

## Upstart Vikings Get Set To Host Butler

Written by {ga=neoleo}

Wednesday, January 16 2008 7:00 PM -

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It was a monumental week for Cleveland State as the Vikings pulled off two road upsets to set-up a home showdown with nationally ranked Butler on Thursday night at the Wolstein Center. The Vikings now stand 12-5 on the season and a perfect 5-0 conference record to lay claim to first place in the Horizon League.

Looking to exercise the demons of past CSU teams, this year's bunch traveled to Detroit-Mercy and did something that no other CSU team had been able to do, win in the city of Detroit. The Vikings came into the game 0-19 in UDM's Calihan Hall and 0-20 overall in Detroit. The game started out like many from the past, as the Vikings came out sloppy. The early offense consisted of ugly turnovers and forced shots while the defense gave up easy baskets on the other end of the floor.

In another example of what separates Gary Waters' CSU teams from those of the past decade, the Vikings were able to toughen up in the face of adversity and clamp down on defense in order to get back into the game. Sparked by two straight baskets from J'Nathan Bullock and a three pointer from Cedric Jackson, CSU surged back into the contest.

CSU trailed by two at the half, 31-29, and the game remained tight through the first nine minutes of the second half. With the game tied at 40 with 10:56 remaining, Jackson stole the ball from UDM's John Good and raced up court for an acrobatic lay-in. The junior point guard was fouled on the drive and converted

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the three-point play to put the Vikings ahead for good, 43-40.

The rest of the game featured Waters' trademark half court defensive pressure. UDM could only muster contested shots and desperation threes for the majority of the half as CSU held the normally hot shooting Titans to 22-percent shooting from three (4-18). UDM entered the contest ranked fourth in the Horizon League, shooting .399 from beyond the arc.

Bullock and Jackson continued their streak of leading the Vikings in scoring. At least one of the two playmakers has led CSU in scoring in 12 of 16 games heading into the Wright State contest. The pair scored 16 a piece, while Jackson added eight rebounds and five assists.

All season long, Waters has talked about holding serve at home and stealing some on the road. After getting over the hump in Detroit, CSU looked to sneak up on another opponent Saturday night, as CSU traveled to Dayton to take on defending champion Wright State. The Raiders have been tough at home, having handed Butler its only loss of the season in the Nutter Center.

CSU started the game out of control and quickly fell behind in what looked to be a mirror image of the UDM game. Jackson picked up two quick fouls and the Vikings had no answer for WSU's Jordan Pleiman under the basket. WSU jumped to a 16-3 lead with 13:24 remaining in the first half.

With Jackson on the bench, the responsibility of running the offense went to Norris Cole. The freshman from Dayton Dunbar had over 60 family members and friends in the crowd and he did not disappoint. Cole settled the offense down in the half court and even added some offensive firepower of his own. Cole played 14 first half minutes and scored five points after coming into the game averaging 12.8 minutes and 3.9 points per game. Cole and the rest of the bench did its part in cutting the halftime deficit to five, 36-31.

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The second half was a dog fight as both teams played hard-nosed defense and the crowd became raucous. The difference in the game for CSU was the big men. The Vikings rallied behind the tried and true game plan of feeding Bullock under the basket. Bullock found early success in the paint but was forced outside because of WSU's weak side double teams. The athletic 6'5" forward used the defensive adjustment to his advantage as he found his way to the rim and the foul line with an array of one-on-one drives from the wing.

Bullock was aided by the play of George Tandy. The 6'8" junior transfer from Eastern Illinois helped neutralize Pleiman while adding nine points, seven rebounds and three blocks. After scoring six of the game's first ten points, Pleiman finished with 15 and became a non factor down the stretch.

The final five minutes of the game featured seven lead changes and three ties and it came down to the final 25 seconds. Trailing 63-62, CSU subbed in Kevin Francis and looked to get the senior reserve an open look. The play worked to perfection, as Joe Davis came off the Francis screen and found the forward on the pop for an open three. Francis nailed the shot to give the Vikings the lead 65-63.

WSU had one final possession, and in front of 6,477 screaming fans, D'Aundray Brown blocked Todd Brown's attempt at the buzzer.

Although the Raiders shot a high percentage from the floor, the Vikings were able to limit WSU's chances on offense by crashing the glass. Led by Bullock and Tandy, CSU out rebounded the Raiders 34-24, with 21 of the Vikings' boards coming on the offensive end.

Bullock again led the team in scoring while notching 12 points and 11 rebounds. The double-double was the ninth of Bullock's career. CSU's bench outscored WSU's 34-4. The reserves were led by Davis with ten, Brown with eight and Cole and Francis with seven a piece.

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The Victory sets up Thursday's Horizon League one-versus-two match-up as Butler comes to town ranked 14<sup>th</sup> in the current AP poll.

### **News & Notes:**

#### **Previewing Butler:**

In the Horizon League Preview edition of this column, it was mentioned that CSU had three keys to winning in conference play. The Vikings needed maturity from its young guards, a third big man to step up off the bench, and improved perimeter defense.

Since that time, Cole has grown in his role as backup point guard, creating opportunities to rest Jackson and even making it possible to play the natural shooting guard off the ball at times. The other freshman guard, Brown, has averaged 7 ppg and 3.7 rpg during the current four game winning streak. After missing the Loyola game with a leg injury, Brown has come back to average 18.3 minutes per game off the bench.

Kevin Francis, looking to solidify his role as the third big man in the rotation, has averaged 8.0 ppg and 5.3 rpg over the same span. Included in those games is a 14 point outburst vs. Loyola which included a career high four three pointers and a 13 rebound effort vs. UIC.

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The perimeter defense, which at times has been a weakness for the Vikings, has become a strength during the winning streak. CSU is now ranked third in the Horizon League in three-point percentage defense, holding opponents to 34-percent.

The key to beating Butler will be continued improvement on the defensive end. CSU can not allow Butler any open looks and the Vikings can not fall behind early as they have had a penchant for doing during the winning streak. The Bulldogs are too good a team and have been in too many battles to let the Vikings overcome a double-digit deficit.

### **CSU Promotions:**

Thursday you can stop in at the Boneyard before or after the Butler game and get a free beverage when you present your game ticket.

Saturday is take-a-kid-to-the-game day. Kids get in free with any paid adult ticket. All Saturday's are family fun day at the Wolstein Center, featuring KidZone, dollar hotdogs and promotional give-aways.

### **Coach Waters on WTAM:**

The Coach Waters Radio Show returns to the air this week, this time on WTAM. The program will air Monday or Tuesday nights from 7pm-8pm

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for the remainder of the year. Hosted by Andre Knott, the show will run through March 25<sup>th</sup>.