The Cleveland State Vikings stayed hot last night, winning their eighth straight Horizon Conference game with a 71-64 home win over Valparaiso. Led by J'Nathan Bullock and George Tandy, the Vikings latest win came close to assuring them of the 3rd seed and a home game in the first round of the conference tournament.

With the season having dwindled down to just one regular season game, the Horizon Tournament, and potentially something beyond, Cleveland State appears to have figured out something essential for success in college basketball: how to beat lesser teams in their own gyms. Earlier in the season the Vikes couldn't do that at Wright State (even with Vaughn Duggins sidelined and John David Gardner playing just seven ineffective minutes); they couldn't do it in Milwaukee; and most glaringly, they couldn't do it at Youngstown State. But finally, in the month of February, the Vikings have won all three of their road games against lesser competition, winning earlier this month at Illinois-Chicago (barely) and at Loyola, and last night at Valparaiso. Just one more road game left in the regular season, tomorrow against Butler, hardly a "lesser" opponent.

Those three road wins are part of an eight-game in-conference winning streak the Vikes are now on (bringing them to 12-5 in the Horizon), a streak which started two games too late to get the pre-season league favorites a 1st or 2nd seed and the resulting double-bye in the upcoming tournament. Instead, despite the win at Valpo, wins last night by Butler (now 14-3, after winning 78-57 at home against YSU), and Green Bay (now 13-4 with the tiebreaker over CSU, after winning 78-62 at Detroit) have assured those two schools the first two seeds, in one order or the other, and the best the Vikes can hope for is the 3rd

seed and a home tournament opener on Tuesday. Coming into the final game, CSU holds a one-game lead over 11-6 Wright State, with Wright State to host Green Bay tomorrow night, seven hours after CSU tips at Butler. Either a CSU win or a Wright State loss gives the Vikes the 3rd seed, and in the event a WSU win and a CSU loss forge a tie, the applicable tiebreaker for 3rd will be determined by other action in the league tomorrow.

In last night's game, rather surprisingly Valpo appeared to show man-to-man in the first minute and a half (why EVER man-to-man the Vikes?), but when ever-improving Norris Cole broke down his man to draw a foul on Cameron Witt at the goal at the 1:17 mark, Coach Drew sensibly abandoned his man-to-man in favor of a 1-1-3 tucked in half-court zone. Over the next eight and a half minutes of play, that zone and grinding half-court play on offense allowed the Crusaders to control the game, and at the 9:55 mark Valpo led 19-11. But then, in what this writer might respectfully call overcoaching, veteran Coach Drew began switching defenses, resuming some man defense and showing half-court traps on multiple Viking possessions. Well, Valpo isn't athletic enough to play man against CSU, and they certainly can't trap the Vikes, and what the Crusaders accomplished by switching defenses was to restore the game to a pace more to CSU's liking. As a result, led by George Tandy (15 points on 6-8 and 6 rebounds in the game) and J'Nathan Bullock (25 on 9-11 and 6 boards), the Vikes went on a 20-9 run over the last ten minutes of the half, and led 31-28 at the break.

The Vikings' run continued in the second half, with CSU getting lots of easy baskets and converting 14 of 17 in the half (82%). The Viking lead topped out at 17 (65-48) at the 17:18 mark. And while a furious rush by Valpo in the last two and a half minutes made the 71-64 final score look more respectable, the outcome was never in doubt after the first media timeout of the second half. Senior center Urule Igbavboa had 17 points

(7-11) and 8 rebounds for the Crusaders (despite foul trouble in the second half), and budding freshman star De'Andre Haskins 18 (6-10, 3-6 from the arc), but much of Haskins' scoring came after the issue was decided. Of note, previously injured and inconsistent Valpo freshman point guard Erik Buggs played only 11 minutes, and his last minute trey provided the only bench-points of the night for the Crusaders (and CSU's guards also held Valpo's second leading scorer Michael Rogers scoreless in the game).

Now, it's on to Hinkle to play a game that still has meaning to Butler (a win assures Butler the no. 1 seed and that rounds 2 and 3--and the final if Butler is still playing--will be played at Hinkle. Then, CSU will play either Valparaiso or Detroit at home on Tuesday night, and if they should win, continue on to Hinkle for a quarter-final game on Friday.

One additional thought: while on the one hand, the way February played out for the Vikes causes this writer to muse over what might have been (playing better earlier could have earned that first round bye so crucial to prospects in the tourney), from another point of view-oddly--the 3rd or 4th seed just might end up helping the Vikes. Remember that while the Vikings are now 21-9 overall, because three of those 21 wins are sub-Division I wins, the Vikes' "real" record is just 18-9. Win or lose tomorrow in Butler, and however they do in the conference semis should they get that far, being forced to play two additional games in the Horizon Tournament will at the very least get that D-1 win total up to 20, perhaps higher (not two great D-1 wins, but D-1 wins nonetheless). And in the event the Vikes don't prevail in the Horizon Tournament, 20 or 21 D-1 wins (rather than 18 or 19) looks much better on CSU's resume. Are you listening, NIT Selection Committee?

Cleveland State News and Notes:

- In a battle between teams tied for fourth coming into last night's action, home-standing Wright State rebounded from a 5-point halftime deficit to defeat Wisconsin-Milwaukee 70-60. Todd Brown once again led the Raiders with 21 points (7-13. 4-7) and 6 boards, assisted unexpectedly on the offensive end by defensive oriented guard N'Gai Evans with 17 (5-11, 3-4) and also grabbing 6 boards. James Eayers (aka the Pillsbury Dough Boy) led the losers once again with 21 (6-12, 4-7). Oh, and while this writer doesn't get a vote for Horizon awards, respectfully, how could anyone leave WSU's Brown off their all-conference ballot.

- While the line in the sand between the league's 3rd and 4th seeds isn't nearly as deep as that between nos. 2 and 3, note that no. 3 avoids playing the no. 1 seed (likely Butler) in its own gym until the final game, its semi-final being a true neutral site game. On the other hand, no. 4 will play the host 1st seed in the tournament semi-final.

- In the last Friday night ESPNU Horizon game, UIC visits Loyola tonight, tip-off once again at 9 pm eastern.

- CSU's regular season finale tomorrow at Butler will be played at noon eastern, and also televised on ESPNU.

- As most of you know, after Tuesday night's first round on campus sites, the Horizon Tournament resumes with double-headers Friday and Saturday at the

home of the no. 1 seed, and then concludes with the Final the following Tuesday night at the home gym of the highest remaining seed.