This writer is not ashamed to admit something that will probably draw a bit of scorn and ridicule...I love the First Energy Mid-American MAC Championship Tournament.

In fact, I love MAC basketball, period.

The Mid-American Conference, in my eyes, has been underrated for years. Though it does not have the plethora of future NBA Lottery Picks like the ACC, or the deeply ingrained regional rivalries like the aforementioned ACC or Big Ten, there is something special going on in the MAC that a lot of people are missing.

While the so-called power conferences have the distinct edge in talent, there is something special about how programs are built and grow together in the MAC. Look at a program like Kentucky in the SEC...this has become a whistle stop for NBA prospects that have to put in one year of college ball before they can declare for the NBA Draft.

Kentucky coach John Calipari does not build a program, he provides a temporary stopover for NBA-bound kids who have no interest in going to class or enjoying the college experience.

The MAC is different. Take Ohio University, for instance. The Bobcats have a junior class of players that are in their third year of growing together. Though he was a talented freshman, Bobcats' point guard D.J. Cooper is worlds better now than he was two seasons ago. Where, after the 2009-10 season Cooper was too small and raw to play at the next level, he has turned himself into a legitimate NBA prospect that, after his senior season, will probably hear his name called on draft day.

Then there are the players like Western Michigan's Flenard Whitfield and Kent State's Michael Porrini. Whitfield recently played his final college game, a MAC quarterfinals loss to Kent. After the game, Golden Flashes forward Justin Greene sought Whitfield out and the two exchanged a long hug on the court. It was two players who have done battle for four seasons showing each other a bit of respect and telling each other how much they enjoyed competing against each other.

Porrini, following Kent's loss to Akron, was very emotional. He had earlier guaranteed his team would not lose to Akron for a third time this season. They did, and after the game the Akron players showed how much class and mutual respect exists in the MAC. Kent-Akron is probably the best rivalry the MAC has to offer and there is no love lost between the schools. But following the game Akron players sought out Porrini...not to gloat, but to console a kid that had earned their respect through four years of playing all-out basketball with heart and intensity.

The Zips players told Porrini not to hang his head, to be proud, and that they will miss competing against him.

The MAC is full of programs with similar players and comparable talent levels. The "on any given night" saying is especially true when talking about MAC teams, as evidence by Northern Illinois (a team with four wins all season) knocking off MAC-West regular season champion Eastern Michigan in the first round of the tournament to earn a trip to Cleveland. Ohio won the tournament, but any one of the eight teams that made it to Cleveland could have ended up winning the championship and the automatic bid to the Big Dance.

There is something special about watching kids compete when they have been knocking heads for multiple seasons. You really don't get that consistently in the so-called "power conferences" because quite a few of the top players tend to stick around only for one or two seasons. The natural rivalries don't develop nearly as much as they do in the MAC.

One more thing. If you buy a ticket to the First Energy MAC Tournament and go to all four days you get to see quite a few incredible basketball players. Toledo guard Rian Pearson is one of the best young players in the college game. At 6-foot-4 he can handle the ball like a point guard, can shoot the lights out and rebounds like an animal. In Toldeo's quarterfinal game against Central Michigan, Pearson took over...ending with 20 points and 15 rebounds.

Cooper is in a class of his own. He has seemingly unlimited shooting range and his quickness and ball-handling ability is among the best in the country. Cooper is worth the price of admission on his own.

Kent's Justin Greene was the Antawn Jamison of the MAC. His endless array of awkward shots, as well as his willingness to stick his nose in the fray to rebound with players much bigger than him, makes him someone you have to keep your eye on when he's on the court.

Though seven-footer Zeke Marshall gets most of the publicity for Akron, point guard Alex Abreau and sixth man Quincy Diggs are amazing players. Abreau looks like he should be delivering pizzas...he's short, a little chubby and not very athletic. But he makes play after play when the Zips need something to happen. Diggs could be starting at virtually any school in the country, Big Ten and ACC schools included. He is a pure athlete that can take over a game at either end. There was a moment in the championship game when Diggs ended up switching defensively and ended up guarding Cooper. Cooper tried to shake him, but Diggs was on him like a cheap suit and forced Cooper to give the ball up.

Javon McCrea and Mitchell Watt at Buffalo, Julian Mavunga at Miami, Trey Zeigler at Central Michigan, Mike Douglas at Western Michigan...there is a long list of incredible players who make the MAC an entertaining league to watch. The talent is probably a lot better than you think.

Finally, a few words about Miami coach Charlie Coles. Coles announced his retirement following the end of his RedHawks' season. I am going to miss him a great deal, as will anyone else that covers the MAC. Charlie is one of those guys that lacks the ability to BS you. He tells the truth regardless of the ramifications, and usually makes you laugh in the process. Coles is one of the genuinely great guys in college basketball and his press conferences could be as entertaining as the game he was talking about.

To wit, after John Wall hit a last-second shot for Kentucky to beat Miami in the final seconds a few years ago. Coles was asked how the game got away from him...and his answer was classic. For your entertainment: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnilJdwyPRs.

Coles has always been one of those guys you can tell is doing what he loves, that he is exactly where he wants to be. This year has been a nightmare for Miami, and seeing things like the following clip is fairly heartbreaking: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=274nGmArZzA&feature=related.

Farewell, Charlie. You will be missed and you deserved a lot better than this during your final season. It's a shame his players made things harder on him than they had to be as he wound down his incredible career.