Cleveland State head coach Gary Waters has coached several players that went on to play in the NBA in his 37 years of coaching and the last 15 years have been as a head coach. So he knows an NBA player when he sees one.

After Norris Cole's 41 point, 20 rebound and nine assist outburst against Youngstown State last Saturday, Waters talked about Cole's NBA draft stock.

"He's got the potential. He's got that killer instinct out there," said Waters. "He's learned the point guard to my estimation as well as you can learn it.

"He knows how to control tempo. He knows when to use his speed and go past you for a layup. He can hit threes. He can shoot the mid-range. Not many point guards that can do that in basketball."

On Monday, Waters was asked if he thought Cole will get drafted: "At least a second-round [pick]," he said at his weekly media gathering. "I think if someone really likes him, I think they will take a chance at him in the first round."

This summer, he caught the eyes of several NBA scouts at Nike's Deron Williams Skills Academy for point guards.

According to Waters, Cole performed so well at the Williams' camp that he was invited to the LeBron James Skills Academy, but he turned it down to workout with his teammates during the summer to prepare for a championship run.

Several NBA scouts have been in attendance at Cole's games this season. According to the Plain Dealer, there were five NBA scouts at CSU's last game at Wright State on Wednesday.

"His stock will change based on what he does at Portsmouth [Invitational Tournament], which he has already been invited to, and how he does at the combine [NBA's pre-draft camp]," said Waters. "Someone has to have a need and has to like him."

The Portsmouth Invitational Tournament is an all-star tournament that showcases the best college senior basketball players in the country. It's from April 6-9 in Portsmouth, Va. Sixty-four college basketball seniors will compete in the four day, 12 game tournament in front of representatives from every NBA team.

"I want to play at the next level," Cole told the Plain Dealer. "It's something every player dreams of."

ESPN.com rates Cole as the No. 7 point guard in the country, the No. 55 player and projects him as a second round pick.

"He will be even quicker at the next level because they have bigger guards," said Waters, who compares Cole to Detroit Pistons great Isiah Thomas. "He's twice as quick as Cleveland's two guards (Mo Williams and Ramon Sessions). They would have a hard time guarding Norris."

The last CSU player to get drafted was Clinton Smith in 1986. He was chosen in the fourth round (98th overall) by Golden State. Only two CSU players have been drafted in the first round. They are Franklin Edwards by Philadelphia (22nd) in 1981 and Darren Tillis by Boston (23rd) in 1982.

The last CSU player to play in the NBA was Cedric Jackson, who had a brief stint with Cleveland, San Antonio and Washington last year.

Early struggles

Coming out of Dayton Dunbar High, the 6'2" Cole only had one other scholarship offer from Walsh, an NAIA program located in Canton.

"He signed with Walsh," said Waters. "Their coaches realized that he was better then that and they started calling DI programs. They called us and told us other DI programs were interested in him. So we took a look at him."

Waters liked what he saw and brought in Cole to back up Jackson at point guard.

"We knew he had a big upside," said Waters.

Early in his freshmen year, he struggled trying to guard Jackson in practice.

"Cedric was killing him, everyday he wanted to go home," Waters said earlier in the season. "At the mid-major level, you get development without all the pressure on.

"At the high major level, if you don't have it [as a freshmen], they move on and bring in another guy. So at the mid-major level, you have a chance to develop."

By the end of his freshmen year, Waters made a decision to switch Cole's and Joe Davis' roles so Cole could get more playing time. Cole would back up Breyohn Watson at the 2-guard and

Davis would back up Jackson at point guard.

The move worked out well for Cole, but turned out to be the end of Davis' career at CSU. Davis would transfer out to Morgan State.

"In the last 10 games, Cole was averaging 10 points per game," said Waters.

Breakthrough season

During the summer of his sophomore season, Cole continued to develop and was CSU's second leading scorer during their trip to Spain.

His development continued during the regular season, as he also finished as the second leading scorer (13.3 points per game) on CSU's 26-11 team that reached the NCAA Tournament in 2009. He was also CSU's leading scorer during their first-round upset of Wake Forest, finishing with 22 points.

With J'Nathan Bullock and Jackson graduating, Cole was switched back to point guard as a junior and became the leader of the team.

He began to blossom as a point guard, leading the team in scoring (16.3) and assists (4.4) during the 2009-10 season and was named to the Horizon League's first team. But without any seniors on the team and all new frontcourt players, the team would struggle, going 16-17.

A star rises

Long before he had his trademark flat top, the senior from Dayton got CSU off to its best start in school history (12-0).

Heading into today's BracketBusters game at Old Dominion (1 p.m., ESPN2), CSU stands (23-5, 12-4 Horizon League) in first place, a half game ahead of Valparaiso (20-8, 11-4).

Cole is the obvious frontrunner to win Horizon League's Player of the Year award by a long shot. He leads the Horizon League in scoring (20.9), assists (5.6) and steals (2.2), and is eighth in rebounding (6.1).

Earlier this month, he was named one of 10 finalist for the Bob Cousy Award, given to the nation's best point guard.

"Winning those (awards) would be nice, but those type of individual awards will take care of itself if the team wins," said Cole. "I don't worry about those (awards). I worry about our team getting better and accomplishing our team goals first."

Cole is also CSU's best defensive player.

"What I don't think a lot people realize is what makes him the best player in the league," said Waters. "He takes a player and shuts him down. He does it every single game.

"Norris is going to be a big loss for us (next year)."