The CSU Vikings came back home last night for their conference home opener, taking on Homer Drew's always tough Valparaiso Crusaders, a consistently solid mid major that is a recent addition to the improving Horizon Conference. CSU never trailed, rolling to a 66-42 blowout win at the Wolstein behind 29 points from Conference Player of the Year favorite J'Nathan Bullock. Jay Pearlman recaps the win.

Whatever the imperfections might be in his game on any given night (or in general), CSU's J'Nathan Bullock left no doubt in this Cleveland newcomer's mind through 6 games-now 7-that he's an awfully tough kid. Most nights against mid-major or even major opponents the toughest in the gym, often by a wide margin. Out in Seattle two weeks ago, even on a night he shot the ball brutally, missing badly from near, far and in between, J'Nathan physically pushed big strong Jon Brockman, the leading returning rebounder in the country, all over-and off-the court.

Battered and bruised despite the win and good numbers, all Brockman could talk about in the post-game press conference was Bullock.

And as we wrote in this space previously, it was Bullock's toughness alone that stole victory out of the jaws of defeat in the second half on opening night against Oakland three weeks ago.

The opponent in last night's conference opener was Homer Drew's Valparaiso Crusaders, the first of this week's two league opponents depending heavily on three freshmen (ok, the NCAA's order forcing Benjamin Fumey to forfeit a year of eligibility makes him a sophomore this year, but he's still in his first season). And while both Fumey and fifth-year senior Urule Igbavboa (the conference's second

returning rebounder, behind UIC's Scott VanderMeer) are reasonably strong physically, and 6-4 freshman Long Beach, California native De'Andre Haskins is awfully skilled, none of them displayed anything even remotely near J'Nathan's toughness, both physically and mentally.

And with Bullock's mental toughness feeding good outside shooting this night (29 points, on 10-13 shooting, including 2-2 from the arc), well, the Crusaders were never really in the game.

Heck, when one team has a player as tough as Bullock, and the other team doesn't, that "other team" is rarely in the game.

CSU Led 31-14 at halftime, scored the first 8 of the second half, and won easily 66-42.

In addition to Bullock's toughness, the other thing this game was about was pace.

Coach Homer Drew desperately tried to control the pace, to slow down the pressing, stealing, running Vikings, and even succeeded for stretches.

In fact, Coach was able to make it a slow halfcourt game for the first 7½ minutes, but due to Valpo's poor shooting (2-8 those opening minutes-with 4 turnovers-20% for the half, and 31% for the game), the Crusaders weren't able to use the slow pace they created in stretches to advantage, trailing 6-4 at the 7½ minute mark.

Frustrated by that inability, over the next 5 minutes Valpo was dictated to by the Vikings, and in what was now a frenetic full-court game CSU went on a 14-0 run that iced the game, leading 20-4.

Bullock had 7 of the 20, on a trey, a perimeter two-pointer and two free throws.

After his best game, and best shooting game, of the season, Bullock made a cryptic-though clearly self-effacing-comment about his shooting: "there are streaky shooters, pure shooters, and ‘made' shooters, and I'm none of the three." I'm not quite sure what a "made" shooter is, but I get the idea.

Coach Waters attributed the win to his group's terrific focus on defense, and

complimented the offense on earning 19 assists on 26 baskets (particularly impressive against 30 minutes of zone).

And Coach talked about sophomore swingman D'Aundray Brown (10 points, 4-7, 4 rebounds, 6 assists and 3 turnovers), comparing his contributions in every area except perimeter shooting to those Dennis Rodman used to make in the NBA (and yes, it'll be D'Andray who matches up against Butler's 6-8 shooter deluxe Gordon Hayward on Thursday night).

Coach's biggest smile was in talking about the energy provided off the bench by senior forward/center George Tandy.

Without scoring a single point in his 24 minutes, Tandy's 10 boards ended a streak during which the Vikings had been outrebounded by every Division I opponent this year.

So now with this week's "prelim" under their belts, the Vikings will prepare for the main event, the Butler Bulldogs coming to town tomorrow night (tipping at 8 pm to accommodate ESPN-U). While Butler also relies heavily on three freshmen (all of whom start), well, Ronald Nored, Shelvin Mack and particularly Gordon Hayward are MUCH better freshmen than Valpo's.

AND, they join a player arguably as tough as Bullock, sophomore center Matt Howard.

When someone asked Coach about Butler at the end of last night's interview, he talked about their three terrific freshmen, and told us that "I hear one of them [obviously Gordon Hayward] is gonna be a pro."

Precisely what this writer wrote in another venue after catching Butler's first exhibition game.

For those of you who think Butler should be easy after graduating four of five starters, think again. Brad Stevens having reloaded, this group is more athletic than last year's, and better defensively. And while Nored and junior forward Willie Veasley don't shoot like the Butler team you remember, Zach Hahn and Grant Leiendecker shoot pretty well off the bench, supplementing Hayward and Mack.

And Matt Howard is now homogenized, like Bullock a man out there, in his case a man three inches taller than J'Nathan.

And while they won't match up man-to man, I suspect there will be plenty of mano-a-mano between Howard and Bullock under the backboards tomorrow night.

So if you're a college basketball fan in northeast Ohio, you should try to get to Wolstein Arena on Thursday night. The old champ against the preseason favorite, good freshmen against good seniors, a controlled pace against a frenetic pace. But most of all, one tough grown man against another in Howard v. Bullock; may the better-and tougher-man win.

CSU news and notes:

- With CSU having the game well in-hand 13:45 into the second half, Coach Drew became involved in an unfortunate exchange with official John Gaffney, resulting in two technicals and an expulsion, the first of Drew's long career. Later, Coach Drew was characteristically warm and understated about the technicals-which included the fastest second technical I've ever seen.

While this writer knows Philadelphia's John Gaffney from CAA days, likes him on the court and off, and has even enjoyed a beverage with him, based on the absence of profanity in Drew's vocabulary, his age, reputation and overall warmth, respectfully Gaffney didn't need to call that second technical foul.

I suspect Gaffney knows that better than anyone.

- It's off to YSU for Valparaiso for a game Thursday night (beginning an hour before CSU tips with Butler). Also on Thursday in this wonderful December week of conference play in the Horizon, Detroit visits Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Wright State visits Wisconsin Green-Bay.