Ohio University (19-16 overall, 9-7 in MAC last season, 4th in the MAC East)

While returning talent is a theme in the Mid-American Conference this season, no other coach has as much back as Ohio University's Jim Groce. Groce welcomes back 11 of his 14 lettermen from last season, including all-conference point guard D.J. Cooper, a 5-11 speedster that has shown the ability to take over games during his two seasons in Athens.

Cooper finished last season fifth in the conference in scoring at 15.8 points per game, first in assists at 7.51 per contest, second in steals (2.31 per game), second in assist/turnover ratio (2.14) and second in minutes per game (35.66).

Cooper's running mate and go-to guy the last two seasons, sharpshooting 6-5 forward Tommy Freeman (99 3-pointers made last season) was lost to graduation, however, meaning Groce will be looking for someone to step in to fill that scoring void this year. He has a number of talented shooters to choose from, including Ohio State transfer Walter Offutt and St. Louis transfer Jon Smith.

"What I don't want to do is throw him out there to the wolves because he hasn't played in two or three years," Groce said of Offutt, who has not played since 2009. "Timing and conditioning, all those things are a factor and I'm going to be very patient with him."

The Bobcats led the conference in scoring offense last season at 74.4 points per game and will

look to push the ball and play up-tempo again this season. Groce is not worried about scoring points, he has other things on his mind.

"We have gotten better. I'm really excited about that in terms of when we started practice until now. From October 14 to November 2 I think we've gotten a lot better, especially defensively and rebounding," Groce said. "That's kind of been our battle cry, I just didn't think we were good enough there last year to be honest. The two transfers that sat out last year, Smith and Offett, have really helped us in that regard. I think our older guys have worked very hard in the off-season to become better players in different ways."

Along with Freeman, Groce lost 6-8 banger DeVaughn Washington to graduation as well. Washington was the Bobcats' best post defender and a solid rebounder. Groce thinks his team's athletic ability will help fill the void lost by Freeman and Washington's departure.

"I had a couple of coaches come in to watch practice, high school coaches, and they said 'My gosh are you guys athletic.' These coaches had been travelling all around watching some college practices and they couldn't believe how athletic we were," Groce said. "Obviously we're going to miss DeVaughn's experience, his toughness and his tenacity. We've got a kid, John Smith from Grove City, that's probably longer than Devon...and more explosive in terms of lift. Tommy Freeman, we're going to miss him and his 3-point shooting, but we replace him with Walter Offett, who's a really good athlete."

Even though he has a talented roster loaded with experience, Groce knows it will take more than just experience to compete in the conference this season.

"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," Groce 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."