

E.J. Liddell Lands With Pelicans After Draft Slide



It was an unexpectedly long draft night for E.J. Liddell.

Touted as a likely first round pick in the 2022 NBA Draft, Liddell saw himself fall out of the top 30 selections, and he was ultimately taken with the No. 41 pick to the New Orleans Pelicans in the second round on June 23.

Although Liddell was a standout at Ohio State, averaging a team-best 19.4 points per game as a junior and collecting All-Big Ten First Team honors in his sophomore and junior seasons, he endured arguably the most glaring slide in the draft on Thursday.

Much has been made about Liddell's draft night slide, and he said he has something to prove in his jump to the NBA.

"This is not anything new," Liddell told reporters at his draft party on June 23. "I've been proving people wrong my whole entire life and I'm going to keep doing that until the day I'm gone."

This begs the question: why did E.J. Liddell slide in the 2022 NBA Draft?

Bucknuts reporter and BSB alum Steve Helwagen said he was surprised to see Liddell fall into the second round, but noted that there wasn't much buzz surrounding Liddell during the draft process.

"It did not make sense to me. One, because he's a very solid person. There's no off-the-court issues with him. Coach (Chris) Holtmann swore by him as a guy who worked really hard and he improved every year. And he had a really good year this past year, I thought, on the whole," Helwagen said. "If there were reasons that the NBA had some reservations about him, I would say: his turnovers, at times they were a little bit troubling, and his ball-handling. If he's going to be a three in the NBA, you have to be able to handle the ball."

One of the more prevalent theories for his fall to the second-round lies in his fit on an NBA court. Standing at 6-foot-7 and weighing in at 243 pounds, Liddell primarily played the four, and even mixed in as the small-ball five, during his three-year college career. While Liddell saw increasing success each season in this role, he is still undersized compared to the average NBA power forward or center.

Although Liddell carries that undersized label heading into his NBA career, shorter big men have created a niche for themselves at the professional level in recent years. The most notable example of this is Golden State Warriors forward Draymond Green, who has picked up seven NBA All-Defensive Team nods and the 2017 NBA Defensive Player of the Year, while playing a major role in Golden State's four championships during its dynasty run.

Green's excellence has created a new mold of big men, at all levels, defined by shorter but stockier builds. For example, the Boston Celtics' Grant Williams, Miami Heat's P.J. Tucker and Utah Jazz's Eric Paschall have all followed that mold to successful NBA careers to this point.

Liddell is another player who fits the mold amplified by Green, carrying the defensive ability and build to defend guards, wings and, in some cases, centers. Liddell is known to have a prowess in defensive rotation — utilizing this strength to lead the Big Ten in blocks last season with 2.5 per game.

Liddell also brings a polished offensive game to New Orleans. He can effectively score at all three-levels, boasting a strong post game while also showing strides as a ball-handler and playmaker in his junior season. He displayed a heightened ability to pass out of double-teams in 2021-22, increasing his total assist output from 52, as a sophomore, to 80 in his final season with the Buckeyes. During his three-year Ohio State career, Liddell posted shooting splits of 48.0 percent from the field and 34.1 percent from three-point range.

Along these lines, Liddell said he did everything he could to improve his stock ahead of the draft. After entering the 2021 NBA draft following his sophomore season, while maintaining his eligibility, he returned to Ohio State with feedback from NBA scouts and executives and worked to make his game more translatable to the league. As a junior, he transitioned from primarily playing with his back to the basket to a player who could space the floor and make plays when called upon.

While Liddell was not selected as early as some would have expected, the slide in the draft will leave the Buckeye with a chip on his shoulder heading into his first season in the league.

For an extended version of this story featuring additional quotes and analysis, be sure to check out the July issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, mailing in early July and available online at BuckeyeSports.com.