

New Faces, Elevated Expectations

Written by {ga=neoleo}

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Coming off last season's Horizon League championship and upset of Wake Forest in the first round of the NCAA tournament, Cleveland State coach Gary Waters has some big holes to fill in his lineup. Gone are all-Horizon League picks in point guard Cedric Jackson and power forward J'Nathan Bullock. Also gone is the center rotation of Chris Moore and George Tandy and backup big man Renard Fields. In order for the Vikings to return to post season play, this year's recruiting class will have to step in right away and make a huge impact. Ryan Aroney takes a look at this year's Vikings.



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Gone are all-Horizon League picks in point guard Cedric Jackson and power forward J'Nathan Bullock. Jackson was the defensive player of the year in the conference and Bullock finished his career as one of the greatest players in program history. Also gone is the center rotation of Chris Moore and George Tandy and backup big man Renard Fields.

Although the play-making Jackson will be missed, the roster is stacked at the

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guard position and the pieces are in place to help make up for his departure. Despite Jackson's recognition from the league, junior guard Norris Cole was known as the best defender on the team and routinely took on the opponent's best scoring guard. Junior D'Aundray Brown is back as the heart and soul of the team after missing last season's post season run with a knee injury and sophomores Tre Harmon and Jeremy Montgomery both played significant minutes as freshman.

The big question this year comes in the front court. The Vikings only return sophomore Joe Latas and walk-on Tim Kamczyc at the forward and center positions. Latas appeared in 16 games as a reserve and averaged 1.4 points per game.

In order for the Vikings to return to post season play, this year's recruiting class will have to step in right away and make a huge impact. Waters and his coaching staff have brought in a talented group of players that looks to do just that and keep CSU in the hunt for another Horizon League title.

The Vikings landed a five man recruiting class featuring freshman point guard Anthony Wells from Shaker, junior point guard Lance James (Lithia Springs, GA/Aiken Tech), junior center Kevin Anderson (Brooklyn, NY/Technical Career Institute), junior forward Jared Cunningham (Oregon City, OR/Arkansas-Fort Smith), and sophomore forward Nigel Ajere (Arcadia, CA). Ajere sat out last season as a partial qualifier out of Summit Prep High School.

The Vikings will also benefit from the addition of junior forward Aaron Pogue. Although technically included in last season's recruiting class, Pogue sat out the 2008-09 season after transferring from Vincennes Junior College. Pogue was considered a top-50 national recruit coming out of Dayton Dunbar high school.

"I felt this year we did a good job of bringing in the players that we needed to facilitate what we have to do to stay competitive in the Horizon League and on the

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national scene," said Waters. "The young men that we brought in all met some of the needs that we had for this upcoming year."

Junior point guard Lance James was brought in to help replace Jackson. Although the Vikings feature a talented bunch of young guards, Waters wanted a veteran presence in the backcourt to pair with Cole. The 5-11, 200-pound James was a third-team NJCAA all-American last year after averaging 23.4 points and 6.1 assists per game. He also ranked fifth in the nation in steals and 16th in both three-point percentage and assists.

"With the departure of Cedric Jackson we needed somebody with experience coming in at the point position and Lance brings that," said Waters. "He also brings other strengths such as being able to score and he was a very consistent player. His credentials really help solidify that position for us. So far he's working extremely hard to fit into the things we need to do and I think he will be a great addition."

Freshman Anthony Wells is a big and talented point guard that has the ability to play right away, although the depth chart might make minutes hard to come by in the early going. The 6-1, 180-pound (and still growing) Wells was a two-time all-state selection at Shaker Heights and averaged 22.1 points per game as a senior. Wells was rated as a top 50 player in Ohio and one of the nation's top 150 point guards by ESPN.

"He's from Shaker Heights here in Cleveland and I'm really excited about Anthony. I think one day he's going to be a great player here at Cleveland State," said Waters. "He's got the size, the quickness, the ability to score, all of the things we need and he's a very, very good defender. He's my type of guy. He's got the character and the background that we're looking for in a player, he's like a Norris Cole in essence, and we really like his potential. He has the potential to play this year. He has a lot of ability and if I didn't have as many numbers he would be out on the floor right away."

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Forward Jared Cunningham brings size and shooting ability to the Vikings and may be in line to start. The 6-9, 225-pound junior averaged 10.7 points and 5.3 rebounds per game during his two-year career at Arkansas-Fort Smith while shooting .509 from the floor (216-424), and .387 from three-point (65-168).

“One of the things we had to solidify was the 4-position because we lost four interior players,” said Waters. “With Jared being 6-9 and weighing 225 pounds he has the ability to fight you inside and he's a good rebounder, but he also has the shooting touch to shoot from the outside. I'm really excited about his ability to stretch the defense for us this year.”

Center Kevin Anderson comes in to fill the role of the departed George Tandy as an athletic, shot-blocking big man. The 6-10 Anderson led the league in blocked shots in his only season at Technical Career Institute. Although listed as a junior, Anderson received a medical hardship as a freshman at TCI and is awaiting paperwork that would make him a sophomore at CSU.

“He's 6-10 and very athletic, he blocks shots and runs the floor well,” said Waters. “He's more on the project side, but one of the things that we have with Kevin is that he's a three year player. That will be great because his first year we can work on him and then have two really strong years out of him. We do plan on using him this year and his athleticism will help us.”

Sophomore Nigel Ajere brings a great deal of athleticism to the Vikings but will need to knock off the rust after sitting out last season. The 6-6 Ajere was a teammate of Tre Harmon at Pasadena High School in California and played for former Viking Amadou Koundoul at Summit Prep. Ajere is known as a high-flyer that uses his 40-inch vertical to grab rebounds and finish around the basket and was rated as one of the top 40 prep school players in the country while averaging over 30 points and 10 rebounds per game at Summit Prep.

“Nigel, in my estimation, is our best athlete on this team,” said Waters.

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"He's been away from the game now for a year so its going to take a while for him to get an understanding of what he has to do, but in regards to him athletically, he's as good as you're going to find. He can score the basketball and he's going to play some, just how quickly will be determined by how fast he picks everything up. The way we're going to play this year, with a full-court pressure style of defense, fits him and will help him."

Junior Aaron Pogue will be looked upon to be a force in the middle for the Vikings this year. The 6-9, 275-pound Pogue is the highest rated player to suite up for CSU in some time and was once rated as the third best prospect in Ohio behind only O.J. Mayo and Bill Walker. Pogue will need to develop quickly after sitting out for a year to give the Vikings a legit chance at the championship.

"The year sitting out last year (while practicing with the team) will really help him to be acclimated to our style of play once we hit the floor," said Waters. "Aaron is a unique player because he's a guy with the strength and physical size to play inside but the skill level to be an outside person. I think he's going to be an inside presence for us this year that people are going to have to work against. We have to get his stamina up so he can play longer, but I really feel that he'll bring us something this year."

The preseason is still young and it might be a little hard to predict a starting lineup but we know that Cole, Brown and Pogue are shoe-ins to start. Out of the newcomers, it looks as though James and Cunningham have the best chance to start which would give you James, Cole and Brown starting in a three guard lineup with Cunningham and Pogue as the starting power forward and center.

In that scenario, Montgomery and Harmon would be the first two guards off the bench with sophomore Josh McCoy, redshirt freshman Charlie Woods and Wells competing for playing time and Latas, Anderson and Ajere forming a big man rotation off the bench.

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Waters and his staff have two weeks to get it all figured out as the Vikings open the season November 13th at Saint Bonaventure.