Gary Waters made Kent State basketball into a household name among mid-major programs, and he is doing it again at Cleveland State, as evidenced by last week's program-defining, back-to-back wins over twelfth-ranked Butler and perennial power Valparaiso. Despite its first Horizon League loss at Wisconsin-Green Bay on Thursday night, CSU is still alone at the top of the conferences standings, and Jesse Lamovsky pens about the opportunity in front of Waters in his latest.

Sky is the limit and you know that you keep on

Just keep on pressin on

Sky is the limit and you know that you can have

what you want, be what you want, have what you want, be what you want

Gary Waters made Kent State basketball into a household name among mid-major programs, and he is doing it again at Cleveland State, as evidenced by last week's program-defining, back-to-back wins over twelfth-ranked Butler and perennial power Valparaiso. Despite its first Horizon League loss at Wisconsin-Green Bay on Thursday night, CSU is still alone at the top of the conferences standings, and even if the season doesn't end in the program's second-ever NCAA Tournament appearance, a regular-season conference title

would virtually guarantee at least an NIT bid- the first postseason berth of any kind for the school since 1988.

Changing the course of a failing program is old hat to the fiery Ferris State grad. What's new in his most recent incarnation is the pace of the revival and, maybe, the extent of future success.

It isn't fair to say Waters brought Kent basketball back from the dead. After all, it wasn't alive in the first place. Prior to the coach's arrival in 1996, the entirety of Kent's postseason history consisted of three NIT appearances- all of which ended in double-digit first-round losses- and zero Mid-American Conference regular-season or tournament championships. The program seemed doomed to a state of perpetual irrelevance, its only brush with glory consisting of three MAC title-game losses in the '80s (by a total of five points). Coach Waters in effect had to create a basketball tradition out of whole cloth. It makes the job he did at Kent all the more remarkable.

Cleveland State, on the other hand, has some tradition . But that's ancient history buried underneath the rubble of two decades in which the only constant was the ruthless application of Murphy's Law. CSU has spent most of the last generation at or near the bottom of the Mid-Con and Horizon League standings. The Vikings haven't won twenty games in a season since 1992-93, and their 14 victories this year are already the most since 2000-01- with eleven games still to play. Since Kevin Mackey's Run 'n Stun scrappers shocked Indiana, St. Joseph's, and the world, the story of CSU basketball has been tragedy, farce, and everything bad in between.

At Kent State, they'd come to expect nothing. At Cleveland State, they'd come to expect the worst.

Yet, despite perhaps even greater challenges in terms of morale and culture, Coach Waters is creating a mirror image of his Kent rescue operation- and he's doing it ahead of schedule. The Golden Flashes went only 13-17 in Waters' second season, although they did make a breakthrough when they upset Akron in the 1998 MAC Tournament. In his second season at CSU, Waters has the Vikings sitting at 14-6, 7-1 in the Horizon League. By no means is the team a finished product- the depth isn't quite there yet, and to my admittedly unenlightened eye, the team could really use a polished floor leader to run the offense. But in its pressure defense, team rebounding and balls-to-the-wall, hustling style, Cleveland State's DNA is pure GW.

Cleveland State also has a number of built-in advantages Kent doesn't have. As good as KSU has been the last decade, the program has a relatively low ceiling, playing at a small facility in a traditionally parity-driven, one-bid league. The wonderful run of 2002 notwithstanding, the most Kent can hope for as a program is what it's experiencing now- perennial contention within the MAC with a legitimate shot to win the conference and score a ticket to the Big Dance. That's not a knock. I went to Kent State. I remember the days of Brook Bright and D.J. Bosse. I'm happy with a team that knocks out twenty-plus wins a year and is always a factor in the title race.

But Cleveland State, with its 13,000-capacity arena and heavily populated recruiting base, is capable of so much more. The Wolstein Center was originally built with a big-school power in mind- an urban hoops juggernaut on the order of DePaul, Marquette, or Memphis. That was Kevin Mackey's dream, and the ingredients are still there to make it a reality. Top-25 rankings and regular at-large NCAA berths aren't just the stuff of fantasy. They can happen here.

Gabe Paul used to refer to the Indians, and the dormant civic support system around the club, as a "sleeping giant." So is Cleveland State basketball. And the giant is yawning and stirring. Half of the Wolstein Center is curtained off, Carrier Dome-style. If Coach Waters stays and sees this thing through, they'll have to lose that curtain one of these days.