

Marshall looks for one more title

Thundering Herd leaving MAC

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. (AP) — Marshall has brought some welcome attention to the Mid-American Conference since returning to the league in 1997.

The Thundering Herd's resume includes five championships, five bowl wins and two Heisman Trophy finalists in Randy Moss and Chad Pennington.

"Marshall raised the bar in the MAC, no question," Bowling Green coach Gregg Brandon said. "They made us all work harder, recruit better and get players to compete at that level."

With one more go-around, the Thundering Herd don't plan to leave quietly.

Marshall, which moves to Conference USA and its five bowl tie-ins in 2005, is picked to win the East Division for the seventh time in eight seasons.

"We've been good for the Mid-American Conference, but the Mid-American Conference has been very good for us," Marshall coach Bob Pruett said. "It gave us a home."

When Marshall rejoined the league, it sought out games against major conference schools, and later, ranked opponents.

Eventually, other MAC teams caught on.

During one weekend last season, MAC schools beat ranked teams Kansas State, Alabama and Pittsburgh.

Miami (Ohio), Bowling Green and Northern Illinois were in the Top 25. Miami and Bowling Green won bowls.

Despite five new league coaches this season and Marshall's eventual move to Conference USA, along with Central Florida, an end to the MAC's prosperity isn't forecast.

"They'll be missed," Toledo coach Tom Amstutz said. "But we do have a strong conference and I think you'll continue to see some outstanding

CENTRAL MICHIGAN

Date	Opponent	Time
Sept. 4	at Indiana	6 p.m.
Sept. 11	at Michigan State	Noon
Sept. 18	vs. SE Missouri St.	1 p.m.
Oct. 2	vs. Kent St.	1 p.m.
Oct. 9	vs. Bowling Green	1 p.m.
Oct. 16	at N. Illinois	3 p.m.
Oct. 23	at Toledo	7 p.m.
Oct. 30	vs. W. Michigan	1 p.m.
Nov. 6	vs. E. Mich.	4:30 p.m.
Nov. 13	at Buffalo	1:30 p.m.
Nov. 20	vs. Ball St.	1 p.m.

EASTERN MICHIGAN

Date	Opponent	Time
Sept. 2	vs. Buffalo	7 p.m.
Sept. 11	at Florida	6 p.m.
Sept. 18	vs. Toledo	6 p.m.
Sept. 25	vs. E. Illinois	6 p.m.
Oct. 2	vs. Idaho	2 p.m.
Oct. 9	at Ball St.	TBA
Oct. 16	at W. Michigan	2 p.m.
Oct. 30	at Bowling Green	6 p.m.
Nov. 6	vs. C. Mich.	4:30 p.m.
Nov. 13	at Kent St.	4 p.m.
Nov. 20	vs. N. Illinois	1 p.m.

WESTERN MICHIGAN

Date	Opponent	Time
Sept. 2	vs. Tenn.-Martin	8 p.m.
Sept. 11	at Virginia Tech	TBA
Sept. 18	at Illinois	TBA
Sept. 25	at Ball St.	TBA
Oct. 9	vs. Toledo	7 p.m.
Oct. 16	vs. E. Michigan	2 p.m.
Oct. 23	vs. N. Illinois	2 p.m.
Oct. 30	at C. Michigan	1 p.m.
Nov. 6	at Bowling Green	4 p.m.
Nov. 13	vs. Miami (Ohio)	2 p.m.
Nov. 20	at Marshall	4:30 p.m.

football being played."

A capsule look at the teams in predicted order of finish:

EAST

MARSHALL — QB Stan Hill missed half of last season with a knee injury ... Must replace Darius Watts, the MAC's first 4,000-yard receiver. ... Pruett (88-17) is winningest active Division I-A coach with at least five years' experience. ... Road games at Ohio State and Georgia. Face defending MAC champ Miami (Ohio) at home on Sept. 29.

MIAMI (OHIO) — Must replace QB Ben Roethlisberger, leading rusher Cal Murray and four starters on offensive line. ... Current 12-game winning streak is longest in I-A. ... 2003 team's 504 points were most in MAC history ... Won first league title since 1987 and



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Marshall and running back Earl Charles would love to leave the MAC as the champions.

beat Louisville in GMAC Bowl.

AKRON — Senior QB Charlie Frye owns 49 school records, including 3,549 passing yards last year, and is the top returning I-A player in total offense (320 ypg). ... First-year coach J.D. Brookhart spent the past seven seasons as an assistant at Pittsburgh.

CENTRAL FLORIDA — New coach George O'Leary welcomes back 15 starters. UCF is 11-4 vs. MAC teams since moving to I-A. ... TB Alex Haynes (2,502 yards) is second-leading rusher among active league players. ... Opens season against Wisconsin, West Virginia and Penn State.

KENT STATE — Offensive coordinator Doug Martin replaces coach Dean Pees, who became linebackers coach with the NFL's New England Patriots ... QB Joshua Cribbs was reinstated in June after pleading guilty to marijuana possession. Will sit out Sept. 4 opener at Iowa.

OHIO — Bobcats have scrapped the triple-option offense, going to a one-back set this season ... Returns 17 starters, including nine on

offense. ... Five key players back from season-ending knee injuries, but RB Ray Huston suffered torn ligament during voluntary summer workouts.

BUFFALO — Lone 2003 win was 26-17 over Ohio. ... Was held to 10 points or less six times. ... Has only 13 seniors on roster. ... Offense returns nine starters.

WEST

TOLEDO — Picked to win second league title in four seasons. ... Returns eight offensive starters from 8-4 team. ... Key returnee is junior QB Bruce Gradkowski (3,210 yards, 29 TDs, seven INTs). ... Starts with three road games, including Sept. 4 at Minnesota.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS — Must replace leading MAC rusher Michael Turner (1,648 yards). ... Team went 10-2 last season and was ranked most of the year after beating Maryland, Alabama and Iowa State. ... Junior QB Josh Haldi threw for 2,544 yards with 25 TDs and nine INTs.

BOWLING GREEN — QB Omar Jacobs replaces Josh Harris (school-record 3,427 yards, 24 TDs, 762 yards rushing). ...

Beat Northwestern in Motor City Bowl to cap 11-3 year. ... Opens the season Sept. 4 at Oklahoma.

WESTERN MICHIGAN — Rutgers transfer Ryan Cubit is the likely successor at QB ... Junior Greg Jennings led team last year with 1,050 receiving yards and a school-record 14 TD catches. ... Rushing attack averaged 81.1 yards per game, ranking next-to-last in I-A.

BALL STATE — Lost eight starters on defense. ... Top two QBs are gone. Sophomore Joey Lynch threw only three passes a year ago. ... Top 11 receivers are back, including junior Dante Ridgeway (89, 1,075 yards, 10 TDs).

CENTRAL MICHIGAN — Brian Kelly, who led Grand Valley State to the past two Division II titles, takes over a program that went 12-34 since 2000, including 3-9 last year. ... Defense allowed league-worst 502 yards per game in 2003.

EASTERN MICHIGAN — TB Anthony Sherrell is MAC's top returning rusher (1,531 yards). ... New head coach Jeff Genyk spent past 12 years as a Northwestern assistant.