

Increased Team Chemistry, Leadership of Bruce Thornton, Micah Parrish Key In Untapping Buckeyes' Recent Defensive Dominance



Ohio State head coach Jake Diebler has said many times throughout the past few weeks that the team's recent successes can be attributed his team coming together as one unit and playing with great connectedness on the court.

These developments have certainly elevated the play of the team as a whole during their current three-game winning streak, and perhaps no aspect of the group has benefited more from these changes than their team defense.

Since defeating No. 11 Purdue 73-70 on Jan. 21, the Buckeyes' have been dominant on that side of the floor, suffocating both Iowa and Penn State in a span of three days.

Facing off against the Big Ten's first -and-fifth-best scoring offenses at the time of those two games, the Buckeyes held the Hawkeyes to a season-low 65 points on 39.3 percent shooting on Monday, then limited the Nittany Lions to their second-worst scoring output of 64 points on 45.7 percent shooting Thursday night.

Ohio State head coach Jake Diebler said on Tuesday that his team's recent defensive success comes from his players developing more trust in one another as the season goes on, allowing them to increase both their communication and aggression on that side of the court.

"It's really important," Diebler said when asked about how team chemistry helps on defense. "Because there are multiple opportunities in a possession to break down. Key No. 1 (to prevent that) is communication. That's been a pointed area of improvement for us. We've been very intentional about

improving in that area. And as we've started to communicate better, we've defended better.

"So chemistry is part of that. We're asking guys to call out coverage that maybe they've been trained completely differently for the last however many years. But I think being connected and us being able to trust each other defensively — like if I trust the guys behind me, I may be able to pressure the ball a little bit more. So I think all that stuff is connected. That chemistry is really important."

In addition to its strong team defense, the Buckeyes have also developed a knack for shutting down each team's best offensive player. This was most evident during the team's three wins over Purdue, Iowa and Penn State, where they held preseason All-Big Ten guards Braden Smith, Payton Sandfort and Ace Baldwin Jr. to 12, 13 and 10 points, respectively, on a combined 10-of-38 shooting (26.3 percent) while also forcing them into five combined turnovers.

Although a lot of the credit for these low scoring outputs could go to the Buckeyes' defense as a whole, it may ultimately be attributed to the elite play of Ohio State's top two perimeter defenders in veterans Bruce Thornton and Micah Parrish, whom Diebler says can completely take opposing offenses out of their rhythm with their impressive defensive instincts and leadership.

"Their defensive instincts and their experience are really important," he said. "There will be — maybe the casual eye can't see it — but there will be multiple possessions in a game where one of those guys just completely disrupts the other team's action with the anticipation and their understanding of the scouting report.

"And then as far as leadership goes, it becomes contagious when guys who have been through it before can turn around — the other team is taking the ball out — they can turn around and get us connected. 'Hey, we need one more of this. Watch out for this coming.' That's the kind of leadership and flow of the game that I think we're improving on, and we're seeing real tangible benefit from."