

Norris Cole Carries Vikings to Huge Win Over Wright State

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Turning in his second straight 20+ point scoring effort and another defensive gem of a game, Norris Cole led the Cleveland State Vikings to a 59-50 win over the Wright State Raiders last night at the Wolstein Center. It was a weird game, with some violent ebbs and flows, but the Vikes prevailed to get their 6th win in Horizon League play. Jay Pearlman recaps the win.



Now a sophomore and a budding star second guard in the Horizon League, less than two short years ago Norris Cole was quarterbacking both the football and basketball teams at Dayton's Dunbar High School. Not a monster scorer in high school basketball and quarterback being the glamour position in all of sport, early on Norris focused on colleges where he could play quarterback, on that basis settling on NAIA D-II Walsh College in North Canton. And while this writer can't vouch for all basketball coaching staffs in America, Wright State Coach Brad Brownell told us last night that upon being informed of Cole's choice, he respected it, and scratched Cole of his list of recruits. It would appear that University of Dayton Coach Brian Gregory and his staff did likewise.

And despite having seen Cole play in person, Cleveland State Coach Gary Waters did the same. Until the phone rang in the spring of 2007 in CSU's basketball office, with Dunbar Coach Peter Pullen informing that Cole wanted to play basketball at a higher level, and asking CSU's staff to consider him. With WSU and Dayton staffs unaware, and neither an NCAA Letter of Intent nor ethical considerations constraining him, Coach Waters and his staff proceeded to pull an absolute basketball nugget from Dayton to Cleveland, to play in a league in which

he can remind Coach Brownell twice a year about the gem he missed.

Turning in his second straight 20+ point scoring effort and another defensive gem, it was Norris Cole who caused the Vikings to prevail over the Raiders last night, allowing his team to avoid its 6th loss while handing WSU its 4th. And Brownell could only compliment the Dayton product after the game. "Not recruiting Cole turns out to be a major mistake. He's a really good player, and a terrific young man." And last night he beat his local college coach almost single handedly.

Last night's CSU-WSU contest was a game played in three chunks: the first 10 minutes of the first half, the last 10 minutes of the first half, and all of the second half. And WSU dominated two of the three chunks, the first and the third (30 of 40 minutes in total), controlling pace, frustrating CSU with great half-court man-to-man defense, outscoring and out-toughing the Vikings. But in a remarkable turnaround, for that second half of the first half the Vikings defended harder, got stops as well as steals, converted in transition, even hit perimeter shots, holding WSU without a field goal for the final 9:46 and finishing the half on a 26-2 run. And despite the Raiders' control of the other 30 minutes of playing time, that run would be enough-just barely-for CSU to win the game, holding off the charging Raiders at the end to win 59-50.

In truth, the first 12 minutes of the game were brutal for the Vikings, as Wright State's fierce defense-as sound as any in the country-frustrated CSU and kept them from scoring. And in a game beginning just as Coach Brownell would have choreographed, at the 12 minute mark WSU led 15-9. While the start looked bad for the Vikings, the only reason they were even in the game after 12 minutes was Cole, as Norris kept his team in the game by scoring 7 of those 9 points (on

3-5 shooting, including 1-2 from the arc).

As to what happened in those last 8 minutes of the first half, Coach Brownell still appeared shell-shocked after the game. Rather uncertainly, Coach told the media that "CSU played well the last ten minutes of the first half, and I need to watch the tape to see just what happened. We fell apart for 10-12 minutes, our kids lost confidence, all to CSU's credit." What happened in those last 8 minutes? Well, while coaches and analysts sometimes speak of offense and defense as if they're utterly separate from one another, you all know that everything is connected, and offense, defense and rebounding feed off of one another, both positively and negatively. So the first thing that happened was that this poor outside shooting team (under 30% from the arc coming into the game) began hitting from outside, first J'Nathan Bullock (2-2 from behind the arc during that stretch, 1-1 from closer, and 2-2 from the line), then Trey Harmon (2-2 from behind the arc, undeterred by a brutal charge call by referee Tim Fogarty), then-who else-Norris Cole (a deep two on his only shot of that stretch, ending the half).

