The MAC East Division takes on a different look in 2012 with the addition of the University of Massachusetts. The school moves up to Division I FBS after a successful run in FCS play, and replaces Temple (whose expulsion from the Big East seems to be done).

The UMass website has a countdown clock that says 43 days, 6 hours, 21 minutes until the FBS era begins.The program has a new coach, a new home, and a new conference, as the Mid-American Conference welcomes the Minutemen to the football family. The team will play in the "MAC East" with the Akron Zips, Buffalo Bulls, Bowling Green Falcons, Kent State Golden Flashes, Miami Redhawks, and Ohio Bobcats.

The 148 year old UMass football program moves up from the Atlantic 10 conference and will start playing in Gillette Stadium. This will be their first season in the Football Bowl Subdivision after a successful run in the FCS, including winning the 1998 FCS national championship. Over the last 14 years, the Minutemen won five conference championships and played in five NCAA FSC (I-AA) tournaments. Last year they had seven alumni playing in the NFL.

"The University of Massachusetts will add to the academic stature of the Mid-American Conference and bring a strong tradition and depth to our conference," said Dr. Jon A. Steinbrecher, Commissioner of the Mid-American Conference. "The UMass football program will add quality to our conference's football programs and balance our divisions. In addition, this addition allows our conference to expand our footprint into New England and into the Boston and Hartford/Springfield markets."

"We feel the time is right for this landmark decision of UMass football elevating to the FBS level," said University of Massachusetts Athletic Director John McCutcheon. "Playing in the FBS is where UMass should be positioned as the flagship campus of the state system. The opportunities to play on a national level and what that means for exposure and visibility will be a tremendous asset not only for athletics, but for the entire university. We are extremely excited about the opportunity to join the Mid-American Conference and develop relationships and rivalries with its members. To have the opportunity to play those games at a state-of-the-art facility like Gillette Stadium really is one of the key factors that makes this transition possible."

Charley Molnar makes his debut as a head coach. He was lured away from Notre Dame where he served as their offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach the last two years. "I've been preparing for 28 years to be a head coach," Molnar said shortly after his hiring.

The timing seems perfect as the team returns 16 starters. But they have their work cut out for them, after filling their non-conference schedule with FBS schools. They open the season against UConn, then host Indiana before travelling to Michigan to play the Wolverines. In late October they travel to Vanderbilt. They also bring in a new head coach as Charley Molnar makes his coaching debut. "I've been preparing for 28 years to be a head coach," Molnar said shortly after his hiring.

One question on a lot of minds is whether the move to the FBS and a bigger stadium will result in higher attendance. Last year UMass averaged just over 13,000 fans, short of the NCAA's requirement of 15,000 in on of two rolling years. And they will be playing almost all of their games against teams outside their region. Territorial rivalries would seem to be impossible playing in a great lakes region conference. And they are joining a conference with a long history of teams stretching to meet attendance requirements.

In games against MAC opponents, UMass has a 7-7 record, including a 1-1 record against Ball State (the most recent game a a 1984 win), a 1-2 record against Toledo (the most recent game a 1999 loss), and they had quite a three decade non-conference rivalry against Buffalo with UMass going 5-4 (the most recent game a 1998 win). They have not faced a MAC opponent in 13 years.

UMass opens the season with a revival of the "U Game" rivalry travelling to UConn on August 30. They start MAC play Sept. 22 at MIami. They appear on the tube Sept. 15 on the Big Ten Network (@ Michigan), and on ESPNU Nov 23 (vs. C Mich). They are ineligible for the MAC Championship Game until 2013. Which will not be an issue (not to give up any information from my upcoming Season Preview in August), but the team has its hands full trying to climb out of the East Division cellar and the Bottom 10 FBS teams rankings. They had great FCS success a few years ago, but since have slipped. They were barely .500 against FCS teams last year, costing head coach Kevin Morris his job.

UMass 2012 Football Schedule

Aug 30 at Connecticut Sept 8 Indiana Sept 15 at Michigan Sept 22 at Miami (Oh) Sept 29 Ohio Oct 6 at Western Michigan

Oct 20 Bowling Green

Oct 27 at Vanderbilt

Nov 3 at Northern Illinois

Nov 10 at Akron

Nov 17 Buffalo

Nov 23 Central Michigan

For times and broadcast info visit
http://www.umassathletics.com/sports/m-footbl/umas-m-footbl-body.html