Kent State won its 31st consecutive game against a MAC West opponent and secured a place in the First Energy MAC Tournament semifinals, but its 76-72 victory over Western Michigan was far from routine.

The Golden Flashes almost blew a 19-point second-half lead, failing to convert from the free-throw line time after time late in the game before senior forward Justin Greene put the game away with a late charity toss that ended the Broncos' comeback hopes.

Midway through the second half it looked like Kent had things well in hand. After a 10-0 Golden Flashes run during which WMU lost its starting center to a level-two flagrant foul, Kent enjoyed a 68-49 cushion. Matt Stainbrook, the Broncos' 6-foot-9, 290-pound sophomore center, was fighting for a rebound when he made what the officials deemed a "non-basketball" action, popping Kent State's Michael Porrini in the head. After consulting the instant replay of the incident, the officials made the flagrant-two call and ejected Stainbrook from the game.

This happened after Kent's Randall Hold scored a driving lay-up to give the Golden Flashes a 60-49 lead. Kent was awarded two free-throws, which Porrini cashed in, and possession of the ball. Porrini hit a short jumper off the inbounds play to give Kent a 64-49 lead. Chris Evans then

slammed home an offensive rebound before Greene hit a twisting jumper in the low post to give Kent its biggest lead of the game at 68-48.

No Stainbrook and a 19-point deficit? No problem for the Broncos.

Brandon Pokely sparked a 15-2 WMU run with a 3-pointer from the left baseline. Over the next 3:30 of playing time Porrini's short scoop-shot accounted for Kent's only scoring while the Broncos were shooting their way back into the game.

Nate Hutchison scored five quick points while Andre Ward added five of his own during the Western run, drawing the Broncos within six points at 70-64 with 4:27 remaining in the game. Kent then missed seven of 11 free-throws down the stretch to let the Broncos make it close.

In fact, Western was able to make it a one-possession game when senior guard Mike Douglas hit a 3-pointer with eight seconds remaining.

Greene, who was fouled with 6.5 remaining, was able to hit one of two free-throws after being fouled on the ensuing possession to seal the win for Kent, who now gets a chance at redemption against an Akron team that beat it by a point in overtime in last season's title game and swept them during this regular season.

"We're happy to be able to move on and get to the next round," Kent coach Rob Senderoff said. "We have a tendency to make things very difficult for ourselves and, like always, we did that again tonight."

The Golden Flashes blew a big lead at the end of the first half as well. Leading 35-23 with 2:56 remaining in the first half, Kent watched WMU end the half on a 7-0 run to move within five points at intermission.

"I probably screwed up at the end of the first half," Senderoff admitted. "We were up 12 and

playing really well, and I was just trying to get to halftime with a lead and sort of took the air out of the ball. They came back in the game and made it five. To come out in the second half the way they did, they deserve a ton of credit for that."

Kent, the fourth seed in the tournament, will now get what Porrini said he wanted...another shot at the Zips. Following Kent's regular season loss to Akron last week, Porrini said, though he knew they would have a quarterfinal game Thursday, he looked forward to Friday's semifinal match-up with the Zips.

"Not just myself, but our whole team, coaching staff and university...we're all excited Porrini said about playing Akron. "We felt that both times this year, we blew both games. We didn't look past Western Michigan, but we knew in the back of our minds we would get them again. Now we have that chance (tonight). It's going to be a good one, I know my boys will be ready, our coaching staff will have us ready and we're going to try to come out of there with a win and get to the championship game on Saturday."

Greene paced Kent State (21-10) with 23 points and nine rebounds. He also scored his 1,500th career point and grabbed his 800th career rebound in the contest. Chris Evans added 13 points on five-of-seven shooting for the Golden Flashes while Randall Hold connected on three-of-six 3-pointers on the way to 13 points.

Ward paced the Broncos (14-20) with 16 points in 33 minutes while Douglas added 11 points and eight assists.

"This is a tough one to take," WMU coach Steve Hawkins said. "We dug ourselves a huge hole, and that pretty much epitomized the year. We did not make things easy on us, but the effort was there. We came back from 19 down and got ourselves back into a one-possession game. But it was not enough and a little too late."