Tonight's second Horizon League quarterfinal game between No. 3 Cleveland State and No.7 Illinois-Chicago turned into a shootout between UIC's all-league senior and conference second leading scorer Josh Mayo, and CSU's budding star sophomore guard Norris Cole. Assigned both to guard Mayo and provide the bulk of CSU's scoring, Cole was up to the task, and behind Cole's 26 points (on 9-16, 2-5 from the arc and 6-6 from the line), CSU came back from a late 9-point deficit to defeat UIC 67-64. The Vikings moved to the semifinals of the Horizon League Tournament with the win, which Jay Pearlman tells our readers about.

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CSU started strong at both ends, and behind the scoring of Cole and Cedric Jackson, the Vikes led by 11 at 16-5 at the 7:17 mark. But guard Robo Kreps led the Flames back with 10 first half points, and UIC trailed by only 2 at the intermission, 29-27. UIC power forward Rob Eppinger managed to score 8 in that first half (on 3-9 shooting), and held CSU's first-team all-league power forward J'Nathan Bullock scoreless for the entire half.

When the teams came out for the second stanza, they both went scoreless for the first 2:53. Then a bucket by Mayo tied the game at 29, and at the first media timeout, CSU led by just one at 32-31. Then came what all of us thought was the move of the game by UIC Coach Jimmy Collins: UIC came out of that first media timeout playing 2-3 zone, which they stayed in for much of the rest of the game. In that zone, over the next 5 minutes the Flames held the Vikings to 5 points, on

just a single field goal by Cole. Slowing the game down to a pace they could win at, from the 4:59 mark until the 13:58 mark, UIC outscored Cleveland State 24-14, and took a commanding 9-point lead at 55-46.

Then the real big move of the game, by CSU Coach Gary Waters: for the last 6 minutes of the game CSU moved its defense up to press full-court, first in the man-to- man, then in a 2-1-2 zone trap, and ultimately in a diamond and one trap. By extending their defense, the Vikings made steals, forced turnovers, scored in transition, and completely took over the game, finishing the game on a 21-9 run, and snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, 67-64. Over the final 5:46 of the game, CSU was led by Cole with 7, and by a suddenly awakened Bullock with 8 of his 9.

In the end, after two Josh Mayo free throws pulled UIC within 2 at 65-63 at 18:59, a Bullock foul sent UIC's Eppinger to the line with two shots to tie the game. He hit one, pulling the Flames to 65-64. Then, UIC fouled the wrong man in Cole, who calmly sank two free throws to extend the lead to three at 67-64 at 19:37. Still UIC had the ball with a chance to tie, but even with two offensive rebounds providing three opportunities from the arc in the final 23 seconds (none by Mayo), UIC could not tie the game and earn five-extra minutes of playing time. CSU snuck out with a win that 5 or 6 minutes earlier seemed most unlikely.

Oh, and by the by, while this hard-fought win was Cleveland State's 23rd of the year, it was also the Vikes' 20th D-I win of the year, a sometimes magic-number for various selection committees.

Coach Waters was effusive in his praise for Norris, reminding the press that the sophomore won the game for him at both ends of the floor. Coach also reminded us that he is now playing without his best defender D'Aundray Brown (who would guard Ryan Tillema tomorrow night against Green Bay), and that his team was able to win this night

despite a subpar performance from Bullock. Coach didn't seem concerned that he'll be zoned again (perhaps for stretches tomorrow night), taking the position that UIC's zone was effective only because seven-foot center Scott Vandermeer was able to take away the inside half of CSU's inside-out zone attack (ie, he neutralized Bullock). Of course, this writer has suggested more than once that no one should play any defense against Cleveland State OTHER THAN a tight sluffing zone, forcing the Vikings to win from the perimeter. If only Jimmy Collins had done that for forty minutes.

Coach Collins was complimentary of his opponent, and of his own seniors Mayo and Vandermeer, and properly concerned about forward Tori Boyd who injured his head during the first half and was taken to a local hospital. He called this game "the story of our season," explaining that his team "played well, took a lead, but then couldn't hold that lead down the stretch." He bemoaned his team's turnovers against pressure and failures to block out on its defensive boards late in the game, and candidly admitted that his team "did not have the energy at the end; you can't relax against CSU, we needed to match their intensity, and we didn't."

Then Coach Collins managed to change the subject, and bring up two issues that were on his mind. First, in addition to his seniors, he is about to lose long time Associate Head Coach Mark Coomes, who is retiring after "being with me for 40 years." Second, Coach chastised the local Indianapolis print media for how little press he saw today for the Horizon Tournament (perhaps that will change tomorrow, with Butler playing).

So after the ultimate reprieve, the Vikes move on to tomorrow night's

semi-final round to face No. 2 seed Wisconsin-Green Bay, that's the Green Bay team which has been off for a week while CSU played two games. Someone's going have to join Cole in scoring (and from the perimeter, no doubt), if CSU is to have a chance to beat Green Bay, and in D'Aundray Brown's absence, someone else is going to have to guard prolific scorer Tillema. It also appears that Phoenix swingman (and last year's defender of the year) Terry Evans will be out injured tomorrow, to some extent neutralizing Brown's injury. It should be interesting tomorrow night here at Hinkle.