Cleveland State was coming off three big wins. Wright State started the season playing poorly, but has been coming around as of late, despite being without their best player, Vaughn Duggins. It made for an interesting Horizon League matchup. Wright State played stifling first half defense, then shot 65% in the second half to walk away with a relatively easy 71-62 win over CSU. Jay Pearlman writes about it for us.

Cleveland State was coming off three straight Division I wins. And while Syracuse should finish as an NIT team rather than in their present no. 11 ranking, and preseason MAC favorite Kent State isn't nearly as good as Coach Waters' last Kent team, those were CSU's two best games of the year, especially defensively. Wright State had also been playing well, but against generally lesser competition. 6-7 on the season, 0-2 in conference (early losses at both Wisconsin schools), and their best player, Vaughn Duggins out since early December.

But for those paying attention, there were signs. They played Wake Forest even in the second half of a 66-53 loss, and defended well against the Demon Deacs (Wake is legitimate top 15 team). Had little trouble winning three against a weak field in San Juan the week before Christmas, but one of those easily dispatched was South Florida of the Big East, albeit near the bottom of that conference. And that much traveled and even more often injured guard from Alabama, John David Gardner, finally reaching his potential, averaging 9 points and 4 assists (and just 2 turnovers), and named MVP down in San Juan. (I don't know if he's quite good enough to have corrected a Cleveland-based reporter who called him "John" instead of "John David").

A group of relative unknowns without Duggins, the Raiders opened up in a styfling sluffing half-court man-to-man defense, holding CSU to two J'Nathan Bullock field goals in going up 19-6 in the first 13½ minutes. At that point in the game, Bullock had taken 9 shots to earn two buckets, the rest of the Vikes were 0-7, and WSU had control of both the game and its pace. And while a desperation trey and four-point play by Eric Schiele late in the half allowed CSU to crawl within 5 at halftime (27-22), the script had already been written in that first half, a half in which CSU shot just 22%.

If you've been to any of the Vikings' games, or listened to Al Pawlowski on radio, you know this CSU team is a team built on defense, on relentless man-to-man pressure. And true, that defense was solid against Syracuse and Kent. But those games were games in which the Vikings were even or on the lead, rather than behind, and on the lead the Vikings applied great pressure without reaching and lunging and fouling. While those of us who coached are fond of saying that a team comes from behind on defense, we don't generally mean all at once; rather, a team comes back with defensive toughness and pressure over the course of many possessions, perhaps continually for a half of basketball or more. This night, down 5 at the half, by 10 at the 2:50 mark of the second (37-27), and by 13 at the 11 minute mark (53-40), CSU's guards patrolled the passing lanes looking for steals, reached for dribbles for the same purpose, and were often beaten by back doors and with dribble penetration. That enabled Wright State to shoot 65% in the second half, and resulted in CSU committing 16 fouls in that half (27 for the game) and the Raiders shooting 18 free throws that half (30 in the game). The game wasn't nearly as close as the 71-62 final scored indicated.

So with the benefit of hindsight, we can take a fresh look at Wright State. First, publications that didn't pick CSU first in the conference (eg, USA Today) picked Wright State (interestingly, no one picked Butler). Second, WSU started off with a tough loss to a good team, Illinois State (now 13-0), lost in overtime at a tough venue in Central Michigan, lost to a rugged Miami of Ohio, and then lost Duggins while losing three more road games. But they had (and have) Brad Brownell as head coach, the very same Brad Brownell who won 83 games in four seasons earlier this decade at UNC-Wilmington, two CAA Conference Tournaments, then won 44 games his first two years at Wright State, and upset Butler to win the Horizon Tourney in 2007. That's 3 NCAA appearances the last 6 years. And the job he's doing with this no-name group could be the finest of his career.

One thing Brownell has on this no-name Duggins-less team is size in the

backcourt. The three guards Coach started this night were 6-3 (Will Graham), 6-4 (Gardner), and 6-5 (Todd Brown). In this game those three scored 7, 12 and 13, respectively, and they pulled down 7, 4 and 9 rebounds. And how they stymied CSU's guards: Cedric Jackson continued a brutal offensive season scoring just 8 on 2-8 shooting, and soon-to-be-star freshman Trevon Harmon scored 5 on 1-8 shooting; only Norris Cole among CSU's guards was able to contribute, continuing his stellar play at both ends by scoring 18 and shooting 7-11. In addition to often guarding Bullock (who had to take 18 shots to score 23), forward Cory Cooperwood led Wright State in scoring this night, tallying 15 on 6-13 shooting.

The more interesting of the two teams right now is Wright State. Duggins is due back early in the new year, more likely next Thursday at Butler than this Saturday against Youngstown State at home. And Coach would not rule out redshirting him for the season, depending on how he practices and in consultation with his family. And while this reporter does expect the preseason first-team all-conference selection to play again shortly, because they were losing with him and are now winning without him, integrating Duggins back into the Raider lineup will be a bit delicate. On the bright side, if Duggins can return to all-league form, and Gardner and company can continue to contribute and improve, this Wright State team can become even stronger as they move through conference play. And with CSU struggling (and Illinois-Chicago's surprising home loss this night to Wisconsin-Milwaukee), Wright State just might be the second best team by late in the conference season.

As for CSU, Coach Waters reported an elbow injury to forward D'Aundray Brown, which caused him to sit out the entire second half. And while disappointed (particularly at his senior leaders, both for the team's poor defense and for taking 27 treys in the game-making just 4), he remained optimistic. "This is a good league," Coach said, and "at the end the winner will have a minimum of four losses." Coach then shifted focus to his next opponent, the University of Detroit Titans, who the Vikings will meet Saturday afternoon in Detroit. As difficult as the road is in the Horizon, one would have to call the UD game an early season must-win road game if CSU hopes to win the regular season crown.

CSU News and Notes:

- Wright State also managed to outrebound CSU, 35-32, a feat accomplished through holding Bullock to single-digit boards (9) and high-flying reserve George Tandy to just 3, this night in 21 minutes.

- Continuing to play a rough and tumble schedule, now-25th ranked Butler came back from a 11-point first half deficit to defeat Alabama-Birmingham at home, 72-68. Freshman guard Shelvin Mack from Lexington, some nights outshined by fellow freshman Gordon Hayward, fueled the early second half comeback with 5 treys, and finished tying his high of 22. Sophomore center Matt Howard scored 19, and Hayward grabbed 9 rebounds. (And I wonder how many times Coach Brownell watched the tape of the December 4th Butler-CSU game).

- Sunday's CSU Detroit game will air in Cleveland on STO television, with Mike Cairns and Franklin Edwards on the game.