There's optimism at the corner of E 22nd and Prospect Ave as the 2010-11 Vikings are deep and experienced. It tells a lot about how far Gary Waters and his staff have brought the Vikes that a .500 team that won ten games in the tough Horizon League was a disappointment last year, but that's what two straight post-seasons and an upset in the NCAA tournament will do to expectations.

CSU returns five players with starting experience and nine letter-winners from last year's 16-17 team. Gone from last year is the disappointing trio of Juco transfers that never lived up to expectations and a brutal schedule that featured five contests against high-major teams. Even with the underperforming transfers and the injuries of a year ago, Waters believes the team could have won 20-games for the third straight year simply by leaving a few power conference schools off the schedule.

That leads us to this year. The Vikings have replaced last year's failed recruiting class with the most highly-rated group of freshman in the Waters era, while the schedule features only West Virginia and South Florida from the high-majors – instead offering the Vikings a chance to test themselves against a stable of solid mid-major programs.

Waters begins his fifth season as the head coach of Vikings this weekend as the CSU host the World Vision Classic.

The Vikings will play four games in four days to start the season for the first time in school history. The tournament field features Bryant, Iona, Kent State and Division II Urbana.

The season tips off Friday at 7:30 against Bryant. The showcase game against Kent is Sunday at 6 p.m., just in time for all you Browns fans to stagger your way from Cleveland Browns Stadium down to the Wolstein Center after the Browns take on the Jets.

***Starters:**

PG Norris Cole, a first team all-Horizon League pick, returns for his third year as the starter after averaging 16.3 points, 4.4 assists and 1.8 steals per game. The Dayton native ranks 9th in school history with 104 consecutive games played to start his career, starting the last 70. Cole enters the season 13th on the CSU all-time scoring list with 1,198 points.

SG Trey Harmon averaged 10.5 points per game last season in his first year as a starter. The junior from Pasadena, CA is known for his tenacious defense and finished 7th in the Horizon League with 1.6 steals per game.

SF D'Aundray Brown, a Horizon League all-Defensive team member, led the conference in steals at 2.5 and finished 13th nationally. The Youngstown native is the heart and soul of the Vikings, constantly taking on bigger players on the defensive end and leading the team in floor burns and hustle plays. The 6-4 senior started much of last season at power forward. Brown has been a mainstay in the Vikings lineup for the past three years but has struggled with injuries because of his aggressive style of play.

PF Tim Kamczyc started the final five games of last season and averaged 11.2 points and 5.2 rebounds in those contests, including 20 points and six rebounds in the Horizon League tournament loss to Milwaukee. A former walk-on, Kamczyc bulked up in the offseason and locked down the starting power forward position early in fall camp.

C Aaron Pogue started every game for the Vikings last season and averaged 6.3 points and 5.4 rebounds in only 22.2 minutes per game. Foul trouble was a huge problem for Pogue last season and he will need to stay on the court for the Vikings defense to be effective. Pogue missed significant time as a senior in high school and played sparingly as a freshman at Vincennes Junior College before sitting out a year during his transfer to CSU. The hope is that the steady time on the court will have Pogue in better playing shape and give him a better feel for the game this season.

Sixth Man:

Junior guard Jeremy Montgomery deserves special recognition as he was a starter for the majority of last season. The 6-2 combo guard began the season as the first guard off the bench but started the final 19 games when the Vikings went to a four-guard lineup. Montgomery finished second on the team behind Cole with 12.8 points per game, led the league in free throw percentage (.851) and his 69 three-pointers came up just one shy of the school record.

Injuries:

The Vikings have already been hit hard by the injury bug and will have to adjust the lineup in the early going.

PG Sebastian Douglas – torn ACL – out for season

The freshman out of Houston injured his knee while playing in a charity basketball game during the summer. The game was a fundraiser for his friend's funeral who was killed in a car accident during their senior year. Douglas seems to be ahead of schedule in his rehab but it is unlikely that he plays this season.

PG Anthony Wells – partially torn meniscus – out 3-4 weeks

Wells was expected to redshirt last year as a freshman but an injury forced him into the lineup as the backup to Cole. With the arrival of Douglas this season, it looked as though the coaches may have revisited the redshirt option with Wells, not because they don't like the sophomore from Shaker Heights, but because he's too talented to play sparingly behind Cole and they wanted him and Douglas together for the next three years. It became a moot point over the summer with Douglas' injury and Wells was again in line to backup Cole – until Wells suffered the knee injury in the Vikings Green and White scrimmage, putting him out for the first month of the season.

