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Each January, college basketball teams begin conference play. Legendary rivalries are stoked and new ones born in heated tussles between 'brothers' linked by league affiliation and geography.

With the exception of one BracketBuster contest in February against an opponent-to-be-determined, Cleveland State (13-5, 4-2 HL) plays all of its remaining regular season games against Horizon League brethren. In this column, CSU coach Gary Waters gives TCF readers his inside look at Horizon League basketball.

The Horizon League includes ten schools (Butler, Cleveland State, Detroit, Illinois-Chicago, Loyola, Green Bay, Milwaukee, Valparaiso, Wright State and Youngstown State) from five midwestern states: Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin. Within that geography, you'll find some of the strongest prep basketball areas in the country such as Detroit and Chicago. The territory also includes basketball-loving states like Indiana and Illinois.

In this area of the country, there is great basketball tradition - from high school through college and all the way to the professional level-and there has been great success as well, with national champions at every level from prep to pro in this

region over the years.

That strong basketball tradition is important to the Horizon League because our coaches and teams appreciate the basketball history of our region. There are rivalries that have been built through many years on many levels - from recruiting to the intense competitive level of play on the floor every night in every league game. Without that rich basketball history, the Horizon League could not have provided such great competitive entertainment for so long. The Horizon League is 30 years old this year and there are some great traditions and rivalries that have been created through our time and history.

The different styles of play in the Horizon League make for an entertaining game to watch and you can see great competitiveness each and every night within the League. The Horizon League has made a concerted effort to develop a first-class program with outstanding student-athletes that in many cases had the opportunity to play at a higher-level conference but they chose the Horizon League because of our quality of play, the high level of competition and the ability to play immediately with their programs

Unlike in most other mid-major conferences, men's basketball is the top revenue sport at almost all Horizon League schools. In most cases, that means that Horizon League schools focus resources on basketball, and as a result, we play in some truly great competitive facilities.

From Butler's historic 80-year-old Hinkle Fieldhouse (where Hoosiers was filmed) to Green Bay's beautiful new Resch Center, Horizon League basketball is played on major league stages in major league cities.

In the Horizon League, it is very important that our basketball programs have success and develop winning traditions.

And right now, we are doing just that. The Horizon League is currently #11 in conference RPI. We are only behind

(#1-10) ACC, Big 10, Big East, Pac 10, Big 12, Mountain West, SEC, Missouri Valley, Atlantic 10 and Conference USA.

That's great company.

But I think the Horizon League this year is the toughest mid-major conference in the country. We've shown that in competing against high-major conference teams and by having some success against those teams. And we're strong this year from top-to-bottom, as seven of our 10 teams currently have winning records. In the latest RPI rankings, we have three teams in the top 100 (Butler #5, CSU #60, Green Bay #83) and four more in the next 50 (Milwaukee #110, Wright State #144, Loyola #146, UIC #149).

Currently, the Horizon League's RPI is stronger than a number of very good mid-major conferences: (#12-19) Southern (top RPI: Davidson #31), West Coast (St. Mary's #29), WAC (Boise State #48), Metro Atlantic (Siena #35), Colonial (George Mason #55), America East (Albany #105), Southland (Stephen F. Austin #70) and the MAC (Ohio #104).

In my estimation, the Horizon League is stronger at this time than the Mid-American Conference. When I coached in the MAC, I would have said that at that time the MAC was the stronger conference. But due to the quality of basketball players in the Horizon League at this time, I believe the Horizon League has forged ahead of the Mid-American Conference.

One indicator for me to identify the better conference is based on quality of basketball players with the ability to go to the next level, whether that's the high major college level or pro level. When a league is heavily favored with these types of basketball players, the competition is set at a higher standard.

I believe that the Horizon League has also gone ahead of the MAC because of the

high quality level of coaching that has emerged in the Horizon League.

Here's a look at our competition in the Horizon League, my overview on how they play and the strengths they bring to the conference:

Butler (Coach Brad Stevens): The Bulldogs play quality defense and have built their program around great outside shooters. Whe
n you watch Butler, you will see a team that always plays solid defense.

They keep the opponent in front of them on defense and play a controlled well-spaced offense that relies on shooting from the perimeter.

Detroit (Coach Ray McCallum): Thomas Kennedy is one of the best players in the League and the Titans have good athleticism around him. They love to play in the paint by penetrating inside or getting the ball down low.

Their defense is pressure-oriented with denial man-to-man.

However, they will play some zone to stay out of foul trouble.

Green Bay (Coach Todd Kowalczyk): Another strong team in the Horizon League is Green Bay. The Phoenix are a very good
offensive team because they can put five good players on the floor at all times that can pass and shoot the basketball.

They play good hard-nosed defense, enjoy shooting the 3-point shot but also like to push the ball in transition as a part of their makeup.

Loyola (Coach Jim Whitesell): The Ramblers are one of the more physical teams in the Horizon League. Their strength is getting the ball to the basket through penetration on post feeds but they also like to get out in transition.

They play a solid physical defense that is designed to make contact with their opponent.

Milwaukee (Coach Rob Jeter): This year the Panthers are one of the surprise teams in the conference. In their perimeter players, they have experience, athleticism and the ability to shoot the basketball.

In the post, they feature good size with the ability to step outside and also knock down the outside shot.

When you watch Milwaukee play, you will see a team that runs a screen flex offense that is predicated on inside-out ball movement.

They like to play a more containing defense designed to make the opposition to shoot the ball from the outside.

Illinois-Chicago (Coach Jimmy Collins): The Flames feature two of the better players in the conference. They rely on them to score from the inside-Scott VanderMeer is a 7' center-or outside with Josh Mayo, their preseason league player of the year who can really shoot the three. They rely heavily on transition and screening to get their shooters open or to get the ball inside.

Their defense is predicated on funneling players towards their center.

Valparaiso (Coach Homer Drew): The newest addition to the Horizon League, the Crusaders have changed their style of play to adapt to our conference, and rely more on athletic movement than they have in the past.

They feature quickness and dribble penetration along with an athletic center.

They love to get into transition and they love to penetrate and kick to the open shooter.

Defensively, they play a match-up zone that will apply some pressure but their goal is to make you shoot it from the outside.

Wright State (Coach Brad Brownell): In my estimation, Wright State is one of the stronger teams in our conference. The Raiders feature outstanding movement on offense both by man and ball with good perimeter shooters and interior passing.

Their defensive scheme is also more of a containing type defense. With strong help-side support, at times their man-to-man looks like a zone.

Youngstown State (Coach Jerry Slocum): The Penguins have an athletic group of players and they play with more depth than any team in the conference. Their players also have the ability to play multiple positions.

They love to shoot the ball from the outside and also penetrate to the basket.

They will switch defenses up from man-to-man to zone to take you off your rhythm.

Come out and watch Horizon League basketball and you'll see why this is from top to bottom, the strongest mid-major conference in the country.

Cleveland State's men are on the Horizon League road for their next three games: at UW-Green Bay on Thursday, Jan. 15 (8:30 p.m. on SportsTime Ohio) at UW-Milwaukee on Saturday, Jan. 17 (8 p.m. on SportsTime Ohio) and at Youngstown State on Friday, Jan. 23 (9 p.m. on ESPNU). □ They return home for games against Detroit on Thursday, Jan. 29 at 7:30 p.m. and against Wright State on Saturday, Jan. 31 at 7:30 p.m.

Tickets start at \$8 with great group rates and promotions for both dates.

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