

Buckeyes Embracing “Must-Win” Mentality In Big Ten Tournament



Ohio State secured a significant win Thursday night against Iowa in the second round of the Big Ten Tournament, a convincing 90-68 victory that boosted the team’s NCAA Tournament resume and put them one game closer to a berth in the Big Dance.

While the wire-to-wire over the Hawkeyes was an impressive feat, it didn’t take long for those within the Ohio State program — especially interim head coach Jake Diebler — to move onto their next challenge in Minneapolis.

“We have to get to work,” Diebler said in Ohio State’s locker room after the Iowa game. “You (reporters) have to ask us less questions so I can go and get some stuff done.”

For Diebler and Ohio State, that next challenge will come Friday night in the Big Ten Tournament Quarterfinals, where the Buckeyes are set to match up against No. 2 seed and 13th-ranked Illinois (23-8, 14-6). The Illini pose a difficult challenge for Diebler’s team, having already defeated the then-Holtmann-led Buckeyes earlier this season — a 87-75 margin on Jan. 30 — and boasting a stretch of six wins in the last eight games entering postseason play.

But it is a game that Ohio State needs to win in order to bolster its chances at securing an at-large bid in the NCAA Tournament, a reality that sophomore guard Bruce Thornton said his team has both acknowledged and embraced.

“Every game is a must-win game at this point,” Thornton said. “Dale (Bonner) was saying that two weeks ago. And we feel like we’ve done our job (so far) against great opponents. But we’re going to take our preparation, go through our scout, go through our film and go 1-0 against Illinois.”

Ohio State’s preparation for the Illini likely begins on the defensive side, which will go up against an Illinois offense that leads the Big Ten in scoring at 83.9 points per game. Brad Underwood’s unit also

appears to be peaking at the right time, with the group averaging 91 points per game in their last four wins, including a 105-point outing in their Feb. 28 win against Minnesota.

Illinois' scoring prowess is spearheaded by the efforts of fifth-year guard and consensus first-team All-Big Ten selection Terrance Shannon Jr., who ranks second in the Big Ten in scoring behind only Purdue center Zach Edey at 21.6 points per game and has notched 25 or more points in six of his last nine contests. Diebler said that while Shannon — who scored 23 points against the Buckeyes in January — poses a formidable threat with his offensive explosiveness, Illinois' success is driven by more than just the talents of its first-team all-conference point guard.

Diebler also listed second-team All-Big Ten graduate guard/forward Marcus Domask (16.0 points, 4.9 rebounds) and third-team All-Big Ten senior forward Coleman Hawkins (12.9, 4.2) as players who can produce on the offensive side of the ball for the Illini, making for a formidable scoring trio that the interim coach said his team must be ready to take on if they want to emerge victorious Friday night.

"They have a great deal of offensive versatility on their team," Diebler said. "(Domask) had a game like that (against Ohio State), but then you have Terrance Shannon and his explosiveness, and what he's able to do offensively. He's been shooting the ball well. (Cedric) Hawkins can stretch the floor and bring versatility. Defensively, he can present some problems out there. So they have great depth, they're really well coached."

While Illinois can easily put a wrench in the Buckeyes' NCAA Tournament aspirations with their offensive explosiveness, Diebler said his team is poised to accept both the challenge that comes from going up against the favored Illini as well as the high stakes and pressure that come with playing in a "must-win" postseason game.

For Diebler, it is a mentality that his group has not shied away from since he took over in the middle of February, something they must continue to adopt on Friday night.

"(Beating Illinois) would mean a great deal," Diebler said. "Listen, when (Chris Holtmann's firing) happened back in the middle of February, we talked about just the opportunity that was in front of us, and our guys have earned the right to embrace how meaningful these games are. So we're not shying away from what's at stake, but we're able to do that because of how mature our group is."

"And they understand that, in order to keep going, we have to focus on the task at hand, and we have to continue to get a little tougher, a little more together, and sustain our urgency and aggressiveness for as long as we can and keep pushing for a 40-minute game of those things."

The Buckeyes' quarterfinal matchup against Illinois is set to tip off at 6:30 p.m., with the game airing on Big Ten Network.