

Branham, Liddell Included In Latest ESPN Mock Draft



Ohio State entered the 2021-22 basketball season knowing full well that it was likely to lose a star to the NBA draft come season's end. That forward E.J. Liddell decided to return for his junior season in the first place was already a bit of a surprise, but to see him return again after a full year of being the main attraction in Columbus would be a major shock.

And with five games left in the regular season, it seems that assumption was right on track. In ESPN's latest mock draft, Liddell has crept all the way into the lottery picks, tabbed at No. 14 to the Atlanta Hawks. He's hovered around the first round all season, and as he pushes for Big Ten Player of the Year contention, it seems he's only gaining more ground as a top prospect at the next level.

Yet, for the first time all season, Liddell isn't alone on draft boards. With a Feb. 22 big board update, Ohio State freshman guard Malaki Branham has earned himself major attention after a fantastic run of Big Ten play.

"Branham has gained considerable traction amongst NBA scouts as a potential one-and-done first-rounder thanks to his stellar play over the last two months," ESPN's Mike Schmitz wrote. "After averaging 16.0 points, 4.6 rebounds and 2.6 assists on 55% from 2 and 42% from 3 in January (8 games), Branham has carried that momentum into February by knocking down 63% of his triples over 6 games, capped off by an impressive 27-point performance on just 13 shots in an overtime win over Indiana on Monday."

"I traveled to Columbus on Saturday to get a better feel for the 18-year-old freshman against Keegan Murray and Iowa, where he yet again topped 20 points with an efficient 22 points on just 13 shots. The No. 35 overall recruit in his high school class out of LeBron James' St Vincent-St Mary's High School, Branham possesses sharp overall scoring instincts which have culminated in big games against Nebraska and Bryce McGowens (35 points), Jaden Ivey and Purdue (20 points on 10 shots), Murray, and now Indiana."

For his recent efforts, Branham has moved all the way into the top 50 on Schmitz's board, and in the ESPN mock, he's now projected as the 41st pick for the Minnesota Timberwolves. He's impressed scouts with his recent play, but his traits seem to be drawing the most attention, especially given his age - Branham is still only 18 years old, and won't turn 19 until May 12. The league loves that, as showcased by 14 other 18-year-olds in the newest mock, including 12 in the first 30 picks.

"Although wiry and more smooth and slithery than devastatingly quick or explosive, Branham's length stands out at first glance at around 6-5 with a 6-11 wingspan, high shoulders, and big hands," Schmitz continues. "He's automatic from beyond the arc in pregame, sporting a quick, compact, and repeatable shooting stroke that's helped him score the ball efficiently both from 3 and in mid-range, where he's most comfortable. Able to play at different speeds with relative ease, Branham is a more versatile scorer than a standstill shooter right now, as he uses hesitations to maneuver his way to the rim and is showing more and more confidence and patience in ball screens by the game. He's made a few encouraging pocket passes as of late as well, and the fact that he can add value out of spot-ups, pin downs and occasional pick-and-rolls gives him intriguing versatility.

"He's not overly physical to the rim, and can still tighten up his handle, but his combination of length, footwork and touch gives him potential as a 3-level scorer and finisher. While still improving with his discipline, technique and awareness, Branham has also shown promise on the defensive end of the floor, making it tough on highly touted Big Ten guards ranging from Johnny Davis (14 points on 18 shots) to McGowens (18 points on 19 shots). He's no stranger to getting lost off the ball or taking a bad angle as the point-of-attack defender, but he makes up for it with his near 7-foot wingspan, solid quicks and effort level."

Although interest around Branham as a potential one-and-one prospect is beginning to pour in, he's not without question in NBA circles, largely because he's without a truly elite skill to this point.

"Overall, Branham is still searching for his truly elite NBA skill as he's a good, not great shooter (regardless of the percentages), in part because of his somewhat low release that makes it easy to contest. He can get downhill and finish at the collegiate level, but he benefits from Ohio State's bigs regularly carving out space for him with deep seals around the rim, creating uncontested finishes. He can also do a better job of covering more ground with his dribble, taking sharper angles to the rim. On top of all that, Branham would benefit from becoming a more reliable and nuanced passer, which is important given that he has the frame of a lot of NBA point guards.

"As it stands now, Branham has a relatively high floor as a versatile off guard who can check 1s and 2s, make spot 3s and play some second-side pick-and-roll. Yet adding more playmaking variety off the bounce would allow him to further tap into the glimpses of shot-creation he does show, potentially evolving into more of a Caris LeVert-style guard. While it initially felt like Branham was trending more toward a 2023 first-rounder, his play over the last two months has surely expedited that process, and he's trending toward becoming a legitimate option for teams drafting in the first round come June, especially if he strings together a few more signature performances with a slew of high-level decision-makers expected to set up shop in Indianapolis for the Big Ten tournament. It's not easy to find long, rangy perimeter players who can score at all 3 levels and defend multiple positions, and at just 18, Branham fits that mold."

For Ohio State, which would certainly like to return Branham so that he can lead an otherwise star-less roster next season - assuming Liddell's departure - those questions around elite skills may prove

critical for bringing Branham back. It's not hard to imagine a move into the lottery range for the Akron native if he has a full season as the star under his belt, especially if that season includes the honing of some of the skills the league decision-makers look for so closely.