

Branham Erupts for 32 Points In Summer League Opener



Last week, former Ohio State and current San Antonio Spurs forward Malaki Branham told the media that his confidence was at an “all-time high” entering NBA Summer League play.

Branham wasted no time using that unwavering belief in his abilities to his benefit on the court, taking control of Wednesday’s game in just his first minute of game action in 2023.

The 2022 first-round draft pick made his presence felt just 13 seconds into his Summer League debut against the Lakers, deflecting a pass away from the cutting former Indiana point guard Jalen Hood-Schifino. Just 12 seconds later, Branham displayed his aggressiveness on the offensive end, striking to the rim and elevating through two Laker defenders to complete a contested three-point play.

This fast start set up a career night for the former Buckeye, as he erupted for 32 points to lead the Spurs to a 109-99 victory over the Lakers last night at the Golden 1 Center in Sacramento, Calif. It was a performance that impressed many, including his teammates.

“When he gets the ball, he (just) attacks, and he scores,” Spurs guard Blake Wesley said after Wednesday’s game. “It’s good playing with him.”

While the 6-foot-4 forward’s 2023 Summer League debut caught the eye of his teammates, it came of no surprise for Branham. Instead, it is a result of the commitment he made over the offseason to refine his play on both ends of the court.

Talking with the media after practice on June 29, Branham said he mainly focused on improving his overall strength and shot-making ability throughout the offseason months.

“(I worked on) just getting stronger,” Branham said. “Getting stronger and just tightening up my shooting mechanics, being able to make sure I shoot the ball at a consistent clip.”

Branham’s commitment to strengthening his body and developing his shooting was on full display Wednesday. In 26 minutes of play, the Spurs forward shot an efficient 12-of-24 from the field, with a number of baskets coming by way of contested floaters and layups inside the paint. He also shot 50 percent from three (3-of-6), and 100 percent from the free-throw line (5-of-5).

The Columbus native, who ranked seventh among rookies with 10.2 points per contest on 44 percent

shooting last season, said he also placed an emphasis on conditioning to prepare for his second NBA campaign. This was something he tried to accomplish not only on the basketball court, but in the boxing ring.

“We did little workshops (at practice) for the team, and they had the guys come and do boxing,” Branham said. “So I got one (of the boxing trainer’s), number, and we started boxing. I got that this summer just because it’s really good conditioning. I have a higher respect (for) boxers now because you really need to be in tip-top shape to do that. So it’s definitely fun.”

Aside from his conditioning, strength and shooting, Branham said Spurs coaches are also looking for him to emerge as more of a vocal leader on a Summer League roster filled with first-year players. San Antonio’s rookie class is headlined by 7-foot-5 2023 first overall pick Victor Wembanyama, who is expected to make his Summer League debut Friday against the Charlotte Hornets.

This is a challenge that Branham and his second-year Spurs teammates are poised to attack this summer.

“The coaches want that out of me, Blake (Wesley) and all the guys that (have) been here for a year,” Branham said. “And I feel like we’ve been doing that.”

In his first game on Wednesday, Branham led the Spurs using more than just his words. With San Antonio holding onto a 84-82 lead two minutes into the fourth quarter, the second-year forward assumed control of the game on offense, surging for 17 of his 32 points in the final period to propel his team to a 10-point victory.

“(I was) just slowing down the game,” Branham said. “We kind of ran one play the whole fourth quarter, and I just made the right plays, made the right reads, I was making shots. So I felt good.”

With at least five more Summer League games on tap for Branham, the confident former Buckeye has already earned the respect and admiration of the coaching staff, something that can bode well for him as he attempts to assume a larger role in 2023.

“He’s a good basketball player,” Spurs Summer League head coach Matt Nielsen said after Wednesday’s game. “He’s putting in the work right now. He had a good rookie season. He’s having a really good summer, working hard and trying to get better. He is one of those guys that comes in the gym and works to get better every day. As you see, he’s a crafty player, and it was good to let him run around tonight.”