The Cleveland State men's basketball team (13-1, 2-0 Horizon League) returns to Horizon League play this weekend with two tough home games against Loyola-Chicago (today) and Illinois-Chicago (Saturday).

How important are these two home games this week?

"These two games are vital for us because we have to hold serve at home. If we don't do well in these next two games it really puts the whole league in a spin for us," said CSU men's basketball coach **Gary Waters**. "Now we got to go someplace where we are not expected to win (and steal a) win."

Loyola (9-4, 0-2) have been a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde type of team this season with two different split personalities. The Ramblers got off to a fast start, like a year ago, winning their first seven games, then went on a stretch where they lost four of their next five games.

In Loyola's four losses (Butler, Valparaiso, Kansas State and DePaul) they have come by a combined 27 points, for an average of 6.7 points per defeat.

So which team will CSU face tonight?

"I think they have learned how to play now. I always thought this is a team you got to worry about in our league," said Waters, who predicted Loyola as his sleeper team to watch in the league before the season started. "This game Thursday will be a war."

The Ramblers have a balance scoring attack with five players who average in double-figures. They are senior guard **Geoff McCammon** (14.3 points), junior guard/forward **Jordan Hicks** (11.7), senior guard
Terrance Hill
(11.2), sophomore forward
Ben Averkamp
(11.2), and junior forward
Walt Gibler
(11).

UIC (5-8, 0-1) have been a much improved team from a year ago because of the addition of Minnesota transfer **Paul Carter** (14.7 points, 7.8 rebounds). The Flames recently upset then (No. 12 AP, No. 14 ESPN/USA Today) Illinois, 57-54, on Dec. 18.

"I think the key (to UIC's recent success) was that transfer (Paul Carter) brought them together," said Waters.

The Flames are led in scoring by senior guard **Robo Kreps** (15.8) who is one of the better three-point shooters in the league (40.3 percent, eighth).

Waters urges CSU fans to come out to the games and support the team this week. "In this league you need people (in the stands cheering for the home team) because you are really fighting for your life (every game)."

Final word: Waters said he received three letters stating that 200 fans were sent away during the South Florida game because the tickets were not ready. "I'm looking into that," he said.

Next year's schedule: CSU's 2011-12 schedule will look similar to this year's schedule.

The Vikes will have home games against Akron, St. Bonaventure, Louisiana, and Sam Houston State. And they will be on the road at Kent State, Robert Morris and Toledo (last year's BracketBusters).

Waters said CSU will also play in a tournament in either Daytona or Las Vegas.

As part of the tournament, CSU will play at a high-major first before heading to the tournament site. By playing in this tournament, which CSU will play in two of the next three years, they will also fund CSU's next summer trip to Greece at the end of next season.

2012-13 schedule: After next season, CSU's contracts with Robert Morris, St. Bonaventure, Louisiana and Sam Houston State are up, according to Waters, and CSU will need to fill those four games. Waters also said CSU has committed to play in the 2012 preseason NIT at the University of Michigan.

Waters said he would like to start up a series in the future with Duquesne, Xavier, Dayton, or Cincinnati.

CSU women update: The CSU women snapped a three-game losing streak Tuesday defeating

Lake Erie College, 81-62, at the Wolstein Center. Senior guard **Shawnita Garland** had a career-high 26 points to lead the Vikes.

CSU (7-4) opens Horizon League play on Friday at UIC.

News and Notes: ESPN announced on Monday that the CSU-Butler game on Jan. 7, which will be televised on ESPNU, will tip off at 7 p.m.... The CSU men's basketball team remained the No. 1 team in the CollegeInsider.com Mid-Major Top 25 for the fourth consecutive week, receiving 24 of the 31 first-place votes.... The CSU women dropped out of this week's CollegeInsider.com Women's Mid-Major Top 25, but still received 20 points in the poll.... The CSU men received one vote in this week's Associated Press Top 25 poll, receiving a 25th-place vote from **Steve Deshazo** of the Free Lance-Star in Virginia.