Cleveland State heads into the thick of the Horizon League schedule this week with a difficult road trip to Wright State and Detroit. CSU (10-4, 1-1) started conference play by splitting with Valparaiso and Butler in early December. After following with a loss at West Virginia to fall to 5-4, the Vikings are now in the midst of a five-game winning streak. Wright State is riding a winning streak of its own and was one of the pre-season favorites in the Horizon League while Detroit is undefeated at home and boasts a 20-1 all-time record against CSU in Detroit. Ryan Aroney looks ahead to the big week for the Vikes.

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Throughout the non-conference portion of the schedule, the Vikings received big contributions from four players. All-League seniors J'Nathan Bullock and Cedric Jackson were expected to make the Vikings offense go, and for the most part, the pair has lived up to the hype. Bullock has been stellar in leading the team with 14.5 points and 7.1 rebounds per contest while also leading the team in three point shooting (14-35, .400), and free throw percentage (37-51, .725).

Jackson has stumbled out of the gate with his shooting from the floor (44-139, .317) and from three (7-38, .184), but the playmaking guard has recently shown signs of getting back to the attacking style that made him an all-conference

selection a year ago and a pre-season candidate for Player of the Year honors in the Horizon League. Despite the shooting struggles, Jackson has stuffed the stat sheet on his way to averages of 9.3 points, 5.1 rebounds and 5.1 assists and is 16th in the nation with 2.9 steals per game.

The pleasant surprise on the season has been the emergence of sophomores Norris Cole and D'Aundray Brown. Cole has actually supplanted the slumping Jackson as the team's second scoring option while also stepping up as the team's defensive stopper. The 6-1 Dayton native is averaging 11.6 points and 2.5 assists while playing a team-high 30.5 minutes per game.

A native of Youngstown, Brown's all-out hustling style exemplifies the type of player that Gary Waters looks to recruit. The 6-4 forward is averaging 8.4 points, 5.4 rebounds and 2.6 assists per game while shooting 51-percent (48-94) from the floor. The hard nosed Brown unofficially leads the nation in floor burns from his repeated trips to the floor in pursuit of every loose ball.

The big men for CSU have been solid, with seniors Chris Moore and George Tandy combining to average 9.5 points, 8.9 rebounds and 2.0 blocks per game in just over 40 total minutes. Moore, a 6-9 senior, has started every game in the middle this season and is playing with improved confidence while putting up 4.9 points and 3.3 rebounds per contest.

The 6-8 Tandy has become a dominant rebounder off the bench for the Vikings. Tandy pulled down a career high 13 rebounds in 24 minutes in the win over Kent and is second on the team for the season with 5.6 rebounds in only 18.9 minutes per game.

With the way CSU is suffocating teams with their defense, the Vikings figure to be in the Horizon League race down to the season finale at Butler. CSU has held nine-of-14 opponents on the season to under 40-percent shooting, including eight-of-the-last-nine. The pieces are in place to make a run into March, but the

key to getting off to a fast start in the Horizon League will be getting the old Cedric Jackson back to help ignite the offense.

Previewing Wright State: Tuesday December 30th, 7 p.m. at Wright State's Nutter Center

The first game of the week takes place on Tuesday at 7 p.m. at Wright State. The Raiders were picked to finish second in the Horizon League's pre-season poll but got off to a horrendous start after all-league guard Vaughn Duggins was sidelined with a broken right ring finger. Wright State (6-7, 0-2) started the season 0-6 but has rebounded to win six-of-seven including victories over Oral Roberts, South Florida and Murray State to capture the San Juan Shootout last week in Puerto Rico. Wright State has learned to play without their leader and is playing good basketball during its current four-game winning streak. The Raiders only loss in the last three weeks came by 12 points at Wake Forest.

In the absence of Duggins, Wright State is lead by a pair of players with ties to the state of Alabama. Junior College transfer Cory Cooperwood was a two-time Alabama Junior College Player of the Year at Wallace State CC and junior guard John David Gardner was an Alabama high school standout, originally playing for head coach Brad Brownell at UNC-Wilmington before both made the move north to Wright State.

Cooperwood has made an immediate impact for the Raiders. The 6-7 forward averages 10.3 points and 5.0 rebounds per game while shooting an even 50-percent (47-94) from the floor. The athletic forward plays with a ton of energy and excels on the offensive glass. Cooperwood averages nearly three offensive rebounds per game and has pulled down more than half of his total rebounds on the season on the offensive end of the floor.

Gardner is a smart player that knows how to get open and can shoot from long range. The junior has played in all 13 games, including 11 starts, and is shooting

47-percent (42-89) from the floor, 36-percent (8-22) from beyond the arc and 81-percent (29-36) from the line while averaging 9.3 points per game. The 6-4 guard plays a solid floor game as well, chipping in 3.6 assists with a nearly 2-to-1 assist-to-turnover ratio and 1.3 steals per game.

The Vikings won at Wright State a year ago in a down-to-the-wire thriller that featured the since graduated Kevin Francis knocking in a game winning three with 11.7 seconds remaining. The victory catapulted CSU to an eventual second place finish in the Horizon League.

Previewing Detroit: Saturday January 3rd, 4 p.m. on STO at Detroit's Calihan Hall

The road trip concludes Saturday at 4 p.m. at Detroit in SportsTime Ohio's first CSU broadcast of the season. Detroit is off to a 4-7, 0-2 start under first year coach Ray McCallum but the Titans are 3-0 at Calihan Hall. The Titans are 20-1 all time against the Vikings in the city of Detroit with the only blemish coming from last season's 74-64 CSU victory.

Detroit's best player on the young season has been Xavier Keeling. Keeling played as a freshman at Indiana before transferring to Wallace State CC in Alabama where he was a teammate of Wright State's Cooperwood. The bruising forward was averaging 12.4 points and 6.6 rebounds in seven games before aggravating an off-season injury to his left foot.

Detroit has missed Keeling's production, but even when he was on the floor, the Titans were led by junior point guard Woody Payne. The 5-11 left hander averages 8.5 points, 3.7assists and 2.3 steals per contest and is counted on to lock-up the oppositions best scoring guard. Payne is not shooing well on the season but he's quick off the dribble and excels at penetrating. The veteran started 21 games last year and has started every game this season while averaging a team-high 33.0 minutes per game.

With Keeling on the sideline, Detroit's best front court player has been junior Thomas Kennedy. The 6-7 junior college transfer is averaging 10.2 points and 4.4 rebounds per game. The highly sought after Kennedy was McCallum's first recruit after leading Mott CC to back-to-back junior college national championships.

At the conclusion of the Detroit contest, the Vikings return home next week for a Thursday game with Loyola and a Saturday game with Illinois-Chicago. It will be a great opportunity to get out and see the Vikings as the Cavs are off and both games feature double-headers with the CSU women starting at 5 p.m. and the men tipping off at 7:30 p.m.