

Key Shrugs Off Shoulder Injury, Seeks Streak-Snapping Win



With 16:19 remaining in the first half of Ohio State's marquee matchup against then-No. 1 Purdue on Jan. 5, Boilermakers forward Caleb Furst sunk his first free throw before clanking the second one off of the rim. As Buckeyes forward Zed Key and Boilermakers big man Zach Edey wrestled for positioning, Key's shoulder locked up, forcing it to go limp, and sending Ohio State's most reliable post presence to the locker room with an apparent injury.

Key was held out for the rest of the contest, a 71-69 loss, before missing Ohio State's 80-73 loss to Maryland on Jan. 8 with a shoulder sprain. The Bay Shore, N.Y. native returned to the floor on Jan. 12 against Minnesota, scoring 10 points in 29 minutes of action in the 70-67 loss, before playing 27 minutes and scoring 11 points in OSU's 68-64 defeat to Rutgers on Sunday.

With the Buckeyes reeling on a four-game losing streak, Key noted that his shoulder has felt fine since returning and he is more concerned with snapping Ohio State's slump.

"The medical staff did a good job getting me ready to play," Key said. "I tweaked it a little bit but it's not affecting how I play. It's not really a big thing, I'm not going out there thinking about it. The only thing I'm thinking about now is trying to back in the W column and getting better every day."

The Buckeyes primarily relied on freshman center Felix Okpara to man the paint, while integrating several small-ball lineups with Eugene Brown III — who stands at 6-7 — playing at the five, during Key's short absence.

Although Key's return against Minnesota was largely successful, with the Buckeye big man hitting five of seven shots and tallying eight rebounds off of the bench, OSU head coach Chris Holtmann felt he jumped the gun when integrating Key back with the team.

"We obviously had a little bit of a lack of continuity, Zed wasn't able to practice the last couple of days,"

Holtmann said after the game. "Looking back on it, I think I made a mistake playing him too long. I should not have played him as long as I did."

Key also came off of the bench in Ohio State's loss to Rutgers, helping the Buckeyes carve out a 38-2 advantage in bench scoring while hitting four of 11 shots and corralling nine rebounds. In total, Key has produced 10.5 points and 8.5 rebounds per game while shooting 52.9 percent in the two games since his return.

Although coming off the bench is a change of pace for the junior forward, who started in Ohio State's first 14 games this season, Key noted that nothing has changed in terms of his preparation as the Buckeyes ease him back into the rotation.

"I said, 'You could put me at any position and I'll be ready to go,'" Key said. "Whether I'm starting or not starting, it's not going to affect the way I play or the dynamic I give to the team. Whenever my number is called, I'll be ready to go."