

Holtmann Reflects on Sensabaugh's "Tremendous" Freshman Season, Talks NBA Future



Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann made an appearance on the Utah Jazz Podcast Network's "Roundball Roundup" show Friday, reflecting on the lone season he spent coaching the one-and-done forward while also lauding the former Buckeye's high NBA ceiling.

Speaking with Utah Jazz Digital Media Manager J.P. Chunga, Holtmann touched on a variety of topics centered around Sensabaugh, who was selected by the Utah Jazz with the 28th overall pick in the 2023 NBA draft on Thursday.

Holtmann said he was first wowed by Sensabaugh's elite scoring ability and physical presence while watching him play for the AAU travel team "Reach One Teach One," a roster that also carried the talents of current Ohio State guard and former five-star Bruce Thornton, Texas forward and five-star prospect Dillon Mitchell and Sensabaugh's new Jazz teammate and fellow first-round draft pick Taylor Hendricks.

Sensabaugh's ability to separate himself among a crowded roster of top prospects enabled Holtmann to extend an offer to the four-star forward in August of 2021.

"Brice played AAU with Bruce Thornton, so we were watching that team," Holtmann said. "It was an outstanding team, just a tremendous AAU team. So we felt like Brice had the ability, just naturally, he was born to score, he is just wired to score the ball. He always has been. And we loved his ability and his confidence when we watched him play AAU, we just felt like he had the confidence of an elite scorer. That was one of the things we loved about him."

After Sensabaugh committed to play for Ohio State in Sept. 2021, Holtmann said the freshman continued to impress him with his unique offensive skillset early in his lone season with the Buckeyes, as he made a seamless transition to the collegiate level that was worthy of praise.

"I think he's the best isolation player that I've coached," Holtmann said. "(He has the) ability to kind of

get his own shot, get to his spot, raise up, he's the most gifted scorer I've coached at that age, and we had a tremendous freshman the year prior."

Sensabaugh's rare one-on-one talent allowed him to quickly gain the trust of his head coach, prompting Holtmann to insert the forward into the starting lineup just nine games into the season and place the ball in hands in high-pressure situations.

Holtmann pointed to the Buckeyes' 89-84 overtime loss to North Carolina on Dec. 17 as a prime example where the coaching staff handed Sensabaugh the keys to produce late in games. With the score knotted at 77 late in the second half, Holtmann put the freshman forward in an isolation matchup with top Tar Heel defender Leaky Black, resulting in a pull-up elbow jumper that would give the Buckeyes the two-point lead, and NBA personnel a glimpse of what Sensabaugh can do on the big stage.

"We just ran a bit of an isolation for him around the elbow area that NBA teams will run a variation of where they're going to put their best scorer in those positions and try and give them space to make the right read," Holtmann said. "And he made the right read and scored it. So he's really good in those situations."

While Sensabaugh excelled for most of his freshman campaign, averaging a team-high 16.3 points a game, Holtmann admitted his team's disappointing 16-19 season was the "most we've ever struggled" in his six years at the helm for the Buckeyes.

However, he added that the overall team struggles can also serve as a learning experience for Sensabaugh as he enters a new stage in his career, as it taught him how to handle the many forms of adversity athletes may face throughout a season.

"There is no question, I think he will learn," Holtmann said. "We all went through a difficult season, [and] I think there's a lot of good things you can take from that. He persevered and I think played his best basketball in the last five, six weeks of the season."

Despite Sensabaugh's stellar offensive skills, many experts and analysts around the league have expressed concern over the new Jazz forward's ability to defend at a high level. However, Holtmann refuted these doubts in his interview with Chunga, stating that his former player has the tangible qualities needed to develop as a two-way NBA player.

"He has physical tools to grow in that area, and his details improved as the season went on," Holtmann said. "He knows that he needs to continue to grow, as every young player (does). This is not unique just to him, most every young player needs to perform, needs to improve in certain areas, and it just so happens that his is on the defensive end. But he will (improve). I have no doubt he will get better in that area and continue to grow."

As Sensabaugh prepares for his rookie NBA season, he now becomes the fourth Ohio State player to be selected in the NBA draft during the Holtmann era, joining 2022 first-round draft pick and current San Antonio Spurs forward Malaki Branham, 2022 second-round selection and New Orleans Pelican E.J. Liddell and 2018 second-round pick Keita Bates Diop.

For Holtmann, he sees this recent string of NBA Buckeyes as an accomplishment both he and his coaching staff can be appreciative of.

“(I have) a lot of pride,” Holtmann said. “E.J. Liddell, Malaki Branham, were two just tremendous players and people last year. To have another young player in Brice who’s just beginning this journey, I’m really happy for him (and) his mom and dad. To be able to start this journey as a professional player, it’s a dream come true.”