

# Buckeyes Ready For Tough Non-Conference Challenge Against No. 15 Texas A&M



After barely squeaking past mid-major Oakland in its season opener, Ohio State is now tasked with an even greater challenge. The Buckeyes will have one of their toughest non-conference matchups of the season on Friday night when they welcome No. 15 Texas A&M to Value City Arena, a game that head coach Chris Holtmann said can serve as a litmus test for where his team stands in the early portion of the season.

“We’re looking forward to obviously a great test (on Friday) against a really good Texas A&M team,” Holtmann said on Thursday. “There’s a reason why they had the year they had last year, and they certainly returned some key players. They’re well coached, head coach Buzz (Williams) does a great job, so we’re looking forward to a great challenge.”

Led by Williams, who is the reigning SEC Coach of The Year, the Aggies are coming off one of their most successful seasons in recent memory. The program finished with a 25-10 record (15-3 in SEC) and returned to the NCAA Tournament for the first time in five seasons, while also collecting the most conference wins since the team joined the SEC in 2012.

This season, Texas A&M reclaims the majority of their key contributors from their NCAA Tournament-team, none more important than junior guard Wade Taylor IV. Taylor emerged as one of the better all-around players in the nation in his sophomore campaign, becoming just one of three Division-I players to net 500+ points, 125+ assists and 50+ steals while making 85.0 percent of better on free throw attempts. These successes allowed him to earn a consensus first-team All-SEC selection last season and also be honored as the SEC Preseason Player of The Year this October, a combination of accolades that Holtmann has not taken lightly.

“He’s a terrific offensive player,” Holtmann said. “He has great change of pace. He’s good in ball screens. He has the ability to really shoot it with range and depth. He can also make good reads, he’s good with the ball. He can see your ball screen coverage and make particular reads against it. And I

think his change of pace, his speed, (makes him) just a really talented guard.”

Taylor is not the only key backcourt piece returning to the Aggies’ starting five this season. The team also welcomes back fifth-year Tyrece Radford, who penciled his name in the starting lineup in all 35 games and earned second-team All-SEC honors last season after averaging 13.3 points and 5.3 rebounds per contest. Taylor’s high rebound total is an impressive feat for a 6-3 guard, a striking stat that is indicative of the style of play the Aggies want to play with in the backcourt.

According to Buckeyes’ fifth-year guard Dale Bonner, Taylor, Radford and the entire Aggies’ backcourt place a strong emphasis on team rebounding and physicality, a unique approach that Ohio State has to be prepared to defend against on Friday night.

“They fly around, just how our guards do,” Bonner said. “Offensively, they’re not afraid to take, crazy shots or anything like that. They’re not going to worry about making or missing. Most of the guards also rebound too, the 2s and 3s and wings, they’ll fly in there and try and get rebounds as well. So our guards, we just have to try and get in there and be physical as well.”

Holtmann also mentioned rebounding as a potential key to the game, specifically limiting the Aggies on the offensive glass. Last season, Texas A&M corralled in 12.4 offensive rebounds per game and finished with a rebounding margin of 4.7, good for 21st and 33rd in the nation. And with frontcourt players Henry Coleman III and Andersonn Garcia, who combined to average 5.1 boards per contest, returning, defending the glass has become a major point of emphasis for Holtmann and his squad this week.

“Coleman’s a really good player,” Holtmann said. “But it’s not just the frontcourt guys. They’ll send at times four to five at the offensive glass. I think you can tell that’s a big part of what they do. And their numbers back that up. So it’s really going to be a collective effort for us right now. It’s just a major part of what they do and a major part of their offensive efficiency. Different teams provide different strengths, we know that. And that’s a major strength for this group, it’s clear that that’s something they’ve really bought into. So it will obviously be a great challenge for us, and we’ve talked about that being an area we have to continue to get better in.”

The Buckeyes are well aware of the great challenges the Aggies present on both ends of the floor, but they also feel that their team is well equipped to match that play and come away with an early signature victory on Friday night. For veterans Battle and Bonner, this game can serve as an opportunity to show the conference and the nation that this year’s Ohio State squad is poised for a return to national prominence.

“It’s just another tough battle, and I think we’ll be ready,” Bonner said, “They’re a good team, but we’re also a good team too. So it’s just another game that we’re looking forward to play.”

“I’m excited for the challenge ahead,” Battle added. “Obviously coming in here, it should be a good environment against the top-15 team in the country, and I think we’ll be ready.”