Returning home last night from a winless three-game road trip at 4-5 in the Horizon League, the pre-season favorite Cleveland State Vikings welcomed the second most disappointing team in the league into Wolstein Arena, the 0-9 University of Detroit Titans. The Vikes got things back on track with a 66-49 win, and Jay Pearlman recaps the win for our readers in his latest piece.

Returning home last night from a winless three-game road trip at 4-5 in the Horizon League, the pre-season favorite Cleveland State Vikings welcomed the second most disappointing team in the league into Wolstein Arena, the 0-9 University of Detroit Titans. Of course, UD harbored no illusion of conference championship or the like in 2008-09, based on the quality of the returnees and largely junior college additions made by late-hired new head coach Ray McCallum. That said, despite the efforts of UD's best player, junior forward Thomas Kennedy (14 points on 6-15 shooting and 7 rebounds), CSU wore down and then pushed around UD last night, by a final score of 66-49. It was a first-and absolutely necessary-step back from the abyss of poor defense and insufficient toughness demonstrated by the Vikings these past three games.

While we shouldn't risk overreacting to a home win against a bad team, we should report here that last night's win was the finest in a series of fine performances by CSU sophomore guard Norris Cole, whose play was the lone bright spot amid the recent losing. Coming into the game, Cole had steadily climbed up the conference scoring list to 11th, averaging just under 12 points per game on 44% shooting, and his 21 this night on 8-14 shooting (3-6 from the arc) undoubtedly vaulted him into the top ten. He also grabbed 4 rebounds this night, and dished out 3 assists.

But in CSU's forgettable last two weeks, the thing about Cole's game most worth remembering has been his defensive improvement, in the face of defensive lapses all around him culminating in a stellar job on Youngstown State's high-scoring two-guard Kelvin Bright on Friday night. This night, with defensive stalwart D'Aundray Brown still injured and unavailable, for the first nearly 13 minutes Cedric Jackson was assigned to defend 6-7 Tom Kennedy, who walked around and shot over Jackson for 12 of UD's 22 points and a 22-21 Titan lead (Kennedy shooting 5-8 over that stretch). Then for the final 7:11 of the half, Cole was assigned to Kennedy (both in man-to-man and in a box and one), and by holding Kennedy scoreless over that period (in fact, shotless) Cole changed the game, snuffing out any hope UD had of winning. Cole's superb defense on Kennedy allowed the Vikes to go from one point down at 12:49 to 8 points up at the half, 34-26. The rest of the game was, as they say, academic.

After the game I asked Norris about his improved defense, and as is his style, he answered generally that "Coach told me he wants to see me as a premier defender, and I've been working on that in practice." The nugget or two came when I pressed him, asking what has he noticed he is doing defensively now that he didn't do this time last year. "Not reaching as much, playing defense with my feet instead of my hands, forcing my man away from the middle of the court, just being disciplined." Well, there's someone who has learned the "how to" of playing defense, and more than talking a good defensive game, he's showing it on the floor. Now for Norris' fellow Vikings (especially the guards) to do the same.

CSU forward George Tandy took a turn at guarding Kennedy in the second half, and while the game was more or less decided by then, Tandy also did a terrific job on UD's best player. So good, in fact, that

Kennedy added just one field goal in the second stanza (on 7 shots), finishing with 14 points for the game. With Norris Cole showing the way, CSU wasn't threatened in the second half, winning easily by 17.

After Coles left the post-game news conference, Coach Waters turned his attention to Saturday's Wolstein opponent, Wright State. The 7-3 Raiders have now redshirted their best player, injured preseason All-Conference selection Vaughn Duggins, and their injury prone second best player, John David Gardner, is day-to-day with a hip injury. Gardner didn't play in last night's 67-61 win in Youngstown, so much of the scoring fell on fast-improving 6-5 junior Canton-McKinley product Todd Brown, who scored 20 last night on 7-14 shooting, including 5-9 in treys. Coach Brad Brownell's defense, as fundamentally sound as any in the country, is played by a no-name group, but that defense gets better each night. That combination-with Gardner available for the full game-was enough to beat CSU in Dayton on December 30, in a game not nearly as close as the 71-62 final score. This should be a great game, and a fun evening, at Wolstein Saturday night.

Cleveland State News and Notes:

If you will indulge me, in addition to covering Cleveland State for The Cleveland Fan and the Horizon League for Hoopville, in the last few weeks this writer has had the chance to see Kent State play three times and Akron twice (as well as Youngstown State against CSU, and two other times). Now, previously I've had the good fortune to observe first hand the frenzy that is Big Five Basketball in Philadelphia (really, Big Four plus Drexel), and at an earlier time I witnessed the cancellation of the "Basketball Beanpot" in Boston, really before it had a

chance to get off the ground. The northeast section of Ohio, and these four fine schools, could use a Northeast Ohio Big Four, and an agreement among the four that the two MAC schools will play the two Horizon schools once each year, presumably one non-conference game at home and one away. And along with the in-conference match-ups, potential meetings in the respective conference tournaments, and less likely potential meetings in the NCAA, NIT or CBI Tournaments, records among these teams should be kept each year, and something like a "Lake Erie Cup" should be given to the winner. In this year's highly unofficial Lake Erie Cup standings, with each pair of conference teams still to play one another one more time in the regular season (and CSU and Akron not playing each other at all), here are the current standings:

Akron: 2-0

Cleveland State: 1-1

Kent State: 1-2

Youngstown State: 1-2

I think a Big Four series will intensify rivalries, help fill gyms, and create regional television opportunities. And just maybe help create more "mid-major buzz" around water coolers at offices throughout northeast Ohio.