

# Important Offseason Ahead For Okpara



As the 2022-23 season wore on, there were very few bright spots for the Ohio State men's basketball team.

The Buckeyes endured a stretch in which they lost 14 of 15 games, plummeting to near the bottom of the Big Ten standings by the end of the regular season. Ohio State ultimately dug itself out of the cellar, winning five of its last seven games — including a run to the semifinal of the Big Ten Tournament — while the Buckeyes were largely led by their emerging crop of freshmen.

A notable member of the freshmen unit was center Felix Okpara, whose defensive acumen shined all season while his offensive game grew as the campaign continued. As Okpara saw steady growth throughout his first season in Columbus, he credited his teammates and coaches for sticking with him as he underwent his season-long development.

"I'm going to give the credit to my coaches and my teammates. They really believe in me. I also want to thank the coaches for giving me the opportunity," Okpara said on March 10. "When I'm on the court, I try to do my job as best I can. I feel like I did my job very well tonight, and I've just got to keep doing it every night."

Okpara hung his hat on the defensive end this season, leading the Buckeyes with 44 total blocks and 1.3 denials per game while serving as Ohio State's rim protector. Not only did Okpara rack up blocks and impact countless shots at the rim, but he hung tough against the Big Ten's most impactful post players, showing a natural instinct to defend on the block. However, standing at 6-11 and weighing 220 pounds, Okpara's slim frame allowed post players to back him down into the paint with relative ease.

As the Buckeyes transition into the offseason, head coach Chris Holtmann said building muscle mass will be key for Okpara's future in the Big Ten.

"It's going to be as critical as anything for him," Holtmann said. "I said on my radio show, he needs 10 or 15 pounds of muscle. I'm not sure it's 15 pounds of muscle, but it's certainly in the 10-pound range."

He just has to get stronger, his legs have to get stronger. His base and core have to get stronger.”

It took some time for Okpara to find an offensive rhythm, but he grew into a roll threat in pick-and-roll situations while also growing as a rim-runner. The Buckeyes primarily used Okpara around the rim and had a particular penchant to get him on the receiving ends of alley-oops. In all, Okpara produced 4.0 points per game while shooting 58.7 percent from the field last season.

As his offensive game developed over the course of the season, Okpara recognized that he settled into his role and improved in that regard, but that there is still room to improve this offseason.

“I just got way more comfortable knowing that I can play through mistakes,” Okpara said. “Even though I can play through mistakes, I just tried to — with the ball offensively — make fewer mistakes so I can stay on the court. Also, I put a lot more trust in my teammates.

“I feel like those two things played a big role in my development offensively.”

While Okpara enters one of the most important offseasons for a college player, jumping from a freshman to a sophomore, Holtmann said Okpara fits into his vision for how he utilizes the center while noting that he was encouraged by the growth Okpara showed this season.

“(The prototypical center) has to defend ball screens. I think he has to really be able to defend ball screens and move his feet, and have the necessary size to do that. That’s probably as important as anything. Protect the rim is another thing, and Felix can clearly do both of those things,” Holtmann said. “Felix has to grow into what he can do at a high level and I think that’s going to be the challenge for him in the offseason.

“What we’ve seen with Felix is that he’s just scratching the surface,” he continued.