The Cleveland State men's basketball team opens its season Sunday at No. 7 ranked Vanderbilt. Tip-off is at 2 p.m.. The game will also be televised on ESPNU.

CSU returns four starters and eight lettermen from a team that went 27-9 and shared the Horizon League regular season title with Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Butler.

The biggest question for the Vikings is: How are they going to replace Norris Cole?

Cole, who now plays for the Miami Heat, averaged 21.7 points, 5.8 rebounds and 5.3 assists per game last season and was named the Horizon League Player of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year.

"I think this is a process for this team. Each and everyday they have to grow together," said CSU head coach Gary Waters. "The only way they will have success at this is if we all do it together."

Waters also pointed out that CSU could have three guards that could all score over 1,000 career points, referring to Jeremy Montgomery (988 career points), Trey Harmon (923) and

D'Aundray Brown (616).

"Not many teams in the country that have that," said Waters. "So the potential is there. Then if you get a good year from Aaron (Pogue) and add these young players (in the mix). I'm really excited about how this season can go."

The starters returning are seniors Montgomery (11.6 points last season) and Harmon (13.2 points last season) in the backcourt, 6'7" junior forward Tim Kamczyc (5.9 points last season) and Pogue (8.2 points and 6.1 rebounds last season), a senior, is at center.

They also gain another starter back in Brown, who missed the entire 2010-11 season with a hand injury. The 6'4" senior guard averaged 8.6 points and 5.6 rebounds during the 2009-10 season and has started 66 games for the Vikings.

"The off year has really helped D'Aundray," said Waters. "It allowed him to get stronger. He has spent a lot of time working on his left hand and his outside shot."

This summer all the players made a commitment to stay in Cleveland and get better.

"We have high hopes," said Brown. "We worked hard in the summer and we all committed to staying here and getting better."

Two of the biggest sacrifices in the offseason came from Pogue and 6'7" sophomore forward Devon Long, who combined to lose about 50 pounds.

"With the weight loss it's lighter on my feet so I can play longer minutes," said Pogue, who says he lost between 25-27 pounds and is the lightest he has been since the eighth or ninth grade.

With no direct leader of the team, Waters has decided to create a "senior counsel" to lead the group. The senior counsel is made up of the five starters.

"We meet once a week to discuss issues and things that are going on," said Waters. "They all understand they have to have input in the decision making power."

Waters also expects the bench to be much improved. If there was an Achilles Heel for the Vikings last season it was probably the bench. Last year, CSU's bench was outscored, 570-372.

The bench has been revamped as four players have left the program and have been replaced by a highly-touted freshman class that Waters calls his "best recruiting class" at CSU.

"The freshmen are a higher level player," said Waters. "These kids are athletes, their bodies look like athletes and their abilities look like athletes."

In its only exhibition game, the revamped bench combined to score 40 points and grab 24 rebounds against Division III John Carroll on Wednesday night at the Wolstein Center.

The key to the bench success will be freshmen Sebastian Douglas, Charles Lee and Anton Grady.

Douglas, a 6'4" combo guard from Houston, was red-shirted during the 2010-11 season after having knee surgery. He was CSU's most heralded recruit last season. In practice, he re-injured the knee again and missed about a week of practice. He returned to action against JCU and scored nine points in eight minutes.

"Our first week of practice I thought Sebastian was the best point guard on the floor. Then he had the injury again," said Waters. "Sebastian is going to be a very good player one day."

Lee, a 5'9" point guard from Milwaukee, averaged 13.1 points and 7.3 assists per game last season for Huntington Prep (W. Va.).

"Charles Lee is as good as they come as a freshman to be a point guard," said Waters. "He's probably the most ready to play player in our whole system."

Grady, a 6'8" forward, turned down some high-majors to play for his hometown team. He is the cousin of NBA player Earl Boykins and averaged 22.3 points, 14.8 rebounds and 3.8 assists per game for Cleveland Central Catholic High School. He showcased his talents against JCU finishing with 10 points and 12 rebounds in 16 minutes.

"Anton has all the potential in the world," said Waters. "He's a next level player. He's long, athletic, can score, can rebound and can defend. He was a big catch for us."

Other bench players that are expected to contribute this season are Long (2.0 points last season), 6'9" sophomore forward Ludovic Ndaye (1.1 points last season), 6'3" freshman guard Ike Nwamu of Greensboro, NC, and 6'6" freshman forward Marlin Mason of Detroit.

In practice, Waters has split the team into two groups - "the veterans" versus "the youth."

"The veterans" are made up of the five returning starters and "the youth" are the bench players.

"At first we were rotating those guys (together in practice) then I seen that the guys that had been here all those years really had chemistry together and I didn't want to disturb that chemistry," said Waters. "And every day in practice its (the veterans) versus (the youth) and they compete. We call it the war zone."

Another area the Vikings struggled last year was rebounding. CSU finished ninth in the Horizon League in both offensive and defensive rebounding. Waters has made rebounding an emphasize in practice.

"We also added size and depth in that area to (help us) rebound," said Waters.

Waters also said he thinks rebounding will be much improved because of the return of Brown and the additions of Grady and Nwamu.

As for the defense, Waters says he's not sure if the Vikings will be a better defensive team then last year, but says they're a much better pressing team.

The Vikings should be tested early with a tough nonconference schedule that has them on the road for nine of its first 12 games.

"Nine of those teams are senior-laden," said Waters. "It should be a good challenge for us. We will see where we are early."

The first test for the Vikings is against a Vandy team that was picked to finish second in the Southeastern Conference preseason poll.

They return all five starters back from last season, but will be without its starting center Festus Ezeli, who is suspended for the game after accepting a meal and hotel room from an alumnus of the university.

The Commodores (1-0) defeated Oregon, 78-64, in its season opener on Friday in Nashville, Tenn.

"They're the No. 7 team in the country and they're really the No. 7 team in the country," said Waters. "They are all basically juniors and seniors and return 73 percent of their scoring back.

"It's a difficult place (to play at) because the bench is in the end zone and when you're at the other end of the floor they can't hear you."

Photo courtesy of Cleveland State athletics.