University of Buffalo (20-14 overall, 8-8 in MAC, 5th in the East last season

The media panel that covers the Mid-American Conference picked Buffalo to finish fifth in the MAC East this season. If they would have picked them to finish first it would have been equally as justified.

Bulls coach Reggie Witherspoon, who was given a multi-year contract extension during the off-season, returns as much, if not more, talent than any other team in the conference. Four senior starters are back, and conference Player of the Year candidate Javon McCrea, a sophomore, will be looking to build on a steller freshman campaign that saw him lead the conference in field goal percentage (63.1) while scoring 11.8 points and snaring 6.5 rebounds in just 21.6 minutes per game.

McCrea will be joined in the starting lineup by senior guard Zach Filzen (15.1 ppg, 110 3-pointers last season), senior combo guard Dave Barnett (6.6 ppg, 4.7 rpg), 6-10 senior forward Mitchell Watt (8.0 ppg, 5.3 rpg, 2.2 bpg) and senior forward Titus Robinson (4.9 ppg, 2.3 rpg).

Witherspoon also landed the top recruit in the conference, Parade All-American Xavier Ford, a 6-8 forward from Hamilton High School in Colorado Springs who averaged 27.4 points and 9.7 rebounds during his senior season in high school.

The frontcourt duo of Ford and McCrea will give other MAC coaches headaches in the very near future, but this season is all about McCrea taking the next step. He was the last from the USA Basketball U-19 team this summer and gained valuable experience during the tryout process. Witherspoon thinks McCrea is ready for a breakout campaign.

"He had an interesting summer. I think the first summer after the freshman year is big for most because they kind of know what they're doing and why they're doing it. On top of that he spent some time with USA Basketball trying out," Witherspoon said. "He had an excellent tryout, a really, really good tryout and got down to 13 (players). Initially they thought they would release eight guys, but they had an injury and wanted to keep a guard in case the other one didn't come back and Javon ended up being the last guy cut. But I think it was a great experience for him and gave him a little more focus."

When he was not with USA Basketball, McCrea spent plenty of time in the gym ... both lifting and shooting.

"(Javon) is stronger. He spent the entire summer here lifting, and that wasn't absolutely necessary because when he came here he was a big, strong guy. He's genetically blessed with that, but he has gotten stronger and his endurance has gotten better," Witherspoon said. "And the biggest thing is that he's a better shooter. He's able to face the basket now and isn't a reluctant shooter. He's stepping out and shooting the basketball, and that's something he needed to work on."

The Bulls have a challenging non-conference schedule, making road trips to Princeton (11/19), Brigham Young (12/20) and Temple (12/28) before opening conference play at home against Kent State on January 7.