

Buckeyes Looking To Break 13-Game Road Losing Streak Against Veteran Northwestern



Ohio State's 2023-24 season may have hit its low-point on Tuesday when the team dropped their fourth game in six attempts this month at Nebraska's Pinnacle Bank Arena, an uninspiring 14-point defeat that caused head coach Chris Holtmann to call out his team's toughness in the minutes following the contest.

Perhaps more importantly, the Buckeyes' loss to the Cornhuskers also marked the program's 13th-straight road defeat, a losing streak that dates all the way back to Jan. 1, 2023, when Holtmann's team took care of Northwestern at Welsh-Ryan Arena 73-57. Ohio State's continued road struggles have placed the program under a critical microscope from fans and others who closely follow the team, but all the negative noise could come to an end on Saturday night when it heads back to Evanston, Ill. to take on a talented Northwestern team.

The Wildcats, led by 12th-year head coach and 2022-23 Big Ten Coach of the Year Chris Collins, have continued to establish themselves as one of the more formidable teams in the Big Ten with their play this season. After securing just its second NCAA Tournament berth in program history last year, Northwestern has jumped out to a strong 14-5 start and a 5-3 conference record, with two of those conference wins coming at home against then-No.1 Purdue on Dec. 1 and No. 10 Illinois on Jan. 24.

Northwestern's strong start to the season — and, perhaps more importantly for Ohio State, its 10-1 record at home — has caught the attention of the Buckeyes as they prepare to take on the Wildcats on Saturday. First-year assistant coach Brandon Bailey told the media on Friday that the Wildcats — much like Nebraska — pose a unique threat on offense with their perimeter shooting and ability to spread the floor with multiple scorers, areas of which he feels his team has struggled to defend against in recent weeks.

"They can get shots in multiple different ways," Bailey said. "They can get them in transition, (graduate guard Boo Buie) is very willing and capable of shooting threes behind pick and roll. They do a ton of off-

ball screening actions for guys to come off, whether that's hand-offs or splits. They do a lot of tight curls to get guys open for threes.

“(Senior center Matthew) Nicholson, he doesn't shoot a three, but he gets guys threes, whether that's with his screening or his passing. So they're really, really versatile in a lot of different things that they're doing, which is why it's been such a great challenge and opportunity to prepare for them.”

To Bailey's point, the Wildcats can attack opposing teams in a number of different ways on the perimeter, with four of their five starters shooting at least 35 percent from three and attempting at least 20 three-pointers on the year. Northwestern's three-point shooting, which ranks second in the Big Ten at 37.4 percent, is spearheaded by senior and graduate guards Ty Berry and Ryan Langborg, who are second and 12th in the Big Ten, respectively, in three-point field goals per game at 2.3 and 2.0.

Berry and Langborg are strong from the perimeter, but the Wildcats' offense flows through graduate guard and 2022-23 All-Big Ten selection Boo Bouie, who has firmly supplanted himself this season as one of the premier scorers and playmakers in the Big Ten. The veteran Bouie, who has made significant contributions to the program in each of his five seasons with the program, enters the contest ranking sixth in the conference in scoring at 18.5 points per game on 43.7 percent and sixth in assists with 5.3, while also shooting 35.7 percent from three and contributing 3.3 rebounds per contest.

Fifth-year forward Jamison Battle, who played against Bouie at Minnesota for the past two seasons while at Minnesota, said that while Bouie can score at will for his team, he poses the biggest challenge with his ability to facilitate and play-make, two aspects of his game both he and his teammates are keenly aware of — and poised to limit — heading into Saturday's contest.

“It's not even the scoring for me, it's just what he does with the ball to get others open,” Battle said on Friday. “That's what you have in a point guard with Boo Bouie, and obviously what he can do scoring wise. What he's done in the Big Ten over these past few years, taking Northwestern to the tournament last year, and then obviously having a good year, this year, I mean, he's the head of the snake.

“He leads this team, he makes them go offensively and defensively, creating. He's the guy with the ball in his hands the majority of the time. He's a special player, but we have just as good of guards as well with Roddy (Gayle Jr.) and Bruce (Thornton) who are ready for the challenge of facing such a good point guard like this...They'll be up for the challenge, which I'm excited to see.”

Bouie and Northwestern present one of the tougher challenges for Ohio State so far this year on the road, creating just another roadblock for Holtmann and the Buckeyes as they look to head in a more positive direction and end their extended road losing streak. But, regardless of the streak, Battle said that he and his teammates are still as motivated as ever to prove they can compete for a postseason bid in a competitive Big Ten Conference, something they can work towards accomplishing if they come away with a signature road victory on Saturday night.

“We're hungry,” Battle said. “That's what I really love about this group. Regardless of outcomes, regardless of wins and losses, we're still hungry, and we still want to win. We have another opportunity with Northwestern, a team who just beat another top-10 team at home. It's a tough place to play, but it's another challenge. It's another opportunity for us to build our tournament resume.”

Ohio State's matchup with Northwestern will tip off at 8:30 p.m. on Saturday night, with the game set to be broadcast on Big Ten Network.