The second thing was stops, as the Vikings held WSU to two Todd Brown free throws for nearly ten minutes, holding the Raiders 0-11 from the field. The third thing was turnovers, as CSU's sometimes extended and uniformly stifling man-to-man defense forced 5 turnovers. Fourth, CSU dominated the boards during those ten minutes, outrebounding WSU 10-4. All in all, it was a brilliant ten minutes of pressure and transition basketball, by far CSU's best of the season.

Then again as if by magic, play in the second half reverted to that opening the game, as methodically, defensive stop by defensive stop,

Coach Brownell's Raiders willed themselves back into the game, pulling within 6 on a Troy Tabler trey at the 6:30 mark, 39-33, and within 4 on another Tabler trey at the 14:52 mark, 48-44. Then the crucial possession of the game, the one that kept the Vikings on the lead against the defending and hard-charging Raiders, and-just maybe-turned around CSU's season. Yet another tremendous man-to-man defensive possession by WSU had resulted in a Bullock trey not drawing iron. But a Chris Moore rebound (CSU outrebounded WSU 42-32 in the game) and the ball found its way to Cole deep in the corner with the shot clock running down. Cole was forced to launch, and when his trey tickled the twine, CSU had a 7 point lead with under 4:30 remaining, and from that point they were able to hold off Wright State. Cole finished with 20 points on 8-15 shooting, including 3-6 from the arc.

In character and very appropriately, Coach Waters preferred talking about Cole's defensive contribution. Coach talked about Norris' stellar man-to-man defense on tall athletic WSU guard Will Graham, "who hurt us down at their place when someone else guarded him." And while much of CSU's effective defensive work on Raider forward Todd Brown was turned in by George Tandy, just as was the case in defending Detroit's Tom Kennedy two night's earlier, in this writer's opinion the best defensive work on Brown was turned in by Cole whenever Coach Waters used three guards.

So it was Cole's play at both ends that first kept the Vikings in this game in the awful first portion of the game, and then secured the win at the end. And while Coach Waters doesn't want anyone paying attention to Cole's scoring ("shhhhhh"), quietly moving up the conference chart Cole began play last night alone in tenth place in conference scoring at 12.3 per game, and Viking SID Brian McCann

"guestimated" for the media that last night's performance may have moved him past Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Avery Smith into ninth place.

As confident in the post-game press conference as he's been on the court, Cole told the press that "the team was focused this week, and I was focused. Nate [Bullock] told me to lead our team, and I tried to do that." Now 6-5 and heading back on the road to Illinois-Chicago and Loyola this week, the Vikings will need that leadership, that defense, and most of all that scoring of Norris Coles.

Cleveland State News and Notes:

- Wright State's second leading scorer and toughest remaining player, John David Gardner, sat out his second game in a row last night, with an injured hip.
- In a game of more than passing interest to the Vikings, three-loss Wisconsin-Milwaukee came from 11 down with ten minutes to go last night to defeat Illinois-Chicago 63-62 at home .
- Finally, Coach Ray McCallum's Detroit Titans have a win in the Horizon, as they bested Youngstown State last night on the road, 68-64 in overtime.
- With most teams having played 11 of 18 league games, Wisconsin-Green Bay continues to lead the "race for second" at 9-2, Milwaukee follows at 9-3, Wright State at 7-4. and Cleveland State at 6-5. And while Coach Waters and senior J'Nathan Bullock refuse to make "backs against the wall" type pronouncements, based on sheer arithmetic it will take a 7-0 finish and some help from unexpected sources for the Vikings to grab that coveted second seed in the conference tournament.
- Both games on the forthcoming road trip will be telecast on

SportsTime Ohio, that against Josh Mayo and UIC on Thursday at 8 pm eastern, and that against Loyola on Saturday at 4 pm eastern.

- Two of the biggest games of the Horizon League season will be played next Saturday evening: Butler down in Dayton at Wright State at 7 pm eastern, and Milwaukee up in Green Bay at 8 pm eastern. Viking fans will be rooting hard for Butler (ughh) and Milwaukee in those games.