There's been talk in recent years of Cleveland State dropping the "State" from its official name.

There's a feeling that "State" makes the university sound more like a community college, thereby weighing down its reputation and limiting its growth potential.

Regardless of whether or not you agree with that mentality, Saturday night offered proof that it's finally time to bring this entity into the M.C. Escher landscape of disappointment and suffering that is Northeast Ohio sports and make it an even more anchored part of this community.

Come what may in the carousel of board of trustee meetings that will be held high atop Rhodes Tower in the coming years, on Saturday night in Milwaukee, with a 76-68 Viking loss to Butler, "Cleveland University" was born.

In case there was any doubt before, it's gone now. These are our guys. Not necessarily in the sense that enough hoops fans have fallen in love with this team, but that the Vikings have now been indoctrinated (or perhaps more appropriately, have indoctrinated us) into Cleveland lore.

To wit: they got our hopes up, then let us down.

In what promised to be our first winter without competitive basketball in at least five years, these Vikings came on hard and fast with the unspoken promise that they'd help us forget The Soulless One the way a new girlfriend gets us over the previous one (in this case, after the former gave us syphilis and then set our carpet on fire and disemboweled our dog on her way out the door).

To their credit, for much of the winter they did. They started 12-0, then 15-1, then 21-3. Then, it seemed, after getting lightly pimp-slapped by Butler on their own home court before an ESPN2 audience, they locked up a bit. And really, who can blame them? It was only a bunch of 20-year-old kids not good enough to get scholarships to Big Ten schools being expected to turn around an entire city's emotional status - and maybe create 4,000 jobs in the process.

And yet, while they may never have been capable of meeting our expectations, it still doesn't feel like they lived up to what they were capable of.

They say it's incredibly hard for one team to beat another three times in one season, particularly if they're relatively evenly matched. Like all memorable Cleveland teams, the Vikings took a well-accepted sports adage and obliterated it.

Saturday's game unfolded so predictably, it warrants little description. From the opening moments, Butler made it clear that nothing would be different this time around, surging to a seven-point lead in the first five minutes and leading by as much as 12 late in the first half. Yet the Vikings proved their mettle, fighting back each time it appeared the Bulldogs were about to pull away. They made one final run, cutting a 10-point lead to two with five minutes left, but Butler hit back-to-back three-pointers and it was time to take the pierogis out of the deep fryer.

Even in the midst of the Vikings' many inspired rallies, there were clear signs it wasn't going to happen. Every time they needed a big three-pointer, they missed. Every time they needed a defensive stop, Butler was quicker to the ball for an offensive rebound (or two or three) for the demoralizing putback.

No sour grapes here, though. The Butler Bulldogs are a crackerjack team - truly a credit to the

game - and have quietly built one of the most respected programs in America, so this isn't to say the Vikings had an easy task Saturday night. Quite the opposite.

But both record-wise and statistically, the Vikes appeared to be on the same level as the Bulldogs this season, at least close enough that you'd expect them to take one of three highly anticipated matchups.

And yet, nope.

Of course, this isn't our first rodeo. Nor is it the first time we've been bucked off the bull and had our spine shattered like a popsicle stick. The Cavaliers demonstrated this same implausibility in five playoff pairings with the Chicago Bulls in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The teams were relatively evenly matched, but the Bulls won all five series. The odds say the Cavs should have taken at least one (and anyone who believes in Jesus knows they should have won two or three).

Or, as my on-call therapist just reminded me, another prime example is the Browns' three AFC Championship Game losses to Horse-Face Johnny and his Broncos.

More recently, the Browns showed us twice that losing to a team three times is far easier than the rest of the sports world seems to think it is. In both 1994 and 2002, the Steelers swept the regular-season series from the Browns, each time with two narrow victories, then defied logic by going ahead and winning the third matchup anyway.

Each and every time they faced Butler in this supposed-to-be-magical season, the Vikings were utterly outclassed and sent back to Cleveland with their horned helmets between their legs (and perhaps shoved politely in their rectums).

No doubt they'll be some talk over the next week about Cleveland State's chances of qualifying to the dance as an at-large bid. Do yourself a favor and tune it out - that ship has sailed. The NIT? Perhaps, but that would be like tying strings to a corpse's arms and putting on a puppet show at the wake.

This is not a rebuke of Gary Waters' mighty Vikes, who were the only thing worth talking about through this entire winter of discontent along Lake Erie, where the most exciting thing that happened outside the Wolstein Center was a peregrine falcon dying at the zoo in last week's flooding straight out of the Old Testament.

Maybe that's when you know you've arrived: when you can colossally disappoint an entire city.

If, when you lose just as Cleveland State has always done in the past after nice little seasons, everybody just says, ‘Well, you tried your best,’ you’re not being taken seriously.

Besides, it’s not as if we really missed out on anything. Cleveland State wasn’t going to be this year’s Butler in the NCAA tournament. Even with the Horizon League title under their belts, the Vikings would have been, at best, a 10 or 11 seed positioned perhaps for a fun first-round upset, followed by a buzz-kill reality check in round two. Still, it would have been nice to see “Cleveland” pop up on the board on selection Sunday.

At the very least, that little moment was required for us to feel satisfied with this 2010-11 CSU endeavor. Instead, entering the league tournament as a milquetoast three seed and then exiting in the semifinals is like the Miami Heat getting knocked out in the second round of the playoffs two months from now. Not that that could possibly happen - right, Mr. Stern?

As much as I want to grab the Vikings by the face the way Michael Corleone did to his brother Fredo in *Godfather II* and growl, “You broke my heart,” I know that’s not really fair. If anything, the Vikings’ modest success and our unrealistic attachment to their heroics should underline the obscene incompetence of their “professional” sports neighbors.

There are silver linings to this nice little season. The program is strong and poised to contend in the Horizon League for the immediate future. They may have let us down, but they helped get us through a winter that lasted 47 years.

But I think the most viable outcome is that on Saturday night, we took the Vikings program under our collective, peregrine falcon wing. We discovered that not only do they reflect us, they *are*
us. And perhaps always will be.

Thanks for a wonderful winter, Cleveland U. And welcome to the circus.