

Brown Makes Season Debut, Likekele Returns From Three-Game Absence Against Alabama A&M



Through the first two months of the season, the Ohio State men's basketball team was never fully intact.

Across the Buckeyes' first 11 games, junior guard Eugene Brown III was held out due to the lingering effects of a concussion, keeping one of head coach Chris Holtmann's most reliable perimeter defenders off of the floor. With Brown out, Oklahoma State transfer Isaac Likekele emerged as a well-rounded wing for Ohio State, providing the Buckeyes with stout defense and high-level playmaking skills.

However, after Ohio State's 96-59 win over St. Francis (Pa.) on Dec. 3, Likekele missed the next three games as he returned to his home state of Texas to deal with personal matters.

But, the Buckeyes finally reached full strength on Thursday and the result was a resounding 90-59 win over Alabama A&M. With Big Ten play on the horizon for Ohio State, Holtmann recognized the importance of getting both Brown and Likekele back but also stressed patience as he integrates them back into the rotation.

"We're really happy for (Isaac) and Gene to be back," Holtmann said. "Now the challenge is, I'm going to need patience from our team because we can't play 11 guys. So, I think we're going to need to figure that out."

Both Likekele and Brown played limited minutes against the Bulldogs while Holtmann eases them back into action, but both showed encouraging signs in their return.

Brown played just five minutes on Thursday but showcased his usual defensive prowess on the perimeter, registering a pair of steals. He scored his first points of the campaign with 1:03 remaining in the contest by sinking two free throws while adding two rebounds for good measure.

Entering the contest, Likekele was to be utilized in an emergency situation only and with Ohio State struggling to pull away from Alabama A&M in the first half, Holtmann turned to the versatile wing for a spark. With the game knotted up at 33 with 1:03 to play in the opening stanza, Likekele entered the contest and, less than 30 seconds later, drew in the defense before hitting Zed Key for an easy and-one opportunity.

Likekele's feed to Key was the first of five assists in just nine minutes of action. He added a pair of rebounds to go along with two points and a block. Despite playing less than 10 minutes, the Buckeyes outscored Alabama A&M by 13 points when Likekele was on the floor.

"We really needed another perimeter defender and another perimeter ballhandler," Holtmann said. "More than anything, I thought (Isaac) could impact this game and I think he did right away. That's why he played, I thought he could impact this game and I thought he did a really good job with that. I was really, really proud of Isaac.

"He's not ready to play 20 to 25 minutes, he's just not," he continued. "But he can provide — who he is is really important for us to grow as a team."