

Since Gary Waters' third year at Kent State in 1998-99 - in fact since the conference season the previous winter, Kent State has clearly been the best Ohio basketball program north of Columbus. That could all be changing. Waters' Vikings absolutely pounded Kent State last night at the Wolstein Center, winning 67-41 in a game that was never close. Jay Pearlman recaps last night's win.



Since Gary Waters' third year at Kent State in 1998-99 - in fact since the conference season the previous winter, Kent State has clearly been the best Ohio basketball program north of Columbus. Through Waters' final three years, one year with Stan Heath, and six under Jim Christian, Kent State has become the signature program of the MAC Conference, winning 20 or more for ten consecutive seasons.

With Waters now in his third season at Cleveland State-and again beginning in conference play last winter-CSU has followed a similar course, having been named preseason Horizon League favorite on the heels of a 21 win second-place and NIT season. But with the Golden Flashes having beaten the Vikes seven of the last eight years, including an 84-69 win last season, and having won the MAC and played in the "big tourney" last spring, Kent State remained a roadblock for CSU to overcome. Until tonight.

Now, one game may not utterly change the world, particularly a home game played in Wolstein Arena. And just as CSU is the preseason pick in the Horizon, Kent State is once again in the MAC. But even with Kent State's recent addition to its roster of much traveled scorer deluxe Tyree Evans (from Richmond, Virginia, most recently attending Motlow, Tennessee Community College), in their most complete and dominating performance of the year, the Vikings totally throttled the Flashes, 67-41. A reserve had to score a meaningless put-back at 19:43 of the second half for Kent State to reach 40 points for the game. And it wasn't even as close as the score indicated.

Coach Waters' Vikings base everything on their defense, that "everything" including the pace they play at and lots of offense coming from defense. Sometimes beginning with a full-court trap, and always playing

aggressive man-to-man in the half court, it is CSU's goal each night to wear down its opponent with constant unrelenting pressure. This night they faced a Kent State team with returning MAC Player of the Year Al Fisher averaging 17, and newcomer Tyree Evans fresh off a 21-point performance to begin his Kent State career, as prolific a pair of guards as you will find anywhere in the country. But with great individual defense at the guard position, beginning with Norris Cole on Fisher and including all of CSU's guards on both Kent State scorers, the Vikings held Fisher to 2 points (on 1-7 shooting) and Evans to 12 (on 4-13, including 2-5 from the arc).

From the moment Kent State's opening 4-0 lead was dented by a D'Aundray Brown trey, it was as one-sided a game as this writer has attended in some time. CSU's defense was so good, the Kent players were so rattled, that the Kent kids couldn't even guard effectively. And CSU didn't need to reach for steals this night to play its most solid defense of the year; they just closed up spacing, applied pressure and played soundly, and were rewarded with numerous poor and difficult opposition shots, and lots of turnovers. Kent State ended up shooting 30% for the game, 24% in the first half in which the game was decided; they also turned the ball over 9 times in that decisive opening stanza.

Oh yes, continuing to improve in his senior year, CSU star forward J'Nathan Bullock had what is becoming a typical Bullock game: 24 on 9-16 shooting, and 10 rebounds. (And with the game long decided in the second half, Bullock passed on lots of open shots he would usually take, preferring to run clock and allow his teammates to shoot). And while I can't find the statistical evidence anywhere, I am certain George Tandy is in the top five in the country in rebounds per minute played; last night he grabbed a career high-tying 13 boards in just 24 minutes.

Coach Waters downplayed the Kent State rivalry, but acknowledged his team's superior defensive performance in the game. With just Saturday's home game against Division III Notre Dame College remaining prior to conference play, Coach peaked ahead, proclaiming his team "ready for conference play," which begins a week from tonight at Wright State, a team Coach warned "has learned how to win without their best player."

For Kent State Coach Geno Ford, this night may have been just the wake-up call his team needed. Suddenly with even more offensive firepower, his group looked unfocused on defense, and a bit selfish on offense, and as Coach acknowledged after the game, his team "didn't play nearly as hard as Bullock and

CSU." But they still have 2½ weeks and three games left until opening conference play on January 11, perhaps enough time to be ready to defend their MAC Championship.

CSU News and Notes:

- What a monster night for the Horizon League tonight, mainly at the expense of the MAC: in addition to our pre-season favorite (CSU) demolishing theirs (Kent State), Detroit won at Central Michigan (67-55), and Illinois-Chicago won at Toledo (65-55). And our highest ranked team, Butler, had a monster win at the Atlantic10's best team, 8th ranked Xavier, 74-65.

- With the Horizon ranked 11th last year among conferences, well ahead of the MAC, and after last night's 3-0 evening against MAC teams, the Horizon certainly appears to be the preeminent mid-major conference in this part of the country, heading into conference play.