For the first time since their magical run in 1986, the Cleveland State Vikings are headed to The Big Dance. Behind Cedric Jackson's MVP performance, 19 points (on 7-12 and 4-8 from the arc), 8 assists and 7 rebounds, Cleveland State defeated Butler at Hinkle Fieldhouse, by a score of 57-54. In doing so, the Vikings won the Horizon League's automatic bid. If you missed this one, all I have to say is "I'm sorry". Jay Pearlman was there for us. And reports on the glorious win by the Vikes.

Now that it's over, it feels all the sweeter when you do it the hard way, playing two extra games, winning the conference championship on the other guys' floor.

And when a senior, Cedric Jackson, who underperformed all year, lost his confidence and looked like he just wanted his career to end quietly, comes back to find the best parts of his game, and uses those to lead his team to victory. Behind Jackson's MVP performance, 19 points (on 7-12 and 4-8 from the arc), 8 assists and 7 rebounds, Cleveland State defeated Butler tonight at Hinkle Fieldhouse, by a score of 57-54. In doing so, the Vikings won the Horizon League's automatic bid; with Butler likely to win an at-large bid, that makes the Horizon a two-bid league this year.

It was a nailbiter throughout, two teams playing hard, defending fiercely, just as they did twice before during the regular season. Somewhat surprisingly, given all of the talent on both sides, the game came down to a shootout between Butler freshman guard Shelvin Mack and Cleveland State senior guard Cedric Jackson, with Jackson getting the better of Mack by the slimmest of margins. Mack finished with one fewer point than Jackson, 18, on 5-10 and 2-7 from the arc. He also pulled down 9 rebounds. Matt Howard added 14 for Butler, on 4-7 shooting. But it wasn't quite enough.

Three times in the game Butler led by as many as 8 points, 25-17 at 13:23 of the first half, after a Mack trey; 27-19 two minutes later on a Mack free throw, and 39-31 1:40 into the second half after a Matt Howard dunk. But each time

Cleveland State dug in deeper on defense, at all five positions on the floor, and held the line, then inched back. Behind the good all around play of Jackson and the shooting of reserve freshman guard Jeremy Montgomery (who finished with 11 on 4-6 and 3-4), over the next 11½ minutes, the Vikes outscored Butler 23-9, to go up 54-48 at the 13:10 mark. In the end, only five points were scored collectively by the two teams in the final 4:55 (4 by Butler and just 1 by CSU); all 5 were on free throws. With Cleveland State up by 2 at 56-54 with under 20 seconds remaining, Cole guarding Haywood and Jackson on Mack, Haywood gave to Mack, who penetrated the left baseline under terrific pressure from Jackson. Largely due to that pressure (and of course the clock ticking down), Mack thought he had a return pass available to Hayward to the right of the key, but threw the pass right to Cole for a turnover. After the Bulldogs fouled Cole, who made one of two from the line to extend CSU's lead to 57-54, Butler had the ball with 14 seconds on the clock, down three. Again under severe defensive pressure, the Bulldogs managed to get two treys off, one by Mack and one by Gordon Hayward, neither close.

A comparison I've used once before, the way this game ended made it feel like the 2008 Super Bowl, with CSU playing the role of the Giants, having lost to these "Pats" twice during the regular year, but having played them tough both times. An incredibly emotional player, Jackson finally found his rhythm in this tournament, and after he made a shot or two, it seemed like months of self-imposed pressure melted away.

We talked to Coach Waters after the game about Jackson, and the return of his confidence. Coach corrected me a bit on that, telling us that "Cedric always had confidence, but was too concerned about his own play, rather than about the team. Earlier in the year he'd look at his stats each night and see only his poor shooting, and not all those other good stats, and he'd feel awful. I would tell him that ‘you're my point guard, be my point guard, and your scoring will come.' And do you want to know who helped Cedric? Quincy Douby of the Sacramento Kings, who played for me at Rutgers, came to practice when the Kings were in town, and sat down with Cedric. He told Cedric, ‘You're worried about the wrong things. As a point guard you need to defend, to distribute, and yes, to make your free throws at the end. Now, if you want to be a good shooter, you need to put the time into that. Come to the gym to shoot every morning at 7:30.' Since then, Cedric's been to the gym to shoot lots of mornings at 7:30."

Coach Stevens, along with Matt Howard and Shelvin Mack, were gracious in

defeat. Stevens said "Cedric was just fabulous tonight. In fact Jackson was great the whole tournament. We were beaten by a really good team tonight. But I just told my team that the last time a Butler team lost the conference championship, we ended up going all the way to the Sweet Sixteen." Coach also added in response to our question that looking ahead to the NCAA Tournament, he is "really encouraged" about the improved play tonight from Mack [who's shooting has been off for almost a month]."

At the end of the night, Coach Waters raised one of his arms and pointed to a ring on one of his fingers. A Kent ring, he acknowledged. "I've been wearing this ring too long, it's time to get a Cleveland State ring." Well, the Vikings have won an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament, and Coach will now get a new tournament ring, one that says Cleveland State on it.

News and Notes:

- This game was so intense, so all-consuming, that the assembled media appeared to forget there were 8 other teams in the tournament besides Butler and Cleveland State. The all-tournament team came exclusively from these two, consisting of Howard and Mack from Butler, and Norris Cole and J'Nathan Bullock for CSU, along with MVP Jackson. While I had a couple of others on my ballot (Ryan Tillema of Wisconsin-Green Bay and Cory Cooperwood of Wright State in lieu of Bullock and Mack), the Final was so good that can appreciate why the voters focused exclusively on players from these two teams.

- Enjoy the Selection Shows on Sunday, and with any luck, the next time you read this space we'll be reporting from one the NCAA sub-regional sites (hopefully one not too too far from home).