

What the hell has happened to CSU basketball? Once a crown jewel of the city, things just haven't been the same since Kevin Mackey stumbled out of a crack house back in 1990. This angers The Rhino, but as he notes in his latest ... things may be turning back around. The team hired Gary Waters, and already has wins over Kent State and Miami of Florida on the season.

As a loyal Cleveland sports fan, anger and frustration are my stock in trade, but as mad as I get at the shortcomings of the Browns, Indians and Cavs, I always make sure to save a little bile for Cleveland State University, and the wasteland that its basketball program has become.

It only takes a glimpse of the [Wolstein Center](#) -- the kind of facility most mid-major programs can only dream of-- to remind me of the potential that's been squandered by CSU over the years. In 1986, when Kevin Mackey's team went 27-3, and then knocked off #3 seed Indiana in what some regard as the [biggest first round upset](#) in NCAA tournament history, the future appeared to be pretty bright for CSU basketball. In fact, for the next several years, the Vikings were on a roll. They followed up their tournament success by going 25-8 in 1986-87 and 22-8 in 1987-88. The team's success allowed them to move their games from tiny Woodling Gym to the newly constructed 13,600 seat Convocation Center.

Then Kevin Mackey [stumbled out of a crack house](#) in 1990, and with the exception of a 20 win season in 1991-92, the next 15 years were pretty much all downhill. It's hard to say exactly when the program hit bottom. In addition to not having a winning season since 2000-2001, not winning a game in the Horizon League tournament ever, and not scoring a single point during the first eight minutes of last year's season-ending [humiliation](#) at the hands of Detroit Mercy, CSU fans have witnessed off the court antics like Jamaal Harris and Damon Stringer's [comic opera robbery](#) of CC Sabathia, and [the fiasco](#) surrounding Mike Garland's firing/resignation after last season.

At first glance, you've got to wonder if former Kent State coach Gary Waters knew what he

was getting himself into when he accepted the Cleveland State job last April, although if you're a Viking fan, it's hard to imagine a better choice. Waters took a Kent State team that posted only one winning season in the seven years before his arrival and turned it into a powerhouse. Waters' Kent State teams posted eight straight 20 win seasons and two NCAA tournament appearances before he left for Rutgers in 2001. Although the Scarlet Knights [bought out his contract](#) at the end of last season, Waters had some notable successes in turning that program around as well.

Waters wasted little time making his mark on CSU's basketball program. Within a month of being hired, Waters [signed](#) Warrensville Heights star [Joe Davis](#), who has averaged almost 10 points per game and ranks second on the team with 11 steals so far this year. What's probably most impressive is that Davis has done this while only averaging 20 minutes per game. Waters made several other coaching changes and [roster moves](#) after arriving at Cleveland State and has emphasized [a disciplined approach](#) on and off the court.

It's early, but the Vikings appear to be responding favorably to Waters. The team is currently 5-6 despite a brutal schedule that's included both #4 Ohio State and #18 Butler. The Vikings were crushed by both of those teams, but they have managed to [upset Miami](#) 78-67 for the school's second ever win over an ACC team, and in what may turn out to be the team's most important statement this season, Cleveland State also managed to [beat Kent State](#) 66-59.

Wins and losses aside, Cleveland State is simply playing better basketball than it has in the past, and it's showing up in the statistics. The Vikings lead the Horizon League in offensive rebounding and rank third in rebounding margin. The team ranks second in the league in free throw percentage. While the team has been getting some notable contributions off the bench from people like Joe Davis, there's not the revolving door approach to the starting lineup that plagued last year's team. In contrast to last season, when the team used 13 different starting fives, Waters has started the same five players in each of the Vikings' 11 games.

But maybe the biggest reason for optimism is that there appears to be some real talent on this team, and it's pretty young. In addition to Davis, the Vikings have sophomore forwards [J' Nathan Bullock](#) (who leads the team in scoring and was a preseason second team All-Horizon League selection) and [Tristan Crawford](#) (a former Pennsylvania AAA player of the year who had to sit out last season in order to meet eligibility requirements).

The fact that Cleveland State is in the midst of an ugly three game losing streak during which they've lost games by an average of 25 points shows that it's going to take some time to clean up the train wreck that the Vikings' basketball program has become, but for the first time in a

Resurrecting CSU Basketball

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long time, it looks like there's reason for some hope.