

Roddy Gayle Jr., Bruce Thornton Emerging as Lethal Tandem For Ohio State This Season



Ohio State sophomore guards Roddy Gayle Jr. and Bruce Thornton came into the season with lofty expectations, with head coach Chris Holtmann making it known throughout the offseason that the team will need to rely on the backcourt duo if they want to have a bounce-back season.

Through the first month of the 2023-24 campaign, the sophomore tandem has met — maybe even exceeded — the standards put on by their coach, where they have taken significant steps in their respective games to emerge as one of the Big Ten’s top backcourt duos.

Starting each of the team’s first seven games, both Gayle and Thornton have put their imprints on Ohio State’s strong 6-1 start to the season, with the guards ranking first and second in minutes (29.6, 31.3), points per game (14.4, 18.3) and assists (29, 31). The duo has also shown a knack for putting the team on its back when they need them most, a shared mentality that was most evident during the Buckeyes’ upset win over then-No. 17 Alabama on Nov. 24. That night, they accounted for 52 of the team’s 92 (56.5 percent) points and both reached career-highs of 29 for Thornton and 23 for Gayle.

This blazing start has infused confidence into the two sophomore guards that was not always seen during last season’s struggles, allowing them to send a strong message to not only the Big Ten, but all of college basketball.

“I feel like we’re one of the best backcourts in the country,” Thornton said on Wednesday. “When Roddy and I are on the court together, I feel like we can make any play at any given time.”

Gayle and Thornton’s impact on the offensive side of the ball as been felt all season, where they have helped the team average 80.0 points per game. But Holtmann said on Nov. 29 that they have also made their presence known on the defensive end, where he thinks the two guards have made the most improvements this season. This is an evolution that the coach said he expected his two guards to go through early on in their careers, as it was an area of strength he saw while he recruited the tandem in

2021.

“(Thornton and Gayle’s production on offense) opens up a lot of stuff,” Holtmann said. “But you can’t minimize that both those guys can be solid to plus-defenders as well. Roddy, when he’s playing well, has the ability to impact the ball defensively with his size and length and physicality. Bruce needs to continue to do that, and he’s also done a better job with rebounding on the defensive end.

“So it’s not just about what they bring on the offensive end, they do have the ability to be dynamic on the defensive end,” he continued. “But we recruited those guys to be complete players, and we’re hoping that that’s what they’re growing into. So that just gives you the flexibility to be able to be a better and more complete team.”

Gayle and Thornton’s rapid emergence has turned the heads of many across the Big Ten and college basketball, but for the two guards, it is a progression into stardom that has been building since they both arrived on campus in 2022. They said their production on the court this season is a product of the chemistry and connectedness they possess both on and off the court, one which Gayle said will only intensify as their Ohio State careers progress.

“I feel like the chemistry between each other is growing every day,” Gayle said. “Me being able to play off of him, especially when he’s hot, opens up a lot more opportunities for me. We’ve gotten off to a great start, and it’s a long season, but I think it’ll be special for us.”