

Cleveland State 64, Green Bay 57: Vikings Earn Share of Horizon League Regular Season Title

Written by {ga=tommieskoski}

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After Cleveland State's devastating loss to Wisconsin-Milwaukee on Thursday, CSU coach Gary Waters brought his team together in the locker room before practice on Friday to talk to them about the loss.

"I apologized to them because I was apart of the uptightness in the game [against Milwaukee] because all we talked about was winning the championship," said Waters. "Then I told them don't let that loss stop you from winning a championship. Now we are going to play the tournament at a different place, but we are still going to win the championship.

"And how are you going to win it. We are going to come out relaxed and play the game."

On Saturday, CSU came out much more relaxed and defeated Wisconsin-Green Bay, 64-57, at the Wolstein Center, to claim a share of the Horizon League's regular season championship with Milwaukee and Butler.

It's CSU's first Horizon League regular season title in school history.

"I hear people saying we're co-champions, but we're Horizon League Champions," said Waters.

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"That's who we are."

Unfortunately for CSU, they didn't get any help from Milwaukee or Butler, who owns the tiebreakers over the Vikings.

With a 94-87 overtime victory at Youngstown State, Milwaukee (18-12, 13-5) clinched the No. 1 seed and home field advantage throughout the tournament.

With a 63-56 victory over Loyola-Chicago, Butler (21-9, 13-5) clinched the No. 2 seed and a bye into the semifinals.

As for CSU (24-7, 13-5 Horizon League), they clinched the No. 3 seed and will host Illinois-Chicago (7-23, 2-16), the No. 10 seed, on Tuesday. CSU swept the regular season series with the Flames.

In order to win the Horizon League championship and get an automatic bid into the NCAA Tournament, CSU needs to win four games in eight days.

Only one Horizon League school has accomplished that feat since the tournament went to this current format for the 2002-03 season. That was the 2008-09 CSU squad, led by Cedric Jackson and J'Nathan Bullock.

"It's going to be hard because everyone has to contribute (to win four games)," said Waters. "Every team has been getting contributions from everybody on their team and we have to do the same."

Norris Cole, who was on that 2008-09 team thinks this year's squad can match that feat: "No Doubt [in my mind]," he said confidently.

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The Vikings jumped out to an early, 19-4, lead and led 28-17 at the half. Six different Vikings scored in the first half, but it was their defense that keyed the early start as they held the Phoenix to 4-of-21 (19 percent) from the field.

"I wanted my teammates to know that it wasn't about me," said Cole, who had 50 family and friends at the game for senior day. "It was a team effort. Everybody contributed and that's why we jumped out on them."

The Phoenix (14-17, 8-10) would score the first seven points in the second half to pull within, 28-24. CSU followed with a 6-0 run of their own to push the lead back to double-digits, 34-24, and then extended it to 15 (48-33) on Trevon Harmon's 3-pointer.

A 18-5 run by the Phoenix pulled them to within, 53-51, on a pair of free throws from freshmen center Alec Brown.

Sophomore forward Tim Kamczyc drilled a 3-pointer to give CSU some breathing room, 56-51, with 2:47 left.

With CSU up, 56-53, with 2:32 left, That's when Cole, who has carried the Vikings on his back all season long, stepped up again during crunch time. His pull up jumper gave CSU a, 58-53, lead with 2:18 left.

Then after a pair of free throws from Green Bay's Daniel Turner pulled them to within, 58-55, with 1:12 left, Cole sank two free throws to extend it back to five.

With 16 seconds left, Turner's jumper cut it to, 60-57.

That's when Cole made the biggest play of the game. After a timeout, Cole took an inbound pass and drove past everyone the full length of the court for an easy lay-up to push it back to, 62-57, with 12 seconds left.

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Harmon would add a pair of free throws for the final score.

"We had to fight to win this game because sometimes its not easy," said Waters. "I thought our kids were resilient down the end and executed to win the game."

Cole led the Vikings with 22 points and 10 rebounds, his seventh double-double of the year.

"We thought if we could tie it we could put the pressure on them and make a run at it," said Green Bay coach Brian Wardle. "I'm glad that Norris Cole is a senior. He made the big shots whenever they needed it. No doubt we will be seeing him play in the NBA."

Junior center Aaron Pogue (12 points) and Harmon (11) were the only other Vikings in double-figures.

Brown and Turner led Green Bay with 13 points a piece.