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After each plays a bracket-buster on Saturday, the Horizon teams will all have two league games remaining.

The short story of last night's Viking win was that they pressured, stole and ran for the first 10½ minutes of the game, were then forced to play half-court against YSU's zone for the next 29½ minutes, saw YSU pull within 2 with 23 second left in the game, and survived Kelvin Bright's penetration and a clean 12 foot look to tie with five seconds, before extending to 4 on a Cedric Jackson runout at the buzzer.

It was a wonderfully exciting game for the crowd at Wolstein (those coming out in lieu of watching the Cavs on television), though doubtless tighter than Coach Waters and his staff would have liked (particularly after going up 22-8 at the 10:38 mark).

Watching the game-which like the Wright State win and some others was really more like two games-I realized that I've been writing something in this space all year long (really two things) that even under my magnifying glass may not be entirely consistent. One is that CSU's guards lunge and reach way too much, play defense with their arms instead of their feet, and that when they don't get steals they either foul or are simply out of position to defend.
The other is that in order to win, this wonderfully athletic but poor-shooting team must play a transition rather than half-court game, apply constant pressure and push tempo, which I've sometimes described as "play the game in the schoolyard."

Well, to come clean, I probably can't have it both ways;

EITHER they're gonna make the game into a schoolyard game (and in the schoolyard, steals are the currency of winning), OR they're gonna stop reaching and lunging and play solid.

One way or the other, but not both.

And since the Vikings played last night's game in the schoolyard, built up a big lead, and held on to win, well, I guess they won largely due to their 15 steals, 12 in the first half, including a career high of 7 by Jackson, and two each by freshmen Trevon Harmon and Jeremy Montgomery, who for good or for bad seem to be emulating Jackson at the defensive end.

Now, while it worked out last night, it's hardly that simple. Taking this a step further, coming into last night's games, three of our Horizon teams were highly ranked in scoring defense:

Wright State was second in the nation surrendering 55.3, Butler fifth surrendering 57.0, and CSU eleventh, giving up 58.9.

But quite obviously, Wright State and Butler, on the one hand, and CSU on the other, defend quite differently.

First in CSU's favor, somewhat like teams we all remember at Princeton and Dartmouth that led the nation in scoring defense, part of the success in Dayton and Indy is based on slow-down offense.

Hold the ball for 30+ seconds before shooting, minimize opposition attempts, and by default your scoring defense will be pretty good.

But second, Butler and Wright State play tight, sluffing man-to-man defense (WSU's so good it reminds me of Bob Knight's early teams at Indiana), force you to beat them from deep (generally with your third and fourth best shooters), and send both guards (or someone in lieu of a penetrating guard) back to cover the backcourt rather than to the offensive board (we used to call that "court balance"), and as a result those teams are 9th and 6th in the nation, respectively, in an even more important defensive category, field-goal percentage defense.

On the other hand, whether pressing full-court or digging and lunging in half-court, CSU's man-to-man defense isn't nearly as solid, and when they don't make a steal the Vikings are vulnerable to guard penetration, in the post, on the perimeter, and to back-door cuts.

So last night, the Vikes made steals and forced turnovers (the stats said 17 turnovers, but it felt like 100), and early on, even when YSU got a shot off, too many Penguins chased offensive boards rather than defending their backcourt. But once Jerry Slocum went to a tight 2-3 zone half way through the first half, and sixth man Kelvin Bright began helping point guard D'Andre Mays control the ball against pressure, well, YSU dominated the last three quarters of the game.

And if Lithuanian sophomore forward Vytas Sulskis-who dominated the second half-had just hit one or two of his perimeter shots that rimmed (he scored 14 on 4-11 and 1-4 from the arc, but most of the rest were darned close), well, Youngstown State would have posted its second win over CSU this winter.

And looking ahead to the conference tournament, it sure doesn't seem that the schoolyard style of defending will transfer to success. Sure, Jackson and Co. will make steals and get runouts against the second

division clubs (including in the likely first round home game on Tuesday March 3rd).

And it may work against Josh Mayo's teammates at UIC, even against Wright State with Duggins and Gardner out (as it did for 10 of the 80 minutes the teams played this winter), maybe even against Milwaukee.

Heck, it worked against the sloppy and overrated Orange of Syracuse, who managed 16 turnovers against the Vikes, 4 by Jonny Flynn.

But it won't work against Rahmon Fletcher and Troy Cotton in Green Bay's backcourt, and it surely won't work against Ronald Nored and Shelvin Mack of Butler.

To beat those teams one simply must play solid half-court defense, rebound defensively, and hit a decent percentage from the perimeter.

And that's just not something CSU seems capable of doing.

Cleveland State news and notes:

- Up 7 with a minute and a half to go, the Vikes played sloppily down the stretch, giving YSU that shot at overtime.

After a Jackson layup and free throw made the lead 7 at 18:30, a Sulskis jumper at 18:45 cut the lead to 5.

Then J'Nathan Bullock uncharacteristically stepped on the sideline for a turnover at 18:58, leading to a YSU basket by Jack Liles, cutting the lead to 3.

Then, following a Chris Moore foul and a missed free-throw by Liles, the biggest play of the game took place at the 19:37 mark, with the culprit again Bullock.

J'Nathan lost his dribble between the circles in the front court, and the scramble for the loose ball was interrupted by Mike Foote's whistle signaling a held ball, presumably by Bullock and YSU's Bright.

Most in the gym thought the ball was still loose (ie, that it wasn't held by anyone, let alone by two players), and with the possession arrow favoring YSU, the crowd howled.

On the bench Coach Waters screamed something-he later told us he was screaming to his team, not at the officials-and despite the calming efforts of Director of Operations Bill Buck, Coach's vehemence earned a quick technical, courtesy of official Tim Fogarty.

Sulskis missed one and made one at the line, cutting CSU's lead to 2.

Then, with 23 seconds left Coach Slocum eschewed a timeout, YSU inbounded at midcourt, and the action that followed led to Bright's miss at 19:55.

Scary sequence for the Vikes.

- It's off to Wichita State for the Vikes Saturday, their

bracket-buster tilt to tip at 3 pm eastern time. Then it's the Indiana swing to end the season, at Valpo at 8:30 eastern on Thursday, and at Butler at noon on Saturday.

The tip of that February 28th Butler game has been moved up to noon to accommodate ESPNU.

- While CSU visits Valpo and Butler, Green Bay will travel to Detroit and Wright State to finish up the year.

That Green Bay-Wright State game tips at 7 on Saturday the 28th, time enough for this writer to get from Indy to Dayton, and perhaps for the Vikes to get home to watch on the Horizon League Network.

That GB-WSU game may still have an impact on the second seed, or the third, although if Cleveland State and Green Bay both win on Thursday (CSU at Valpo and Green Bay at Detroit), the second and third seeds will have been decided before play on Saturday.

- The final Friday night ESPNU game of the season will be a battle of Chicago, as UIC visits resurgent Loyola at 9 pm on the 27th.