

Men's Basketball Year In Review: Felix Okpara



During Chris Holtmann's six-year run as Ohio State's head coach, the Buckeyes have lacked a true rim-protecting big man. But, Holtmann found his answer for that void in freshman center Felix Okpara last season.

Okpara's length and leaping ability gave opposing offenses fits in the paint during his first season with the Buckeyes, as the Nigerian native showed flashes of his defensive potential. Ohio State also unlocked a key element of its offense with Okpara being utilized as a lob threat around the rim off of pick-and-rolls and rim runs. Okpara posted averages of 4.0 points and 3.6 rebounds per game — across 15.5 minutes per contest — while totaling 44 blocks, by far the most on the team with forward Zed Key trailing at 24 blocks.

"He's different than the bigs we've had, he's different than Zed," Holtmann said in his first media appearance following Okpara's National Signing Day on Nov. 11, 2021. "He's really unique in his shot-blocking ability. At 6-11 and with about a 7-3 wingspan, I think he really provides a dimension that's exciting for us. He's quick off of his feet."

Across his first seven games for Ohio State, Okpara largely fit into the role of a defensive specialist off of the bench. During the stretch, Okpara did not score more than four points in a contest — shooting an efficient 62.5 percent on only 2.3 attempts per game — but tallied 1.0 blocks per game.

But, Okpara finally unleashed a glimpse of his all-around potential in Ohio State's 96-59 win over St. Francis (Pa.) on Dec. 3, 2022, posting 10 points, 12 rebounds, two steals, a block and an assist in the victory. Okpara even connected on his first-career three-point attempt in the game, helping him stake out the first double-double in his short time with the Buckeyes.

Okpara followed up his offensive outburst with the best defensive game of his young career just two games later against North Carolina during the CBS Sports Classic in Madison Square Garden on Dec. 17. Despite being tasked with defending Tar Heel star forward Armando Bacot, and a solid North Carolina offense, Okpara registered four steals and a pair of blocks. Okpara reached double-digit

scoring again just a game later, hitting 5 of 7 field goal attempts to tally 10 points and four rebounds in a win over Maine on Dec. 21, 2022.

With Okpara getting into a groove in December, largely off of the bench, he emphasized that he was comfortable in his role while playing behind Key.

"I've embraced my role on the team," Okpara said after Ohio State's 95-61 win over Maine. "It's coming way easier for me. I know I'm coming off the bench and I have to come with great energy. I have to provide, crash the boards and play defense."

Although Okpara was finding success offensively, scoring at least 10 points in two of four games from Dec. 3-Dec. 21, 2022, he also recognized that his value was largely tied to his defensive presence.

"Defense, that's why I check in," Okpara said. "I try to get defensive rebounds, crash the glass offensively. For me, scoring right now is a bonus. I like to do the little stuff like set screens and dive on the floor."

After a successful first few months at the college level, Okpara was thrust into a much more expansive role for the Buckeyes after Key sustained a shoulder injury in the opening minutes of Ohio State's clash with then-No. 1 Purdue on Jan. 5. Tasked with defending 7-4 center Zach Edey for much of the night, Okpara held his own, holding Edey to only 11 shot attempts, which he turned into 16 points, but the Buckeyes still fell to the Boilermakers 71-69.

Okpara tallied his first career start a game later against Maryland, but it did not go according to plan. Struggling to adjust to Maryland's versatile frontcourt, Okpara fell into early foul trouble and never quite recovered, playing just 12 minutes in an 80-73 loss on Jan. 8.

The losses to Purdue and Maryland sparked an adverse stretch for the Buckeyes, in which they lost 14 of 15 games and saw their NCAA Tournament aspirations slip from their grasp. Following an embarrassing 62-41 loss to Michigan State at home on Feb. 12, in which the Buckeyes shot 28.3 percent from the field and 20.7 percent from deep, Okpara called out his team's mentality, noting that he wasn't pleased with its approach during the adverse stretch.

"We need more of a dog mentality, that killer mentality," Okpara said. "We have to go out there and try to do what's best for the team and try to play harder and smarter. I feel like we've been lacking that for the past five games now, but we're going to find it out."

The Buckeyes ultimately did find their way, largely thanks to the insertion of Okpara into the starting lineup after Key was shut down prior to Ohio State's road trip to Iowa and Purdue — in which OSU was outscored 174-130. From there, though, the energy shifted for Ohio State and the Buckeyes closed the regular season by winning two of its last three games, entering the Big Ten Tournament with some momentum.

Entering the conference tournament at 13-18, Ohio State needed to run the table in order to claim the Big Ten's NCAA Tournament automatic bid. While Okpara's offensive impact was limited, his defense shined during an unexpected run that saw Ohio State reach the conference semifinal. During the four-game stretch, Okpara produced 5.0 points per game on 52.9 percent shooting but also registered 2.3 blocks per contest — including five denials in the Buckeyes' 68-58 victory over Michigan State in the quarterfinal.

During the conference semifinal against Purdue, Okpara struggled to defend Edey effectively and ultimately fouled out despite playing only 22 minutes. Edey torched the Buckeyes for 32 points and 14 rebounds, and it set the tone for where Okpara needs to focus his offseason development. Holtmann emphasized that Okpara needs to add some muscle in order to handle some of the tougher post assignments in the Big Ten.

With attention to the offseason, Holtmann expressed excitement about the potential of the Buckeye big man.

“(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.”