

Buckeyes Fend Off Late Gophers Rally For Sixth-Straight Win, Defeat Gophers 84-74



Ohio State continued its winning ways on Sunday night, benefiting from a balanced scoring attack and fending off a dominating outing from Minnesota forward Dawson Garcia to defeat the Gophers 84-74 in the team's Big Ten opener.

The Buckeyes (7-1, 1-0 in Big Ten) had three starters — Jamison Battle (25), Roddy Gayle Jr. (16) and Bruce Thornton (26) — reach double figures, while the team connected on 9 of their 17 three-point shots. The Buckeyes held Minnesota (5-3, 0-1 in Big Ten) to just 48.3 percent shooting from the field and 28.6 percent from three, while they forced 13 Gopher turnovers that led to 16 points.

Like many games this season, Ohio State jumped out to a strong start, hitting on three of its first four shots to take an early 9-2 lead. Gayle started things off with a three-pointer, which was immediately followed by a pair of triples from the former Gopher forward Battle.

After two more points from Battle from the free-throw line, the Buckeyes were ahead 11-2 with 16:37 remaining, which soon grew to 14-2 following another three makes from the charity strike free throws from center Felix Okpara and Thornton.

The Buckeyes' blazing start was stopped after four-straight free throws from Garcia and a made layup from guard Mike Mitchell Jr., which trimmed the deficit to 14-8 with 12:48 left in the half. But after Battle and Mitchell traded baskets, Ohio State took off again due to Thornton, who outscored Minnesota 7-2 by himself in 1:18 to increase the team's advantage to 24-12.

Ohio State's lead inflated to 18 soon after following a made basket from Gayle, a dunk from Key and layup from Bonner, a stretch that capped an extended 11-0 run and put them up 30-12 with 8:35 remaining in the half. After a series of traded baskets from the two teams, Ohio State inflated its lead to a game-high 22 points following another 8-0 run that was capped by a three-point basket from Gayle, which put the team up 42-20 with 2:39 left. This was the largest lead they held all game, though, as

Minnesota closed the first frame on a 8-0 run in the final 2:17 of action, a sequence that was started by a made jumper from Garcia and capped by a fast-break dunk from forward Pharrel Payne.

Ohio State was still able to take a comfortable 42-28 lead into the locker room due to its crisp shooting, where they connected on 15 of its 27 field goals and four of its eight three-pointers in the game's first 20 minutes, with two of those triples coming from Battle. The Buckeyes also forced nine Gopher turnovers that resulted in 11 points, while also earning 16 of its 42 points in the paint.

Minnesota continued to trim the deficit down to start the second half, where they scored four of the half's first six points — all on Garcia free throws — to trail just 44-32 with 18:49 remaining. But the Buckeyes responded in a big way, embarking on a quick 10-2 run in just under two minutes of game action, a sequence that was capped by a corner three-pointer from freshman guard Scotty Middleton at the 15:22 minute mark that inflated the lead to 54-34.

The Gophers did not go away, though, due to a dominating display in the paint from Garcia. After a Battle free throw made it 58-40, Garcia embarked on a personal 8-2 run with four consecutive baskets in the paint, an impressive showing that allowed the Gophers to cut the deficit to just 60-48 with 10:09 left in the game.

The Buckeyes tried to create some extra separation, increasing their lead back up to 66-52 with 8:00 left after Thornton found a cutting Battle for a fast-break dunk, forcing a Gophers timeout. But Minnesota continued to claw its way back, instantly responding with a three-pointer from guard Cam Christie, then getting another two baskets inside the paint from Garcia to trail just 68-59 with 5:17 remaining.

After two Gayle free throws, Minnesota's comeback intensified coming out of the under-four-minute timeout, where they succeeded on a rare five-point possession. This came by way of a three-pointer from guard Elijah Hawkins and a personal foul on Battle that led to an additional two free throws from Garcia, a sequence that put the Gophers behind just 70-64 at the 3:53 minute mark.

But the game's momentum quickly shifted in the Buckeyes' favor one final time following a barrage of clutch three-pointers from the team's top three scorers. The first came from Battle, who created the initial separation with a three-pointer to increase the lead to 75-66. Then, after another Garcia layup, the Buckeyes responded again with three points, this time from Thornton. The final sequence of triples came from Gayle, who increased the Buckeyes' lead to 81-70 with just 1:53 left in the game with a triple from the wing — giving the team the separation they needed to cruise the rest of the way and hang on to the 10-point victory.

The Buckeyes were led in the win by the trio of Battle, Gayle and Thornton, who scored 35 of the team's 42 second-half points, including the team's final 25 points of the game. Middleton added 8 points on 3-of-4 shooting, while center Felix Okpara and Battle each shared the team-high for rebounds with seven.

The Gophers were led by Garcia, who turned in a dominating performance with a career-high 36 points on 12-of-25 shooting, including 12-of-14 from the free-throw line. His point total was the most ever by an opposing player in Value City Arena history.

The Buckeyes will look to increase its winning streak to seven games later this week when they welcome Miami (Ohio) to Value City Arena on Wednesday night. The matchup is set to tip off at 7 p.m. and be streamed exclusively on Big Ten Plus.