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They came into Wolstein Arena undermanned, Oakland's best player, Derick Nelson, lost at least six weeks with a foot broken in Thursday's practice. Hoping for a win they could no longer expect, with games to follow at Oregon, Syracuse, Iowa and Kansas State constituting games two through five of a brutal season-opening nine-game road schedule. Even with their best player out they came with good players (including a preseason Mid-Major All-America selection in junior point guard Jonathan Jones), and a really good coach much too young to be entering his 25th year. And they came with a plan. The plan Coach Greg Kampe implemented was a tight half-court zone defense, one that often started 1-1-3 and morphed into 1-3-1, 2-3 and 1-2-2 sets in what Coach called a "match-up" (and what an old Philadelphia coach once called an "amoeba"). While the first "1" in the 1-1-3 would pressure the ball at the top, and the other "1" would sometimes trap the ball, the primary plan was to seal off all guard and wing penetration with double teams, forcing Cleveland State to win by shooting from the perimeter. And it just about worked. Oakland led this game for the first 36 ½ minutes, often by double-digits, and it took a monster comeback led by a monster player to thwart the plan and steal the win for the Vikings.

The team Coach Gary Waters has put together, predicted by most to come first in the Horizon, is wonderfully athletic, prides itself on its man-to-man defense, and often plays at a lightning quick pace. The achilles heel, often masked by pace and pressure, is perimeter shooting, as Coach's best athletes and defenders are not his best shooters. (Of course, if a player were both wonderfully athletic AND a solid deep shooter, he'd more likely be at Duke or North Carolina than here at CSU). So with his focus on defense and pace, Coach plays the

most athletic team in the conference: speedy St. John's transfer Cedric Jackson at the point, 6-5 chiseled J'Nathan Bullock at power forward, his best athlete 6-4 D'Aundray Brown at the three-spot, and physical specimen Norris Cole at second guard, joined by a three-headed dragon at the center position. Of those first four, Cole is a streaky though not pure shooter, star seniors Jackson and Bullock-and now perhaps also sophomore Brown-are scorers but not shooters, and the production of all four from outside will surely be diminished by the one-foot deeper three-point line this season. And of course, on the same "Duke-North Carolina theory," Coach's best perimeter shooters-sophomore Eric Schiele and freshman Josh McCoy-are less athletic, and therefore less capable defensively. (Pasadena freshman Trevon Harmon likely won't be eligible until December 13th at Marist, but in practice, he appears to be that rare mid-major player who combines both attributes-speed/athleticism with terrific perimeter shooting).

Anyway, Oakland's transition defense and match-up zone worked to near perfection this night, and forced to score from the perimeter CSU's soft underbelly was exposed, the Vikings shooting just 14% from the arc in the first half, and 18% in the second. At intermission, Jackson and Bullock were a combined 0-6 in threes, Cole was 1-6, and CSU was fortunate to be down just 7 at 31-24. (The deficit had been 11 with just over a minute to play, but a CSU bucket by George Tandy, turnovers by each team, a shot much too early in the shot-clock by Jonathan Jones giving CSU an extra possession, and a transition bucket by Cole cut Oakland's lead to 7). And they were only that close because of the stellar play of Brown at the offensive end, hitting two- and a three-point baskets in the half without a miss for five points (Brown would finish high-man this day with 15, on 7-9 shooting-all but one from modest range-and grab 6 rebounds).

The second half began much like the first, with Oakland controlling pace and forcing CSU to fire from deep. Not yet easily observed however, the combination of CSU's athletic defense and Grizzlies playing unaccustomed minutes (in place of Nelson) was subtly wearing Oakland down. But four minutes into the half, Oakland's lead was pushed to 10 on an Erik Kangas' trey, and a minute later that 10-point lead was restored when center Keith Benson hit a pair of free-throws. Then, after D'Aundray Brown's second straight make cut the lead to 8, a period of 2 ½ minutes went by with neither team able to score, but the tide turning. Brown had kept CSU in the game through the first half and nearly half of the second, and now someone on the Vikings had to show sufficient toughness not to let them lose.

Earlier in the day, I had this fun (and prescient) exchange with a writer and sometimes editor of mine in Boston, both of us waxing lyrical about the athleticism coaches recruit, the "character" they tell the public they want on their teams, but the one single quality that wins these kinds of games more than any other: toughness. And yes, sometimes you need a player (or two) who's simply not afraid, who won't let anyone push him around, get the best of him, be it in a back alley or on the court. Someone who doesn't care about looking good, about good press, about being liked or loved, someone you'd want in that bunker along side you, someone who won't let you lose. Well, there are very few players this tough (at any level); Michael was obviously such a player, Russell. Isiah Thomas in college. In the league I covered the last couple of years, a Hofstra player named Loren Stokes was that kind

player two years ago, as were Bashir Mason and Chaz Crawford of Drexel; Will Thomas of George Mason had that toughness last year, and I expect VCU's Larry Sanders may have it now. Having to date seen only three Horizon teams, I'm wondering if Butler's Matt Howard has that toughness. On this night in this gym, the player with the toughness, who refused to lose, who put CSU on his back the last 10 minutes, was senior forward J'Nathan Bullock. No, he didn't shoot well from outside (4-12, 0-2 from the arc, for 11 points). What he did--with co-star Cedric Jackson mostly sidelined with leg cramps--was begin working both boards, grabbing 10 rebounds for the game and tipping countless others to teammates. And both on offensive rebounds and off his own and others' penetration, he worked and worked to get to the rim, and willed those late shots to go down. And what Bullock displayed to the 2,100 in attendance at Wollstein was absolutely contagious on the floor, and suddenly, the look and body language of every CSU player changed: now they knew they could win, even that they would win. That's what one tough kid does for you.

So empowered by Bullock, CSU overcame its woeful shooting to steal a 58-55 win from a game, undermanned and well-coached Oakland team. Now, Coach Waters must get the athletic players to shoot a little more, the shooters to do enough other things to merit more minutes, and improve on last night's overall 35% shooting (up in the last ten minutes when Bullock & Co. got closer) and 16% three-point shooting. And whatever the style of upcoming opponents is generally, you can rest assured that CSU's shooting will be tested by zones more and more going forward, until the Vikes prove they can hit a

respectable percentage from the perimeter.

CSU news and notes:

- It's up a notch in class for the coming week, as the Vikings travel to Seattle to face the University of Washington on Tuesday in a game part of the CBE Classic, and then return home to face Kansas State in the McLendon Classic on Saturday.