



Kevin Mackey kneaded his hands together obsessively, feeling sweat begin to pinprick into tiny beads across his forehead as the pounding of his pulse in his ears sounded like waves along Lake Erie's rocky shore.

The room he sat in on this Sunday evening, filled with such young, vibrant energy just a few minutes before, had drawn eerily silent once six o'clock arrived. Everyone watched morbidly over the next few minutes as the names of dozens of other schools popped up on the television screen. But not theirs.

Twenty-four hours before, the 1985-86 Cleveland State Vikings had completed their mission, doing everything in their power to earn their first invitation to the NCAA tournament. With a gritty win over Eastern Illinois witnessed by less than 2,800 spectators in Springfield, Missouri, the Vikings had captured their first Association of Mid-Continent Universities (affectionately known as the AMCU-8) tournament championship with their 12th straight victory, bringing their overall record to an impressive 27-3.

But now, with the NCAA tournament in just its second year as a 64-team field and the qualification process still evolving, Cleveland State was at the mercy of the selection committee. And as the names scrolled across the screen on the tiny television in this cramped room in the CSU Physical Education Building, it looked more and more like the Vikings were going to get passed over – just as they had the year before by both the NCAA and NIT committees despite 21 victories and their first regular-season AMCU-8 crown.

Now, as the 1986 tournament bracket began to fill in, the Vikes' third-year head coach was getting a bad feeling. Ohio Valley Conference champ Akron, whom Cleveland State had defeated by 12, was announced. Then came DePaul, whom the Vikings had trounced by 15 at the Rosemont Horizon in January. Of course, Big Ten champ Michigan was in as a No. 2 seed, and Mackey wondered if anyone on the selection committee knew that his Vikings had given the Wolverines a good half of basketball back in December, trailing by only two at the intermission.

As each school's name was announced and the number of spots left on the bracket dwindled, it just didn't feel like it was going to happen.

The top half of the fourth and final bracket filled in – still no Cleveland State. Mackey knew, even if his players didn't, that if they weren't invited now, they never would be. There was nothing more he could do, no better team he could assemble here, none that was better qualified to earn a tournament spot. It looked as though once again these talented but generally unrefined young athletes, most from inner-city neighborhoods, would be passed over. They would never have another shot to show how good they could be.

Finally, in the second-to-last pairing, in a bolt of green-and-gold lightning, there it was:

14 Cleveland St.

The room erupted. Players and coaches leapt into each other's arms. Some players openly wept in relief. This time, they hadn't been passed over. For the first time in school history, they were going to the dance.

Off-Broadway Guys

It would be oversimplifying things to say this was the moment Cleveland realized its only major university had a basketball program. CSU first fielded a team in 1929, but it was probably best known for once losing 30 straight games between 1959 and 1961. Aside from a handful of decent squads in the late '70s and early '80s, the program had been abysmal. When Mackey took over in 1983 after serving as a hard-working assistant at Boston College, the Vikings were coming off their fourth 20-loss season in the previous 14 years.

Once Mackey arrived on Euclid Avenue, there was an immediate impact. The Vikes went from eight wins to 14 in Mackey's first season, then to 21 in his second along with the regular-season AMCU-8 crown – the program's first-ever conference title.

These teams had been built with spare parts off the scrapheap that the bigger, more established programs didn't want – players who were deemed to be a few inches too short or a step too slow. Mackey himself described his players as “off-Broadway guys; players who watch every game on the tubes and eat their hearts out waiting for their chance.”

What he wound up with was a menagerie of colorful characters whose nicknames defined their offbeat personalities and playing styles: Vinny Vandalism. The Gigolo. Iceberg Slim. The Identified Flying Object. Black Rambo. And the Mouse.

On this glorious Sunday evening, these Vikings had reached the promised land. They had waited for their chance, and now they had it.

As the cacophony quieted in the aftermath of the news that had just crackled over the television, everyone looked to Mackey, not quite sure what to do next. The fiery little coach's leadership and determination had taken them this far, now it had to take them a little further.

Knowing what was expected of him, Mackey asked himself what the first step should be. It didn't take long.

"Hey," the coach wondered aloud, "who do we play?"

The players and coaches alike looked at each other dumbly. Little details like that hadn't seemed important.

Mackey had an assistant phone the *Plain Dealer* to find out.

Run and Stun

It would be Indiana, the third seed in the East Region and ranked 16th in the final AP poll. It was a legendary program five years removed from its fourth national championship and now defined by clean-cut, sharp-shooting guard Steve Alford and brilliant, volcanic head coach Bobby Knight.

Mackey, a short, pudgy Irishman who would look like a cartoon character compared to the larger-than-life Knight, admitted he'd never met the iconic coach, but he'd read all his books.

To anyone else who'd read Knight's books and revered them as basketball gospel, the upcoming matchup looked hopeless for the underdog Vikings. Indiana was one of the giants of college basketball and Knight had virtually invented the modern game. Cleveland State was...well, Cleveland State.

But Mackey knew better. He respected Knight and all the other successful coaches who served as anchors of the game, as well as the rock-solid philosophies they indoctrinated in their players. But Mackey's Vikings played an altogether different brand of basketball.



They called it “run and stun,” and it left an indelible mark on all who saw it. The *Plain Dealer's* Bill Livingston likened witnessing a Cleveland State game to watching “inner-city scramblers come at opponents like stinging squadrons of ants from an overturned hill.”

It was a method of madness still three to four years away from gaining a foothold in the college game: up-tempo the entire game on both sides of the ball, defined by a swarming full-court press, an offense perpetually running a fast break, and a 10-man rotation that wore teams down.

The Vikings had led the nation in scoring over the course of the 1985-86 season, averaging more than 90 points per night, and had outscored their opponents by just under 21 points per game. They'd scored more than 100 points 12 times and more than 90 on 18 occasions.

While most coaches looked at an opponent's field goal percentage as an effective benchmark of how well their own defense had played, Mackey didn't really care how well an opponent shot. He was more than willing to give up a few easy baskets in order for the Vikings to get a few

more. He focused his attention on a handful of other statistics, primarily turnovers.

He was certain Indiana, like most teams across the country, had never seen a pressure attack like Cleveland State's.

"This is a milestone," senior CSU center Bob Crawford admitted that Sunday night. "But getting into the tournament is not enough. We want to win. Indiana can be beaten."

Mackey didn't disagree, though he put it in more coy terms. "When I was a kid," he said with his thick Boston accent, "I read *Cinderella* just like everybody else."

A Glass Slipper in Green and Gold

In the minutes before the opening tip at the Carrier Dome in Syracuse, New York, the following Friday afternoon, Mackey engaged in some playful psychological warfare. As he approached Knight for a pre-game handshake, he sheepishly requested, "Go easy on us, big guy."

But both coaches knew Mackey wasn't serious. They both understood that while Indiana clearly had more talented players, this was going to be a hard-fought game. It took less than two minutes for everyone in the Carrier Dome to realize it, too.

Before most fans had settled into their seats, Cleveland State had collected a pair of steals and took a quick 6-2 lead. The tone was set, and Mackey was proven right. In all its games against heralded, much more talented teams in the Big Ten and beyond, Indiana hadn't seen anything like Cleveland State's non-stop pressure defense. The Hoosiers would commit 10 turnovers in the first 20 minutes as the Vikings took a 45-41 lead to the half. By now, the majority of the 16,000-plus packed into the arena were rooting for the little guys in green.

