Check your calendars. Although it may seem like 1986 with Cleveland State playing important basketball games into March, it is not. This is a new era of Vikings basketball that represents the resurgence of the often overlooked urban campus in the heart of Cleveland. The similarities to the magical run two decades ago are there, with the well dressed coach stalking up and down the sidelines, arms flailing with each swing in momentum, and the Vikings stunning the opposition with their swarming defensive pressure. Even the do-everything east coast point guard and the workman-like strongman in the paint are there. But this time it's not Mouse McFadden, Eric Mudd and the rest of Kevin Mackey's Run 'n Stun crew. This year's Vikings are powered by Cedric Jackson and J'Nathan Bullock and they've led CSU to the brink of the Big Dance.

After a whirlwind last week of the season that saw CSU gain two-and-a-half games in the standings in the season's final three days, thus securing a double-bye into the Horizon League tournament semi-finals, the Vikings are on a mission to continue the ride. The mantra for Gary Waters and his Vikings all year has been to flip the script. Last year, in Waters' first season in Cleveland, CSU finished 10-21. The goal for this year was to finish 21-10 while ridding the players of the losing culture that had taken over the program after years of humility. Thanks to Saturday's victory in the semi-finals, the Vikings enter Tuesday's championship game with Butler at 21-11.

The script has been flipped. The Vikings are no longer the downtrodden program that was picked to finish ninth in the Horizon League's preseason poll. These Vikings come with a reputation of being well coached, hard-nosed and determined. Butler fans openly cheered against CSU in the semi-final game, opting instead to support in-state rival Valparaiso. This

wasn't a sign of Hoosier brotherhood, it was Butler fans hoping their Bulldogs could avoid the inevitable dogfight that a rubber match with CSU was sure to bring.

The actions of the fans showed the respect that Waters has earned for his program in two short seasons. Now comes the championship game. The Vikings have a chance to tell their story to a national audience on ESPN, putting the finishing touches on this year's script, and proving that the January upset of the Bulldogs was no fluke.

Butler, and its fans, will be ready. The 10th ranked Bulldogs won what amounted to a no-holds-barred rematch in February. In this day-and-age of freshman phenoms and early entries to the NBA, Butler is as battle-tested a team as you'll ever see. Four seniors start for a Butler team that won last year's pre-season NIT before advancing to the NCAA sweet 16. All five starters returned this year to win the Great Alaska shoot-out en route to its current 28-3 record.

The intense match-up for Butler and CSU comes from opposing styles of play. Success for the Vikings comes from the defensive end of the floor, while Butler prides itself on its smooth flowing offense and potent outside shooting. Butler's Mike Green was named the Horizon League Player of the Year after averaging 14.6 points, 6.4 rebounds, and 5.2 assists per game. Green is supported by sharpshooters Pete Campbell and A.J. Graves and big man Matt Howard. Campbell killed CSU last year with a Wolstein record eight threes while Graves is coming off a 14 point (4-10 from three) effort in the semi-final match-up with UIC. Howard, a highly touted freshman from Connersville, IN, bullied the Vikings in the February rematch to the tune of 17 points and 8 rebounds. Three of CSU's big men committed two fouls a piece trying to stop Howard during the first five minutes of that contest.

CSU will have to slow down the Butler offense and keep the crowd from taking over the game. It won't be easy. Green is a wizard in the open court. Campbell, Graves and the rest of the Butler marksmen don't miss open shots. Howard is a bull in a china shop. With each made Butler basket the crowd noise escalates and bounces off the tin roof inside the 80-year-old Hinkle Fieldhouse until it amplifies to an excruciating crescendo.

Of course it won't be easy. Nothing for Cleveland State ever has been. If these new Viking heroes are successful in challenging every Butler shot while quieting the crowd, it will be 1986 all over again.