The days are getting longer, the snow is melting and the breeze has a hint of spring in it. March isn't too far off. As college basketball teams begin their final stretch of conference play, tournament play and March Madness are on the horizon. Cleveland State (19-8, 10-5 HL) plays its final regular season home game tonight. In this column, CSU coach Gary Waters talks about preparing for college basketball's

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I believe the last part of the regular season is a key component to the success a team has in their conference tournament. By this part of the season, a coaching staff has seen its team nearly every day for four months. You've learned how they respond to coaching, instruction and game preparation-as a team and as individuals. You've learned their reaction to success and hardships, victories and defeats. And your underclassmen have either played and/or practiced enough so you know what they can do.

Our coaching staff has prided itself in getting our team better each and every game down the stretch of the regular season. We want to make sure that our

team is playing at its highest level to begin tournament play. In tournament play, the margin for error is terribly slim. One missed defensive assignment, one turnover, one bad shot, one rebound, etc. can mean the difference between advancing to the next round or going home.

Therefore, in every practice, we are dedicated to execution and emphasizing attention to detail. This has allowed our teams to perform consistently during the late stages of games at this time of the year. Most games near the end of the regular season will be decided in the last four minutes of a contest. At this time of the season, we design practice sequences that prepare us for close end-of-game situations. We also put a great deal of emphasis on the areas necessary for individual improvement by each player and how they are performing together. This is especially true for freshmen, because at this stage of their first college season, they have already played more games than they did in their longest high school season.

The final third of the regular season is a most challenging time for college teams because you are playing your league opponents for a second time. By this time of the year, each team has an awareness of everything you might throw at them. Therefore, you must make adjustments to stay a step ahead of your opponent. As a coach, you may have to add new wrinkles and identify new strategies to help better prepare your team for the second time around. However, those adjustments need to be made in the context of your program's philosophy. While you may make adjustments to your game strategy, they shouldn't compromise your team's identity.

At Cleveland State, we personally identify the post season time of the year as a separate season. We are committed to positioning ourselves during the second half of the regular season to put us in a position for the highest possible seed in the post season tournament. Again, practice planning is a key to postseason preparation. We must make sure that our players are rested and not overworked during this time of the year so they are able to play extra minutes if needed throughout the tournament. We also make a special effort to help prepare our younger players for a daily challenge at practice and their development during the final league games. This time of the season is especially vital for the maturity of

each and every underclassman.

College teams that have a tradition of advancing to postseason play have an advantage every year they return there. Their experience and tradition, developed by coaches and administrative staffs over time, help their teams to prepare for the demands of postseason play. Each year presents a new challenge for a program to better prepare them for the postseason. The success they acquire during post season only enhances their ability to perform at the highest level during tournament play.

Our Cleveland State experience last year in the NIT is something we can build on to further our confidence during post season play this year. We are looking forward to the challenge and the readiness for post season play this year.

*CSU's regular season finale on Wednesday, February 18 is also Gary Waters Bobblehead Day for the first 1,000 fans. Wolstein Center doors open at 5:30 for the Great Indoor Tailgate Party and Garage Sale on the arena floor featuring $1 hot dogs, sodas, and chips with games and prizes. The Vikings tip off at 7 p.m. against Northeast Ohio Horizon League rival Youngstown State Penguins. Tickets start at just $8. Visit [www.csuvikings.com](http://www.csuvikings.com) or call (216) 687-4848 for information.*