

# Buckeyes Face Biggest Test Of Season Against No. 15 Wisconsin Wednesday Night



Coming off a difficult road loss to Indiana on Saturday night that snapped the team's four-game losing streak, Ohio State will look to return to the win column inside the friendly confines of Value City Arena on Wednesday night, a venue where the Buckeyes currently boast an 8-1 record and have outscored their opponents by 143 points (704-561).

That home success will be tested in a big way on Wednesday night, however, when the Buckeyes will play host the 11-3 (3-0 in Big Ten) and 15th-ranked Wisconsin Badgers, a veteran and deep group that head coach Chris Holtmann acknowledged as his team's most formidable opponent yet this season.

"(We have) a terrific Wisconsin team coming in," Holtmann said on Tuesday. "They're off to a great start, as many expected. 92 percent of their scoring is back from last year, and they had a good team last year. The addition of a key transfer and some young guys, and then the guys that returned, (they're) getting better and better.

"I think they're clearly, to this point right now, the best team we've seen. We're excited for the challenge and it should be a great environment here (Wednesday night)."

The Badgers, led by eight-year head coach Greg Gard, turned in a 20-win season last year that led them to the semifinals of the NIT Tournament. With all five of last year's starters returning this season, along with an impact transfer in former St. Johns guard A.J. Storr joining the program, Gard's team has taken a significant step forward in 2023-24, where they sit at the top of the Big Ten standings with quality wins over then-No.3-ranked Marquette and No. 24 Virginia.

Wisconsin's resurgence this season has occurred due to its improved offense, which has undergone a change in philosophy that focuses more on motion and on-ball screens as opposed to a more stagnant, one-on-one attack. This has allowed the Badgers to increase their scoring intake from 65.3 last season to 75.8 points per game so far in 2023-24, and their shooting percentage from 44.1 to 46.9 percent.

Holtmann said the key transfer addition of Storr has helped Wisconsin transform their offense, as he has provided the team with an extra element to the unit with his unique athleticism and versatility. Despite it being his first year with the program, Storr has already emerged as the Badgers leading scorer, racking up 14.7 points per game on 44.7 percent shooting, while also totaling 2.9 rebounds and 0.9 assists per contest.

“He’s a terrific offensive player,” Holtmann said. “So I think it will be a number of guys (who are tasked with guarding him). He’s a terrific point guard, great size, great interior scorer...They have a lot of other guys, but he’s been a great addition.”

Storr is joined in the backcourt by a pair of returning guards in two-year starter and floor general Chucky Hepburn, who leads the team in assists with 56, and former Wofford transfer and 2022-23 starter Max Klesmit, who enters the game scoring 7.2 points and 1.8 points per contest. Sophomore guard Conor Essegian, who started every game last season and set the school record for most three-pointers by a freshman with 69, is also a key contributor off the bench, while freshman guard John Blackwell has also emerged for the team, scoring a bench-leading 9.2 points and 3.9 rebounds per contest.

But Wisconsin’s biggest advantage may come from its starting frontcourt, which features a pair of intimidating and experienced forwards that has given the Buckeyes fits in years past. Leading the team in the paint for the Badgers this season is fifth-year forward Tyler Wahl, Wisconsin’s most experienced player who enters the contest averaging 11.9 points and 6.9 rebounds per game along with a team-high eight total blocks, along with 7-0 junior Steven Crawl, who has also dominated on the inside with a team-leading 12.6 points and 7.6 rebounds per game.

Ohio State sophomore center Felix Okpara, who went against the frontcourt pair in two games last season, including the Buckeyes’ 65-57 defeat of the Badgers in the Big Ten Tournament, said the key to victory on Wednesday night will be containing both Wahl and Crowley in the paint, which he admitted will be a tough task due to their physicality and play-making abilities.

“I just feel like the key to success in the game is going to be on the defensive side, just trying to guard the post men well — and also the guards. (We need to) contain them and just give them fewer shots. It comes down to rebounding. I feel like that’s going to be the key.”

This year’s Badgers team, which Holtmann called the deepest and most talented team they’ve had in the Gard era, will pose a formidable challenge to the Buckeyes on Wednesday night, something the team has recognized in the days leading up to the matchup. For Okpara and his team, though, this is a challenge that they are prepared — and most importantly motivated — to face.

“It’s going to be a really good game,” Okpara said. “They’re the No. 1 team in the Big Ten, they’re undefeated (in conference play). And they also beat us here last year. So we kind of want this game to be a redemption game, getting our payback.”

The Buckeyes’ matchup with Wisconsin is set to tip off at 8:30 p.m. and be broadcast on Big Ten Network.