that we've had a lot of good shooters around those inside players.

"The biggest thing for us is finding our niche. There are very few teams in the country that can recruit to their style of play, and what we try to do is get the best players we can and try to build our team around them. We're probably a little different than we've ever been, we're probably a little more athletic and probably not quite as tough right now. We're not as intelligent as we've been, but I think we can improve our toughness and intelligence as we go. Until then we have to rely on our athletic ability."