

How quickly it can end in the NCAA Tournament, turn from euphoria to sadness, from ecstasy to emptiness, from marching forward to what might have been. In their second game in the West Region of the tournament, played in Miami, the No. 13 Cleveland State Vikings were in a game that in some ways looked very much like their first round game against No. 4 Wake Forest two nights ago. Yes, very much alike. Only CSU was now playing the role of Wake Forest, and No. 12 Arizona was playing the role of CSU. Jay Pearlman talks about the end to the run for the Vikings, and looks ahead to next season.



How quickly it can end in the NCAA Tournament, turn from euphoria to sadness, from ecstasy to emptiness, from marching forward to what might have been. In their second game in the West Region of the tournament, played in Miami, the No. 13 Cleveland State Vikings were in a game that in some ways looked very much like their first round game against No. 4 Wake Forest two nights ago.

Yes, very much alike.

Only CSU was now playing the role of Wake Forest, and No. 12 Arizona was playing the role of CSU.

Yes, eerily similar.

Just as two night's earlier CSU had jumped out 9-0 and 18-6, in this game Arizona jumped out 7-0, 22-10 and 28-14. Just as two night's ago the Vikings fed off the tremendous energy of senior guard Cedric Jackson, gaining confidence from

Ced's confidence, this game the Wildcats did likewise from the play of junior guard Nic Wise, who had 10 points, 3 assists and 3 rebounds by halftime (finishing with 21 on 5-7 shooting, 5 rebounds, 8 assists and only three turnovers).

Just like Wake Forest had engineered a mini-run just before halftime, allowing them to pull within 9 at the break, in the last 5 minutes of the first half of this game CSU had the wherewithal, led by J'Nathan Bullock, to outscore Arizona 11-7, and close the gap to 10 at the intermission, 35-25.

But like that game two nights earlier, that late first half run proved illusory, as Arizona got the lead to 12 at the 3:00 mark of the second stanza with buckets by Chase Budinger and Jamelle Horne, and were never headed.

In the end, despite finishing within three of Arizona on the boards (33-30), it was too much Wise, Jordan Hill (16 on 5-11 and 9 boards), Budinger (15 on 6-12 and 5 rebounds) and Horne (15 on 6-11 and 5 rebounds), and the Wildcats went on to win 71-57.

What really happened in this game-understandably if not predictably-was that CSU reverted to form, to what they "really" are: a gritty, undersized team that is challenged shooting from the perimeter (on the shooting front, think Dayton, sometimes even Memphis).

Cleveland State is really not the team that shot 48% Friday night against Wake (31-65) and a blistering 40% from the arc (6-15);

they're a lot closer to the group that shot 37% against Arizona (22-59), and particularly to the group that shot 13% from the arc against the Wildcats (3-23).

And while Gary Waters got more out of Jackson in the Horizon Tournament and the first round game against Wake than anyone had expected (and likely more than any other coach in the country could have), what we got this night from Jackson at the point was pretty much what we'd gotten all season long:

15 points, 5-12 shooting, 0-5 from the arc, 5 rebounds, 1 assist and 4 turnovers.

Oh, and 5 steals, but since CSU was down for the entire game, much more lunging and digging than against Wake, often compromising his individual man-to-man defense.

Norris Cole was better (but also struggled from deep), finishing with 17 on 7-15 shooting, just 1-7 from the arc. And Arizona's superior size and strength, and a game-plan obviously focused on defending Bullock near the goal, limited J'Nathan to 7 on 3-12 shooting, 0-4 from the arc. Bullock did work on the boards, pulling down 10 rebounds.

While this is a tough day for the Vikings and their fans, both groups should look back on this season with great pride. In his third year rebuilding the Vikings, Coach Waters was faced with greater expectations this season than he had last, perhaps greater than any since his final year at Kent in 2000-01.

And both early in the season and early in conference play those expectations weighed heavily on the team, resulting in uninspired play, a 4-5 Horizon League record in late January, and more than one observer deeming this a lost season.

But then led by the physical and mental toughness of J'Nathan Bullock, this team began competing harder, refused to feel sorry for itself, pulled itself up by its bootstraps, won 7 conference games in a row, and then lost at Butler by just 2 to finish the regular season.

And then CSU became the first team in Horizon League history to win four games for the conference crown (ie, to win the conference tourney without the double-bye awarded to the first two seeds), completing that task with a stirring win over Butler on Butler's home court, 57-54.

Then a near-perfect game in upsetting Wake in the 4-13 first round tournament game, Wake likely a team fielding three future NBA players.

So despite being beaten by a bigger, stronger and better shooting Arizona team in the second round, there is lots for this team, its coaching staff and their fans to be proud of.

Finally, if you've become a Viking fan just lately and are feeling sad about losing this year's seniors, all is not lost. Yes, Jackson, Chris Moore, George Tandy and Bullock are graduating. And yes, Bullock's NFL-type toughness will be hard to replace.

But Jeremy Montgomery has shown good point guard skills (if far less pizzazz than Jackson), and Trey Harmon can play second guard or the three-spot, and

should settle in as the team's best shooter for the next three years.

Oh, and Aaron Pogue, high school teammate of Norris Cole at Dayton Dunbar, will now become eligible, and immediately challenge Butler's Matt Howard for best center in the Horizon.

Pogue is big, strong and nimble, with good touch around the basket, terrific hands, and passing ability from the post that ever so briefly makes one think of Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Walton.

And I hear two really good recruits are coming to Viking-land, one a big.

So, keep that enthusiasm built by this year's team close by, and bring it with you to Wolstein early and often next year, as Coach Waters continues to build the Viking program.