The Cleveland State Vikings are set to start their most anticipated season in over a decade on Saturday night at the Wolstein Center. CSU returns four starters and eight letter winners from last season's 21-13 NIT team, including senior all-league picks J'Nathan Bullock and Cedric Jackson. And they just extended coach Gary Waters, who has brought winning Division I college hoops back to the north coast. Ryan Aroney previews this years Vikings for us in his latest column.

The Cleveland State Vikings are set to start their most anticipated season in over a decade on Saturday night at the Wolstein Center. CSU returns four starters and eight letter winners from last season's 21-13 NIT team, including senior all-league picks J'Nathan Bullock and Cedric Jackson. The Vikings looked dominant in its lone exhibition with an 81-33 dismantling of John Carroll. Jackson played his normal all-around game with 5 points, 10 rebounds, 4 assists and 3 steals in 26 minutes.

Even with all of the experience and excitement, Coach Gary Waters has some tinkering to do with the lineup.

"If all the cards fall right we could be in the NCAA's," said Waters. "We can't have injuries. We need a couple of people to step up who might not have been expected to step up. We lost three good players. Breyohn Watson was strong defensively, Kevin Francis did a great job coming off the bench and Joe Davis brought scoring. Now we need someone to step up and fill those roles."

Davis, a Warrensville Heights native, transferred out of the program and Francis graduated and

is now playing overseas. The two combined for over 13 points per game off the bench, with Davis finishing just behind Bullock and Jackson in scoring and Francis providing energy and clutch shooting from his forward spot. Also graduated is Watson. The tough guard from Flint started every game and always locked up with the opposition's best scoring option.

Waters believes he has a replacement for both Davis and Watson built into the same player.

"I know Norris (Cole) can fill the scoring role, you look at the end of last year and he became our third scorer," said Waters. "What I want is for him to take over that defensive role too. He has the ability, he just has to keep working at it and get in the right mind-set."

Cole, 6-1 guard, finished off his freshman season on a tear. The Dayton native averaged 10.2 points per game over the last six games of the season and began to cut into Davis' minutes down the stretch. The sophomore led all scorers in the exhibition with 13 points on 5-of-10 shooting.

If Cole is counted on to become the third scoring option, it will mean moving him off the ball to play alongside Jackson in the starting backcourt. Speculation was that Cole would serve as the backup point guard while also splitting duties in the starting lineup to allow Jackson to roam free off the ball. Waters, however, has a different take.

"When (Cole and Jackson) are in there together, Jackson is our point guard. He's our guy at that spot," said Waters. "What I want to do is work on getting Norris away from playing point guard so he can concentrate on scoring and defense."

Keeping Cole off the ball opens a giant hole for CSU at the point behind Jackson. Waters and his staff are very high on freshman Jeremy Montgomery and he will need to make an impact immediately for the Vikings. Montgomery was a three-star recruit out of Lincoln Park high school in the Chicago Public League and he impressed in the exhibition, dropping 6 assists with no turnovers in 11 minutes of action.

"A guy that has to help us this year is Jeremy Montgomery," Waters. "He's a combo guard that can shoot the ball or run the offense. He can play some point for us this year and we need him to support in that role (off the bench)."

The only other options at point guard are freshman Trevon Harmon and sophomore Eric Schiele. Harmon has yet to be ruled eligible and likely won't be allowed to play until December while Schiele missed much of his freshman season and is known more as a scorer than a facilitator. The 5-10 Schiele averaged 39.6 points per game as a senior at Waterloo high school, including 69 in one game.

Replacing Francis' role off the bench is a bit trickier. Last season Francis provided veteran leadership, consistent outside shooting and rebounding from his sixth man role. Francis nailed a game-winning buzzer beater at Wright State, drilled 4-of-5 threes in one game against Loyola and pulled down 13 rebounds against UIC last season.

"Now I have to find someone to fill Kevin's role," said Waters. "He provided a lot for us last year for that second group."

Ideally, Waters could bring multi-talented sophomore D'Aundray Brown off the bench. The diversity of Bullock to slide from his natural power forward spot down to the three position would allow Waters to start his two best bigs in seniors George Tandy and Chris Moore. Off the bench, the 6-4 Brown is strong enough to play as a forward and can create match-up problems similar to what Francis provided a year ago.

