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Even after a brutal oh-for-Wisconsin weekend last week, coming into last night's game at Youngstown State it was all set up for Cleveland State. No, the preseason Horizon favorites weren't going to catch Butler for the regular season Horizon crown; nor will anyone else. But with Green Bay and Milwaukee both picking up losses last night (the second for each), with Milwaukee still to play Butler twice (the first of those games tomorrow at 2), with its three closest competitors-Green Bay, Milwaukee and Wright State--all coming to Wolstein the second half of the conference season, and with hustling defender D'Aundray Brown closing in on his return from injury, even at 4-4 CSU appeared in terrific shape to make a run for the coveted Horizon no. 2 seed and the accompanying double-bye in the tournament. And even playing on the road in Youngstown, surely powerful CSU would prevail this night, finish the first half of the season at 5-4, and begin that run to no. 2 at home next Thursday.

However, Coach Jerry Slocum, forward Martin Sirlester, and the rest of the YSU Penguins had other ideas, scoring the game's first two buckets, never looking back, leading by four at the break, and holding off pressure in the last two minutes to hold on for a wire-to-wire win, 64-60. In front of 6,249 screaming fans-the fourth largest crowd ever in Beeghly Center-the Penguins had a season-changing win over their biggest rival, the biggest Division I win in Coach Jerry Slocum's career, and specifically in his 3½ years at YSU. And with CSU now at 4-5, Green Bay and Milwaukee with just two losses, and Wright State with three, the Vikings would now have to win out (including February 28th at Butler)

and get lots of help to capture second place.

A poor perimeter shooting team but wonderfully athletic, the Vikings have talked and sometimes played terrific defense this winter, their game plan each night to dominate at the defensive end of the floor. However, as we've said more than once in this space, the Vikings' defense hasn't been nearly as good when behind on the scoreboard (most often that's on the road) as it's been when on the lead (more often at home). The lost weekend in Wisconsin was almost entirely due to poor defense rather than poor shooting (in losing twice the Vikes scored 65 and 75 points in Wisconsin); even offensively challenged guard Cedric Jackson got going in Wisconsin, contributing a total of 38 in those two games.

This night, however, as on other nights on which they trailed, that defense consisted of digging for steals, lunging for passes, and doubling from and slow recovery to perimeter shooters. And while Norris Cole did a good job when he was on the league's second leading scorer Kelvin Bright (holding him to 10 on 3-9 shooting, 5 points below his conference average), the rest of the team was lackluster on defense. Yes, the Vikings made 10 steals-Cedric Jackson 6 of them-but steals is a horribly overrated statistic in college basketball, sometimes even a negative statistic. A more telling statistic is field goal percentage defense, and this night CSU gave up 45% shooting, 57% in the second half, to a team shooting just 41% for the year, 40% in conference play. And in terms of strategy, rather surprisingly, on a number of defensive possessions the Vikes showed a "triangle and two," showing great respect for and covering all over the floor both Kelvin Bright and reserve swingman Tom Parks. Parks, averaging just 4 in conference play, was held scoreless this night; and even against Bright such a gimmick defense was shocking. More shocking,

CSU didn't break out its full-court press until the last two minutes of the game, and while that press was effective in turning the contest into a schoolyard game, it came too late to overcome a 6-point deficit, as CSU managed only to pull within 2 with four seconds left, before time ran out.

Focusing on Youngstown, as evidenced when this writer attended their home game against Butler in early December, while YSU's personnel aren't the best in the conference, Jerry Slocum gets the absolute most out of his group. Having benched preseason second team all-conference designee Vytas Sulskis (Sulskis played just 3 minutes in the first half tonight, 18 in the game), Slocum is relying more and more on junior college transfer juniors Kelvin Bright (second in the league in scoring since conference play began at 15, behind only J'Nathan Bullock's 18.5) and Sirlester Martin (tied for second in conference-play rebounding with Butler's Gordon Hayward with 7.5, behind only UIC's Scott Vandermeer). And this night, it was Sirlester who showed the way, scoring as well as rebounding during a "point-a-minute" type first half, scoring 10 of his team's 29 points in the first stanza, grabbing 5 of its 19 rebounds, and largely responsible for a four point halftime lead. After the game, senior center Jack Liles told us that "Martin showed us [in the first half] that we could win the game, made us believe that we could win."

Like most coaches a serious man, veteran Coach Slocum was smiling ear to ear after the game, acknowledging the hugeness of the win over CSU. "I'm not asking for perfect basketball from my team. We didn't play perfectly tonight. But we played hard for 40 minutes." Coach also said that "this was our largest crowd in forever, and they really helped. Our kids didn't get rattled in front of the big crowd, made some great stops on defensive. And while we turned the ball over a time or two when CSU pressed near the end,

again we didn't rattle, but kept it together." When I asked him about Martin's development, Coach responded thoughtfully that "like other JUCO transfers, at first Martin didn't understand how hard he needs to play at this level." Well, now he does, and this win will allow Coach Slocum to coach some more as the season goes on, with the full attention of his team.

Cleveland State News and Notes:

- With Trey Harmon having not yet overcome freshman inconsistency, this night Coach Waters started three forwards instead of three guards, with George Tandy in the lineup in Harmon's stead. While hampered a bit in the first half with two fouls, Tandy did continue to rebound effectively in the game, grabbing 6 boards in 28 minutes of play.
- His knee healthier than it has been all year, backup senior center Renard Fields had more playing time this night (13 minutes) and turned in his best game of the year. Fields had 4 rebounds and 4 points (on 2-2 shooting) in those 13 minutes.
- Mentally as well as physically tough, CSU's J'Nathan Bullock continues to look like the Horizon's Player of the Year. His 18½ points already leading the league during conference play, Bullock turned in a typical Bullock game, scoring 19 and grabbing 14 boards. He just didn't get enough help.
- Norris Cole helped Bullock keep CSU in the game in the second half, scoring 12 of his 18 in that stanza (on 5-7 shooting, including 1-2 from the arc).
- CSU returns home Thursday to host Detroit at Wolstein Arena, game time at 7:30.

- In what may have been an even bigger Horizon League upset, homestanding Valparaiso used a 26-0 second half run to beat Wisconsin-Milwaukee last night, 63-51.