SG Trey Harmon – hyperextended knee – day-to-day

Harmon injured his knee in a closed scrimmage vs. Buffalo last weekend and has not practiced since and is questionable for this weekend's World Vision Classic.

SF D'Aundray Brown – torn finger ligament – out 8 weeks

Brown was injured in practice in late October and is expected out for up to two months. The hope is that Brown will be back as soon as the Vikings December 18th trip to West Virginia but

the Horizon League schedule around the first of the year is probably a safer bet.

***Current Starters Because of Injuries**

PG Cole

SG Montgomery

SF Charlie Woods

PF Kamczyc

C Pogue

Montgomery slides back into the starting lineup for the time being but with Wells out as the backup point guard, Montgomery's ball handling will be needed when Cole takes a break.

6-7 sophomore small forward Charlie Woods started one game last season and will fill-in while Harmon is out. Once Harmon is healthy, Woods could remain in the starting lineup in order to keep Montgomery with the second unit. Woods started the exhibition against Baldwin-Wallace and recorded 10 points and nine rebounds.

Sophomore guard Josh McCoy will have a chance to earn playing time off the bench with all of the injuries to the guards and junior center Joe Latas and a pair of freshman big men (more on them in a minute) will be counted on as the Vikings will have to rely on a bigger lineup until the guards return to health.

Freshmen:

Even with the jewel of the class in 6-4 point guard Sebastian Douglas being out for the season, the class still promises to make an impact this season, especially in the post – where the Vikings struggled mightily last season.

Waters targeted big-men in this class and he found two good ones with opposing styles of play.

Ludovic Ndaye is a 6-9, 230-pound forward from Westwind Prep (Phoenix, AZ). Originally from Montreal, Ndaye is an athletic and skilled big that can defend inside and out, and has the range to step outside on the offensive end of the floor. He figures to get minutes as the backup power forward early in the season.

Devon Long is a 6-7, 260-pound banger. The native of Detroit has a soft touch around the basket and is known as a powerful player, although Waters wants Long to lose some weight and get into better shape. Long will give the Vikings much needed depth behind starting center Aaron Pogue. CSU struggled last year when Pogue went to the bench as the Juco big men never picked up Waters' defensive philosophy. Long figures to play right away as he competes with Latas to be the backup center and could play some minutes at the 4 when the Vikings go big.

Check out Tom Mieskoski's write up for more on the freshman class.

Freshman, again:

Thursday was the start of the early signing period for the 2011 freshman class and Waters topped himself with an even higher ranked class for next year.

Signing with Cleveland State are Tremain Brown (Warren, OH/Warren G. Harding), Anton Grady (Cleveland, OH/Cleveland Central Catholic), Charles Lee (Milwaukee, WI/Huntington

Prep), Marlin Mason (Detroit, MI/Cass Tech) and Ike Nwamu (Greensboro, NC/Westchester Country Day). Each will enter CSU as freshman next fall with all four seasons of eligibility remaining.

The star of the class is Central Catholic's Anton Grady. A 6-8, 215-pound forward, Grady is ranked as the fourth-best prospect in the state of Ohio and is a three-star recruit by ESPN, Rivals and Scout.

Getting Grady to stay in Cleveland is a huge coup for Waters. Since he came to Cleveland, Waters has been looking for a top local player to stay home and turn the tide towards CSU for other local players. They were in on Dallas Lauderdale before he settled on Ohio State but they haven't had much luck since. It took a few years, but Grady is finally that guy. Now, I don't believe the Vikings will suddenly compete head-to-head with OSU for in-state guys, and Tom Izzo and the other Big Ten coaches will always pull their share of Ohio talent. But with OSU recruiting nationally these days for top 5-star talent, there is no reason for these 3-star Cleveland guys to go out of state or to consider the MAC or the A-10 when they can play against just as good/better competition in the Horizon League and make tournament runs right in their home town.

What Butler did last year really could help CSU in recruiting and this year's current freshman and the 2011 class already seem to prove that it is.