

Jake Diebler, New-Look Buckeyes Set To Host No. 2 Purdue On Sunday



The Ohio State men's basketball team endured perhaps the most hectic week in years when the team agreed to fire head coach Chris Holtmann on Wednesday after seven seasons leading the program, and that week will culminate with their most difficult challenge on the court this season.

Jake Diebler's interim head coaching debut will come at home on Sunday against projected NCAA Tournament No. 1 seed and Big Ten leader Purdue, who enters the contest as the No. 2-ranked team in the nation with an impressive 23-2 record. The Boilermakers have steamrolled through the Big Ten with a 12-2 conference record — mostly led by the brilliance of projected back-to-back Naismith Award winner and 7-foot-4 center Zach Edey, who is averaging 23.3 points and 11.3 rebounds per game.

Despite this dominance from Matt Painter's Boilermakers, the Buckeyes see this game as an opportunity to show the national audience that the program has stayed together amid this adversity and is capable of competing with the powerhouses.

"I think it's certainly well-documented the task that will be at-hand on Sunday," Diebler said. "We're going into that game to compete at the highest level and win. I understand that there are some areas where we have to get better and that we're working on addressing quickly. But they want to win this game. And so we're doing everything we can do ready. We're going to be well-prepared. I think our guys are excited. When you think about Sunday and the opportunity in front of us, they're excited about that. And that helps shift the focus."

According to Diebler, the Buckeyes' focused mentality was on full display during Thursday's practice, where they installed a new format under the guidance of the new interim coach. Part of those changes involved a more high-tempo approach in practice, something sophomore guard Bruce Thornton thought increased the level of intensity at the facility that day.

(Practice) was highly intense on Thursday, with three days out (from the Purdue game)," Thornton said. "We went up and down, almost like (practices) in the offseason. So (Thursday's practice) was a lot of fast pace, a lot of urgency, trying to get stuff accomplished in a shorter amount of time.

"I feel like yesterday was a good (practice) understanding that a crazy incident happened, one that you have no control over of as a player. And I'm just trying to make sure my team is all on the same page to

go win a big game against Purdue.”

Thornton, who has seen a decrease in production since the strong start to the beginning of his season, said that he hopes to see this increased pace translate to the floor during games, something that they have rarely done this season. Under the guidance of Holtmann — who repeatedly said he wanted his team to play with increased pace throughout the season — the Buckeyes ranked 308th in the nation in adjusted tempo per Ken Pom at 65.2, a metric that tracks each team’s possessions per 40 minutes.

“College and high school is more fast-paced, more uptempo, which (Diebler) brings in himself out there on the court at practice,” he said. “Trying to bring up to pace, get more transition buckets, things like that, to increase our tempo, increase our urgency on the court that we need to have to finish out the way that he wants it. I think it could be a great role for us, having a different style of pace about us, to win big games in the future.”

This change in style of play could benefit Ohio State in the short-term on Sunday, as the frontcourt-driven Boilermakers enter the contest with the 155th-ranked adjusted tempo in the nation at 68.1 possessions per 40 minutes. But in the long-term, this change in mentality could also help springboard their success moving forward this season, where they hope to finish the final six games out strong and play with a greater sense of urgency.

“They know what’s ahead of us,” Diebler said. “They know the opportunity. I explained to them the reality of the unknown surrounding circumstances, that’s real. But what I also explained to them is the reality of the opportunity, that’s in front of us. That is real too. So we’re focusing on that, and we’re going to do our best to get that all the time.

Ohio State’s matchup against No. 2 Purdue is set for a 1 p.m. tip off on Sunday afternoon, with the game slated to air on CBS. The 1998-99 Ohio State men’s basketball team — who reached the Final Four and finished with a 27-9 overall record — will be honored during the first half.