

Buckeye Coaches Push For E.J. Liddell As Big Ten POTY Candidate



Ohio State junior forward E.J. Liddell has not gone without recognition for the season he's putting together for the Buckeyes. Averaging 20.1 points, 7.5 rebounds and 2.5 blocks in 21 games, Liddell earned a spot on the Naismith midseason team in early February, is considered a candidate for an All-American spot at the end of the year and was picked as a finalist for the Karl Malone award — which goes to the top power forward — but after his performance in Ohio State's win over Michigan on Feb. 12, head coach Chris Holtmann felt that it was time to support his player even more.

An almost exasperated Holtmann extended a plea to the rest of his league to push Liddell as not just an All-Big Ten candidate, but as a serious contender for the conference's Player of the Year award come March.

"Will somebody please - outside of the people who follow our program - start talking about E.J. as a Player of the Year in this league? He is deserving," Holtmann said. "He is deserving to be in that conversation as a Player of the Year. And I'm on him as much as everybody every day. But I don't hear his name mentioned. I don't know why I don't hear his name mentioned. Granted, we have to keep winning, we've got to win more, whatever. But he's got to be mentioned in that conversation.

"The year he's had has been phenomenal. And he's getting better at leading on that end and it's asking a lot of him. But he should just want to talk about defense because he was phenomenal on offense but our team defense got us off. But please. He's deserving of being in that conversation. The year's not over. He's got to keep working. But E.J. Liddell is deserving to be in the conversation of Player of the Year in this league as long as we keep doing well."

Holtmann isn't alone in his support of Liddell. On Feb. 14, assistant coach Ryan Pedon echoed Holtmann, saying that he's "exactly right" about Liddell and that the forward is "not a guy just scoring points and making plays for himself." He called him a winner, and said that Ohio State "value(s) E.J. at the highest level."

Even Michigan's Juwan Howard, who saw Liddell score 28 points up close in a 68-57 win for the Buckeyes, came away impressed both with the player Liddell is now, and where he came from to become this player.

"Liddell is unique in a lot of ways and what makes him so efficient is he really does a good job of getting to a spot, and he's also patient with it as well. Whether he's on a low block and he's getting back to that left shoulder - and everyone knows he's getting to the left shoulder, but it's still hard to stop because he gets so high up on his jump shot. And he also does a good job of creating space. Whether it's a crab dribble, with a shoulder bump to knock you off balance and then he raises up, or whether it's facing - where he faces you, jab, shot. Or it's pick-and-pop, where he pick-and-pop shoots it, or pick-and-pop, shot fake, drive it.

"He's hard-stopping going left, and then going right he's going to raise up and try to shoot over you. And I've just seen a lot of growth. The game is slowed down to him too because as a freshman, he was putting his head down and going fast - like a lot of freshmen. And then last year he just made a huge turn. He switched and he became their elite go-to guy along with Duane Washington. And now this year, he's one of the best players in the Big Ten who can play at the 4 or 5 spots."

As Liddell and the Buckeyes enter the final frame of the regular season, his competition for the award has become clear. Wisconsin guard Johnny Davis seems to be the favorite, with Illinois center Kofi Cockburn - the preseason pick among Big Ten media - close behind. Indiana's Trayce Jackson-Davis, Iowa's Keegan Murray and Purdue's Jaden Ivey have all been mentioned as well, though the conversation usually ends there, with the Buckeye standout. But moving forward, if Holtmann gets his way, Liddell will be in the mix, with a serious chance to claim the crown if he can lead the Buckeyes to a strong finish.