Ohio University shot the lights out in the first half. In the second, Buffalo almost turned out the lights on the Bobcats' season.

OU hit 10 3-pointers in the first 20 minutes of the contest and extended out to a 15-point lead early in the second half, then fought off a career night from Mid-American Conference Player of the Year Mitchell Watt to hold on for a 77-74 victory in the semifinals of the First Energy MAC Tournament at Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland.

The third-seeded Bobcats will square off with top seeded Akron in tonight's championship game with an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament on the line.

First Team All-MAC performer D.J. Cooper led the Bobcats with 18 points and nine assists. He connected on five-of-nine 3-pointers in the first half ... many of them from nearly 10 feet beyond the 3-point arc.

"I trust him a great deal," Ohio coach John Groce said of Cooper. "Some of those shots were not the greatest shots in the world, but I had the chance to listen to Doc Rivers at a Doc Rivers clinic and he said if he had to do it over again he would give his best players more leeway. I was cringing on a couple of those, but he's the type of player that likes to go for the jugular. He made some big ones and got us off to a great start."

The Bulls spent most of the second half trying to whittle away Ohio's lead, and actually made it a one-possession game when Jarod Oldham hit a spinning jumper off the window with 37

seconds remaining in the contest to make the score 77-74.

After a questionable intentional foul call on Zach Filzen, Reggie Keely missed a pair of free throws that would have put the Bobcats up by more than one possession. OU retained possession and Buffalo was forced to foul again, sending T.J. Hall to the line for a one-and-one.

Hall missed the front end with 21.8 seconds left, giving Buffalo a chance. First Watt missed a 3-point attempt from the left wing, then Filzen, who grabbed Watt's miss, missed a triple from the right wing.

Jon Smith pulled down the rebound for Ohio and was immediately fouled with 2.8 seconds left. Like Hall, Smith also missed the front end of a one-and-one situation. Oldham scooped up the rebound for the Bulls, dribbled to mid-court and let fire in a bid to tie the game. The shot was on line, but a touch too strong. It bounced off the back of the rim as the final horn sounded.

After a strong night in the quarterfinals, Keely led the Bobcats' bench in scoring with 14 points and seven rebounds in 19 minutes. The Ohio bench out-scored the Buffalo bench 27-13.

"He's had two really good games in the tournament," Groce said of Keely. "He was really good (against Toledo), in 20 minutes he had 13 (points) and six (rebounds). He was efficient and, my gosh, he was tough. He was really tough. Our juniors stepped up and I decided to ride with those four kids with Keely, (Ivo) Baltic, Cooper and (Walter) Offutt and it paid off for us."

Watt scored a career-high 32 points and grabbed a game-high 11 rebounds to lead Buffalo. Sophomore forward Javon McCrea was the only other Buffalo player that scored in double-figures, netting 12 points.

Ohio will now face Akron in the championship game tonight. The teams split a pair of regular season meetings in 2011-12, with each team winning on its home floor. The Zips won 68-63 in Akron on Jan. 14 while Ohio led by as many as 30 points in the second half in its 85-61 win over Akron at the Convocation Center in Athens on Feb. 25.

"The biggest thing when you play them is you have to rebound the ball and you've got to do a good job of limiting paint points," Groce said of locking horns with the Zips. "They're terrific from down there. You look at the stat sheet, what they shoot from three (point range), and they don't do it on a lot of attempts. They take great ones. They are well-coached and they take care of the ball. One of the reasons they shoot the ball well is not only do they have great shooters, they take good ones. And they play off that paint attack. So I think it starts with rebounds and the ability to protect the paint."

The game will tip off at 8 p.m. tonight at Quicken Loans Arena.