

Vikings Get Set For Conference Play

Written by {ga=neoleo}

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Now led by the man that brought Kent State to prominence (Gary Waters) ... the Cleveland State basketball program is back on track.



After a mostly up and sometimes down non-conference slate, the Cleveland State Vikings will have to prove if they are for real during Horizon League play. Unlike college football and its mathematical formulas to decide the national champion, college basketball affords every team an opportunity to make the field of 65. The Vikings start their march towards March Madness Thursday night at 7:30 pm, as Loyola-Chicago comes to the Wolstein Center.

If CSU is to improve upon last season's 3-13 conference record, the Vikings have to improve their perimeter defense. In the loss to Ohio State at the Q, the Buckeyes repeatedly made open jumpers and the game was over before the second largest home crowd in Cleveland State history had a chance to settle into their seats. The Ohio State game wasn't the first time that perimeter defense has been the downfall for the Vikings, most notably in two blowout losses at the hands of Butler last season.

Although the Vikings play with a defensive mindset and start a defensive stopper at shooting guard (Breyohn Watson, 4.6 ppg), the defense has been inconsistent, looking great at times, and porous at others. Since the OSU game, the Vikings have had two such outings.

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On December 22nd the Vikings bounced back from the OSU loss with a dominating performance against Central Michigan. The Vikings held CMU to 39 percent shooting for the game, including 17 percent (3-17) from behind the arc. The Vikings countered the defensive intensity with their best shooting effort of the season, hitting 8 of 15 threes and shooting 53 percent from the floor.

Looking to ride the momentum from the Central Michigan performance, CSU made the trek down to Kent to take on the Golden Flashes last Saturday. The Vikings responded with perhaps their worst performance of the season. Kent lit up the M.A.C. from outside and continuously found back-door cutters under the basket for easy lay-ins. In a flash back to the Ohio State game, CSU never closed the gap and the game was essentially over before it started.

If Coach Gary Waters' wishes come true, the early season roller coaster ride will benefit the young players as they mature going into the Horizon League season. The roster includes ten new faces from last season, four new starters, and the lone holdover plays a new position (J'Nathan Bullock from PF to SF). The non-conference schedule featured a five game season opening road trip, three games in three days at the Glenn Wilkes Classic, teams from the Big East, ACC, and Big Ten, and a trip to Kent State, where the Golden Flashes are undefeated on the season.

For a team that won ten games last season, making it through the challenging non-conference portion of the season 7-5 is no small feat. With those experiences behind them, the Vikings can look to make their mark in conference play. It won't be easy. The Horizon League has sent a team to the sweet 16 in three of the past five seasons and this year looks to be no different with Butler heading into conference play ranked 16th in the current AP poll.

The 8-5 Vikings already stand 1-0 inside the conference, thanks to an early season victory over Youngstown State. For the Vikings to build upon that mark and compete with the top half of the Horizon League

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they need their young guards to mature (Sophomore Joe Davis, Freshman Norris Cole and D'Aundray Brown), find a third big off the bench to contribute consistently (Kevin Francis or Renard Fields) and shore up the perimeter defense.

In a league that's historically dominated by guard play, CSU has the offensive firepower to compete. The question that hasn't been answered is do the Vikings have the ability to shut-down the opposition. The Vikings look to take the first step towards answering that question Thursday night.