

# Buckeyes Open Season With Non-Conference Matchup Against Oakland



Following a disappointing 16-19 campaign last year, the Ohio State men's basketball team is eager to embark on a bounce-back season, and they will start their quest of accomplishing that on Monday night. The Buckeyes will begin their 2023-24 season with a home matchup against Oakland, providing the team with their first crack at redemption as they look to return to prominence in the Big Ten and beyond.

"We're just a hungry, hungry group," senior forward Zed Key said. "The guys want to win, they have the will to win. So we're just excited to display that on Monday and just show the world what we've been working on this offseason and just display our talents."

Led by seventh-year head coach Chris Holtmann, Ohio State will take the court with a mix of returning contributors and intriguing additions. Along with the veteran Key, who is entering his fourth year with the program after making a full recovery from his shoulder surgery this offseason, Ohio State also welcomes back several players who helped spur the team's late-season surge in the 2022-23 campaign. That list is spearheaded by a trio improving sophomores in guards Bruce Thornton and Roddy Gayle Jr. and center Felix Okpara, who each showed signs of brilliance towards the end of the year and are expected to make a significant jump this season.

Holtmann will also look to count on a number of newcomers to make a difference this season, a list that includes transfers Jamison Battle (forward), Dale Bonner (guard) and Evan Mahaffey (guard), as well as promising freshmen Scotty Middleton (guard) and Devin Royal (forward).

This new-look Buckeyes team will look to get off on the right footing against a Golden Grizzlies team that struggled in 2022-23, finishing with a 13-19 overall record and ranking ninth in the Horizon League in scoring defense allowing 76.3 points per game. Despite the poor showing last season, Oakland is still led by longtime head coach Greg Kampe, who has spearheaded the program for the past four decades and has racked up 675 career wins, the third-most out of any active Division-I coach. It is a strong

resume that Holtmann has not taken lightly as they prepare to take on the Golden Grizzlies.

“Greg’s one of the all-time great guys in our profession. Greg Kampe is a really good coach. He’s won a tremendous number of games. They play a unique style, they have really talented, athletic kids who can really impact the game in a lot of different ways. I’ve always been impressed with him, the way he coaches.”

On the court, Oakland will be led by a strong contingency of veteran players. That starts with graduate guard Blake Lampan and junior forward Trey Thompson, who are each expected to carry the load for Kampe’s offense after combining to average 13.3 points, 5.2 rebounds and 1.6 assists per game last season. The Golden Grizzlies will also return a familiar face to the starting lineup in senior guard Rocket Watts, who netted 8.7 points and 2.7 rebounds per game last year after playing one season at Mississippi State (2021-22) and two at Michigan State (2019-2021).

Oakland may present a sneaky challenge for the Buckeyes in their season opener, but for Holtmann and his squad, it’s an opportunity to start the season on the right note and gauge how their team shapes up after a long and arduous offseason.

“Yeah, I think they’re ready, for sure,” head coach Chris Holtmann said. “They’re anxious. They’re anxious to play somebody else and compete against other competition and kind of see where they stack up. That’s a pretty fluid process with most teams here, particularly early in the year. But they’re excited.”

Ohio State’s season opener will tip off at 7 p.m., streaming exclusively on Big Ten Plus.