Akron basketball coach Keith Dambrot knows he cannot count on his Zips winning the MAC Tournament Championship every season. He also knows the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee rarely awards mid-major conferences with at-large bids, so the only surefire route to the Big Dance is to win the tourney.

Unless you go another route.

This season Dambrot drastically improved the level of competition his Zips will face during their non-conference schedule. It all started Nov. 9 with a trip to Starkville, Mississippi where the Zips squared off with Mississippi State out of the Southeastern Conference. Also in the Zips near future are road games with Valparaiso (Horizon League), West Virginia (Big East) and Middle Tennessee (Sun Belt) along with home contests with Duquesne (Atlantic 10) and Detroit Mercy (Horizon League).

The line of thought being if Dambrot's Zips can pull off an upset or two against a few of these perennial NCAA Tournament participants, maybe Akron can get an at-large invite if they have an off-night during the MAC Tournament.

The plan is moving along nicely.

The Zips steamrolled Mississippi State last night, dominating both ends of the floor and looking very much like a team that deserves national recognition in their 68-58 win over the Bulldogs. Quincy Diggs scored a game-high 19 points and Zeke Marshall, Akron's seven-foot center, blocked five shots and altered numerous others as the Zips took a 12-point lead midway through the second half and answered everything the Bulldogs threw at them the rest of the way.

This was the first game of the Mid-American Conference season, and I kept a running diary during the contest. Here are some random thoughts I jotted down while watching this upset unfold.

- Akron is aggressive on the offensive boards early, grabbing two offensive rebounds during their first position...Zeke Marshall, however, looks like a stick figure next to Renardo Sidney. Sidney is listed at 285 pounds...he weighs at least 15 pounds more than that.

- Diggs looks really good tonight, attacking the basket. If he can keep away from the silly fouls and also keep his temper in check he could have a monster year. Kid is 6-6 and handles the ball like a point guard. He also jumps out of the gym.

- Marshall just hit a 15-footer about five minutes into the game. If he can consistently hit that shot this season the rest of the league is in trouble. I remember how lost he looked as a freshman...looked like a clumsy kid that was completely over his head. The first time I saw him play I was thinking "This is the highest-rated recruit in MAC history? Seriously?" But he has gotten a lot stronger and has grown into his body. There is no doubt Marshall can play defense at the next level. He should be shooting about 10,000 mid-range jumpers a day. Either way, Mr. Marshall is going to get paid when his college days are over (granted they ever solve this stupid lockout).

- Alex Abreau, Akron's sophomore point guard, looks like the quickest player on the floor and it isn't even close. Mississippi State's Dee Bost was supposed to be one of the top point guards in

the country and Abreau is blowing by him like he's standing still. He had a really good MAC Tournament last season and I think it gave him a lot of confidence. He played like a freshman more often than not last season, but looks in control this year. And, of course, I write that and he immediately throws a dumb pass.

- Is anyone else tired of Brian Wilson? The guy grows a beard and acts like a nutjob during that Showtime series on the San Francisco Giants, now he is in all these commercials like he's some kind of a superstar. Seriously, he's dressed up like Larry Bird in the NBA 2K12 commercial and looks like a total idiot. First Taco Bell, now NBA 2K12? Go away already.

- The crawl at the bottom of the screen on ESPNU keeps repeating the Joe Paterno news. They are just going to fire him...do they really have a choice (they later did fire him). Kind of makes the Jim Tressel "scandal" look pretty silly, doesn't it?

- Imagine that...Nick Harney (a Benedictine kid) steps off the bench and gets a nice pass from Abreau and takes it in for a lefty layup and gets fouled. Hadn't even broken a sweat and on the floor, the first appearance in his Zips career (he sat out all last season because of academics) and scores within five seconds. That had to feel good for him. I'm happy for the kid.

- Mississippi State looks afraid to take the ball into the paint when Marshall is in the game. Lindy's basketball preview claimed Sidney is an all-American candidate and will be bolting for the NBA after this season. Uhhh, not if he's afraid of Zeke Marshall. He should be backing Marshall, who weighs about as much as a shooting guard, down to the basket and either powering over him or powering through him. NBA prospects don't back down from other players like this.

- Halftime. Akron is shooting 52 percent and Mississippi State 33 percent. Akron has 13 points off turnovers and Mississippi State has two. Akron is playing like it expects to win and Mississippi State is playing like it is afraid to lose. Zips up eight at the half.

- MSU made a little run early in the second half and cut it to four, but that was about it. The last 10 minutes or so proved either Akron is very good or MSU is in serious trouble in the SEC. Or both. Zips up 10 with 6:42 left.

- Uh oh. 3:17 left, Marshall just fouled out and the Bulldogs cut the Akron lead to six at 62-56. We'll see what the Zips are made of now.

- Akron weathered the storm it looks like. Just over two minutes left and they seem to have the game under control.

- HUGE moment in the game. MSU, down six, played strong defense and forced a jump ball...getting the ball back because they had the arrow. Bost missed an open 3-pointer, then Diggs scored at the other end. He then drew an offensive foul on Bost with 1:29 left to get Akron the ball back, up 64-56.

- Ballgame. Hood hit a jumper for the Bulldogs, but a pair of free throws by Diggs and a basket by Nik Cvetinovic put the game away. Final: 68-58.

This game wasn't a fluke...Akron was the better team tonight and, actually, are a better basketball team overall. The Zips have loads of experience, good size and know how to close out games. Kent State was picked to win the East, but it is going to be a battle. Akron is an exceptional basketball team that already has a signature win.

Well-played, Dambrot. Well-played.