

Celeste Taylor Set To Lead No. 2 Ohio State Against No. 7 Duke In “Full-Circle Moment” With Sweet 16 On The Line



Second-seeded Ohio State will be playing on its home court on Sunday when it hosts No. 7 Duke at The Schottenstein Center with a trip to the Sweet 16 on the line, but for fifth-year guard Celeste Taylor, it will represent a different kind of homecoming.

Taylor, who was named Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year after a standout regular season with Ohio State, played her previous two seasons at Duke before transferring to Columbus. With her previous stints at Texas and Duke just as important as her current run with the Buckeyes, she said ahead of the contest - set for a noon tip on ESPN - that she feels it's a "full-circle moment" for her college basketball career.

"It does feel like a full-circle moment," she said. "I just turn it over to it being part of my journey. The different things that happen, everything happens for a reason."

Taylor said she will try to treat it like just another game, adding it's like going against her teammates in practice - only this time, it's former teammates rather than her current ones at Ohio State. But there is no hard feeling between Taylor or Duke, as she said the Blue Devils helped her grow during her time in Chapel Hill.

"I think as a person, they've helped me grow tremendously," she said. "Forming relationships with multiple people. Giving me the opportunity to have the degree that I have from there. I think basketball-wise, (they) helped me defensively. I was always a defensive-minded kid, but I think giving me a different style of play, giving me a different role on the team, I think that's how they've helped me."

Taylor has had a successful transition from Duke to Ohio State, winning her second consecutive Defensive Player of the Year award - one each in the ACC and Big Ten - and providing a significant

boost for the Buckeyes, averaging 10.2 points, 4.2 rebounds, 3.5 assists and 2.5 steals per game. It's come as no surprise to her former teammates and coaches, who saw the work she put in behind the scenes at Duke.

"She just competes at a really high level," Duke head coach Kara Lawson said. "Practice, games, she takes pride in it and is competitive because she wants to win. I think that mindset is what allows her to be really good on (the defensive) end."

Taylor facing off against her former team is just one notable story entering the contest, but the game is just as intriguing when it comes to how things will play out on the floor. The Buckeyes knocked off No. 15 Maine to reach the next round, while Duke - after facing a 37-28 deficit against No. 10 Richmond - pulled off a 72-61 win to advance.

Much of Duke's success this season (21-11 overall and an 11-7 record in conference play) has come from the defensive end, even with Taylor's departure.

The Blue Devils are allowing just 57.8 points per game and hold the opposition to just 36.8 percent shooting, a top-25 mark nationally, while four players - including guards Taina Mair, Oluchi Okanawa and Reigan Richardson, and wing Jadyn Donovan - have notched at least 30 steals and their 5.7 blocks per game are fifth-most in the country.

"Yeah, (Duke is an) excellent defensive team," Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff said. "They put a lot into that end of the floor, and they're really good. They're very disruptive. They've got great ball pressure. They're heavy in the passing lanes to try to disrupt the flow of your offense and create turnovers. This will be one of the best defensive teams we've played this year."

Duke is middle of the pack offensively, with Richardson at 11.9 points per game the team's only double digit scorer, though five players averaged at least 8.3 points. But with 38.2 rebounds per game - significantly outpacing the competition at 32.1 boards - the Blue Devils get plenty of second-chance opportunities, something that has hurt the Buckeyes this season against teams with a height advantage like Duke has.

It's a familiar position for Ohio State, however, as it looks to advance to the Sweet 16 for the third consecutive season, and the Buckeyes will lean on their fundamentals as they look to get past the Blue Devils on Sunday in their last home game of the season.

"Just keep it the same game plan that we had," forward Taiyier Parks said. "Anything that our coaches draw up for us, we're just going to execute. I feel like what we have in store we'll be able to handle whatever Duke has for us."