

2023 NBA Summer League Review: Former Buckeyes Thrive, Recover From Injury Out West



The Ohio State men's basketball program was well represented on the 2023 NBA Summer League stage this month, with several former Buckeyes making significant impacts throughout the two-week slate of games.

The two most successful Buckeye Summer League campaigns derived from a pair of second-year 2022 NBA Draft picks in Malaki Branham and E.J. Liddell.

Branham, who was selected by the San Antonio Spurs with the No. 20 pick in the 2022 NBA Draft after playing just one year at Ohio State, experienced an up-and-down July while serving as a team leader on a rookie-infused roster. The 20-year-old notched 15 or more points in three of his four appearances, bookended by a 32 and 29-point performance in his first and last games against the Los Angeles Lakers on July 5 and Washington Wizards on July 11.

Branham's strong finish came just two days after the Ohio State product missed 16 of his 17 shots from the field, including seven of his eight attempts from three, in the team's 85-80 loss to the Portland Trail Blazers. The guard's ability to respond following a difficult offensive performance impressed those within the Spurs' organization.

"He's a good basketball player," Spurs Summer League head coach Matt Neilson said following the Wizards game. "It was a rough night for him the other night, that's a credit to him that he just comes back. There was a world where he could've just put his head down or whatever, but (he) stayed with it and he got the rewards."

"For me, everybody was kind of bashing me on Twitter and I wanted to come out and play my game," Branham said. "But you just have to trust your work. You have to trust your work. We're here for a reason, you put in so much work. Just trust your work, that's all I have to say."

The 2023 Summer League was also a success for Liddell, who made an emotional return to live game action almost one year after suffering a Torn ACL in his right knee on the same Cox Pavilion Floor.

The New Orleans Pelicans' forward, who was forced to undergo season-ending surgery and begin a

year-long rehabilitation process last July, logged his first minutes since the injury during the team's 102-88 loss against the Minnesota Timberwolves on July 7, recording nine points, three rebounds and one blocked shot.

"I was just happy to be out there honestly, just to be playing," Liddell told the media after the game. "(I) had a couple nerves coming into the game, but when I got out there and ran up and down a couple times I was fine."

After shaking off the rust in his first appearance, Liddell returned to form to finish out his four-game Summer League slate, scoring double figures in two of his final three games. The 22-year-old forward put forth his best performance during the Pelicans' 117-114 consolation round loss to the Philadelphia 76ers on July 16, netting a team-high 23 points on 7-of-10 shooting.

Just getting started □ <https://t.co/kDK4R3syXp>

— E.J. Liddell (@EasyE2432) July 18, 2023

Liddell admitted that he still needs to regain full trust in his lower body before the fall, but the strides he has taken towards achieving that goal during Summer League have encouraged those within the franchise that just granted him a three-year, \$6.2 million contract.

"He's gotten way more confident just with his body and his ability to trust different movements within crowds and different areas of the game that he hasn't really had a whole lot of experience in," Pelicans Summer League head coach Casey Hill said. "Seeing that timidness wash away from him and him becoming who he is again has been really fun. It was a great finish for him and we have some momentum to work with going into the rest of the offseason."

Although both 2022 Ohio State draftees thrived throughout the month, the two former Buckeyes who are chasing their NBA dreams for the first time this summer have experienced a more mixed result.

Former Ohio State forward Justice Sueing, who signed a contract to join the Oklahoma City Thunder's Summer League team on June 23, received limited playing time for the franchise, appearing in just two of the team's eight games.

The Honolulu native saw his first game action in the Thunder's 105-92 loss to the Houston Rockets on July 11, entering the game with 3:07 remaining in the first quarter. In nine minutes played, the forward recorded two points, two rebounds and one blocked shot.

ICYMI: Honolulu's Justice Sueing made his NBA Summer League debut w/ Oklahoma City Thunder on Tuesday, recording 2 pts, 2 rebs in 9 minutes in OKC's 105-92 loss to Houston #NBAAHawaii □□ @JusticeSueing @MaryknollSchool pic.twitter.com/BF98YozczH

— Rob DeMello (@RobDeMelloKHON) July 12, 2023

Sueing's second and final appearance came during Oklahoma City's consolation round matchup against the Spurs on July 16. The 24-year-old forward put forth his best performance that night, scoring eight points on an efficient 4-of-7 shooting along with a team-high six rebounds.

Despite the strong end to his Summer League campaign, Sueing's NBA future remains uncertain, as he has yet to be signed by the Thunder or another NBA franchise.

Sueing's teammate in 2022-23, Ohio State one-and-done and Utah Jazz first-round draft selection Brice Sensabaugh, failed to see the floor throughout the team's eight-game Summer League slate.

The Orlando, Fla. native, who was drafted with the No. 28 overall pick in the 2023 NBA Draft, was held out of game action due to continued recovery on his surgically-repaired left knee. Sensabaugh's injury dates back to his time at Ohio State, where he was ruled out for the remainder of his lone collegiate season on March 11 after experiencing "knee soreness" late in the Buckeyes' Big Ten Tournament second-round victory against Iowa.

Jazz update (a non-update) on Taylor Hendricks and Brice Sensabaugh: "Taylor and Brice continue to make progress with their injury rehabilitation and have participated in on court workouts in Las Vegas."

— Andy Larsen (@andyblarsen) July 13, 2023

Despite the lack of game action, Sensabaugh's injury will reportedly not linger into the regular season, as he "should be fine" heading into training camp.

"Let's say Summer League had come two weeks later, Brice would've played," The Athletic's Tony Jones said on ESPN 700's "The Drive With Spence Checketts" on July 18. "This was strictly a timing thing."

If placed on a regular season roster, the quartet of former Buckeyes will get their next chance to compete for their respective teams on Oct. 3 when all 30 NBA teams report to training camp.