

Buckeyes Gearing Up For Difficult Road Test Against Indiana



In its first 14 games of the season, Ohio State has built a strong resume that can match up with some of the sport's elite. The Buckeyes enter this weekend with an impressive 12-2 overall record and 2-1 record in the Big Ten, with many quality wins over teams such as then-No. 17-ranked Alabama, 11-3 Minnesota and talent-laden UCLA.

Ohio State still has yet to put something valuable on their resume that can potentially boost them into the AP Top 25 on Monday, that being a road win. Head coach Chris Holtmann's team enters this weekend with a 0-1 record on the road so far this season, with the lone loss coming by way of a demoralizing 83-80 loss against Penn State on Dec. 9 where they squandered a double-digit second half lead.

Ohio State will get their chance on Saturday to secure its first win this season away from Value City Arena or a neutral site, but it certainly won't be an easy task, as the Buckeyes will travel to Bloomington, Ind. to take on head coach Mike Woodson's Hoosiers in historic Assembly Hall. With tip-off set for 8 p.m. and the Hoosier faithful likely to pack the arena, the Buckeyes know they are walking into a steep challenge on Saturday night, one that they will need to mentally prepare themselves for before they take the pristine Assembly Hall floor.

"Assembly Hall is a very tough place to play," senior forward Zed Key said on Friday. "We just have to stay connected. It's going to come down to the little details. It's going to get loud in there. They're going to go on runs, and they're a really good team. But we just have to stay connected."

Key, who played at Indiana last season during Ohio State's 86-70 loss on Jan. 28, said that while they recognize that this will be a steep challenge for the team, it is a unique opportunity for he and his teammates to play on a national stage compete in a historic venue in primetime, especially for those who have never played in the arena.

"It's a great experience," Key said. "You grow up thinking about playing in these big moments. With traveling too, you get to see different places that you usually won't get to see...Obviously, we're planning to get a 'W,' but you can feel the history in there. You see all the banners up on the wall, you see how many people have played (at Indiana), and it's like, 'Wow.' But it's going to be a good challenge. And they are a really good team."

While the Buckeyes will have plenty of time to bask in the glory of Assembly Hall, they must also be prepared to face off against a talented Hoosiers team that is capable of putting together a complete performance on any given night.

Indiana, who enters Saturday night's contest with a 10-4 overall record and was last seen dropping a 86-70 game at Nebraska on Wednesday, poses a formidable threat in the frontcourt. The Hoosiers are spearheaded in the paint by sophomore forward Malik Reneau, who is experiencing a breakout season with a team-high 16.1 points on 58.8 percent shooting along with 5.7 rebounds per game. Also manning the frontcourt is sophomore center Kel'el Ware, who enters the contest ranked fourth in the Big Ten with 9.0 rebounds per game, while also contributing 15.3 points per game and a team-high 20 blocks.

Associate head coach Jake Diebler said his team will have its hands full trying to limit the production and physicality of Reneau and Ware, as they impact the game in more ways than just rebounding and scoring.

"(Reneau and Ware are) two good players," Diebler said. "If you look at their assist numbers (42 for Reneau, 24 for Ware), between the two of them, they're pretty high. They're really good at protecting the rim, so they're impact is felt at a high level on both sides of the ball.

"We have to limit their paint catches and paint attempts, because they're efficient in there. And then we have to read the rim on offense...So those two guys are high-level players. And you feel their impact on both sides of the ball, without question. So we have to be aware of them on both sides."

The Hoosiers backcourt has been led by senior and freshman guards Trey Galloway and Gabe Cupps, who have combined to average 6.8 points and 2.3 assists on a combined 43.3 percent shooting this season. But Woodson is also returning a major reinforcement at the guard position in redshirt senior Xavier Johnson, who returned to the lineup on Wednesday after missing the last seven games with a left foot injury.

Diebler said that Johnson, who is averaging 9.0 points, 2.4 assists and 2.1 rebounds per game in seven contests, can provide yet another challenge for the Buckeyes, mostly due to his leadership and play-making ability.

"(Johnson brings) experience," Diebler said. "He's been through some Big Ten battles. He creates a dynamic for them both offensively and defensively with his speed and physicality. But his experience is probably most important. He's hit big shots for him in big moments in the past. He's caused turnovers in big moments for them in the past. So I think having that experience out there, I'm sure they're excited to have him back."

With Indiana getting healthier and posing many threats in both the back-and-frontcourts, Diebler said his team will have to work to bolster their resume and send a message to both AP voters and the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee with a statement road win, something the coach thinks his team is more than capable of achieving.

"I think we're ready," Diebler said. "We're going to see Indiana's very best. And (Assembly Hall) is one of the toughest places to play in the country. So in those situations, when you travel on the road in the Big Ten, you want to make sure you give yourself an opportunity to win the game down the stretch. We did that at Penn State, but we didn't finish it... I think our toughness and our leadership is going to give us opportunities to win games on the road at a much higher level than last year. So I'm excited about the opportunity we have tomorrow."