The problem with bringing Brown off the bench and starting Bullock, Tandy and Moore together is depth on the front line. Until a reliable fourth big man steps up to earn minutes, Waters seems reluctant to start all three big men together.

6-9 senior Renard Fields is an energy player that can provide rebounding and shot blocking but he has never played much and averaged only 7.6 minutes a season ago. Behind Fields is red-shirt freshman 7-footer Joe Latas. The Bedford-Chanel graduate is a work in progress that played very little in the open scrimmage and logged only 7 minutes in the exhibition.

A key to the depth of the Vikings will be Fields expanding his role and playing a solid 15-plus minutes as the fourth big in the rotation.

Until that time, it appears that Waters will go with a three guard starting lineup featuring Jackson, Cole and Brown with Bullock at power forward and Chris Moore at center.

Jackson is a candidate to win Horizon League player of the year this season. The 6-3 senior from New Jersey transferred in from St. John's last season and averaged 13.9 points, 4.9 rebounds, 4.9 assists and 2.6 steals per game. His 168 assists were second in CSU history and his 88 steals were the third highest total in CSU history and ranked ninth nationally. A key for this season will be improving his assist-to-turnover ratio of 1.28. If Jackson can play under better control and take better care of the ball, the Vikings will be hard to beat.

Bullock is the other end of the Vikings two-headed monster. The 6-5 forward from Flint averaged 14.8 points and 6.6 rebounds last season en route to being named first team All-Horizon League. Bullock has been a rock throughout his CSU career, starting 69 consecutive games which is just 17 off Mouse McFadden's school record. He also ranks 12th in school history in points scored with 1,238 and is one of only ten CSU players to score 1,000 points and grab 500 rebounds in a season.

Cole is a 6-1 sophomore that played in all 34 games a year ago while leading the team in free throw shooting at .817. Outside of picking up the scoring and defensive assignment this season, the athletic guard is also a natural leader. He won back-to-back high school state championships as a point guard and another as a quarterback for Dayton Dunbar.

Brown put together a very promising freshman season a year ago. The staff was familiar with the Youngstown native from an early age as Brown's father played for associate head coach Jayson Gee at Youngstown State in the eighties. Brown stepped in and started the final 11 games at small forward, capping a solid freshman campaign that saw him average 4.9 points and 3.7 rebounds per game.

Moore had an up-and-down junior season after transferring in from UC-Santa Barbara. The St. Edwards graduate started 23 games at center and averaged 4.9 points and 2.7 rebounds per game while shooting .558 from the field. The 6-9 Moore has good touch around the basket with

range that can extend out to 16 feet but had trouble picking up Waters defensive schemes a year ago and lost playing time as a result. There were questions during the off season on whether Moore would return for his senior season but after rededicating himself and redefining his body, Moore is back in the middle and poised for a break-out senior season.

The sixth man role will fall to the Tandy. The 6-8 forward transferred in from Eastern Illinois a year ago and was a key member of the rotation, playing in 33 games with 15 starts at power forward and nine at center. The long and athletic Tandy was second in the Horizon League with 1.24 blocks per game and averaged 4.2 points and 4.2 rebounds in 18.6 minutes per game.

Beyond the six returning players with starting experience and Montgomery at backup point guard, minutes are up in the air. Fields will have a chance to earn his time and freshman guard Josh McCoy will have a chance to spread the floor with his outside shooting. Waters likes to go ten deep and it looks like Schiele's 11 point performance in the exhibition may have given him the inside track at spot number ten in the rotation.

Outside of playing time, there are many certainties. Waters' team will play hard, they will press and play hard on defense, they will look to get out and run on offense and they will play an exciting brand of basketball.

After so many down years and countless rebuilding efforts, this year's Gary Waters led Vikings squad has realistic dreams of March Madness. It's hard to say for a team that hasn't reached the NCAA tournament since 1986, but anything less than an NCAA tournament appearance for this year's team will be an underachievement.

The exciting journey to March begins Saturday at 7 p.m. against Summit League favorite Oakland.