

Ohio State Adjusting To Playing Without Key



Ohio State's big man depth took a significant hit on Thursday after forward Zed Key aggravated his shoulder against then-No. 1 Purdue.

Key's injury was officially labeled as a shoulder sprain and head coach Chris Holtmann noted that the star forward "is making regular progress" on Monday. In the absence of Key, however, the Buckeyes have seen significant rotational challenges, primarily due to its depleted depth at the five.

With Key out of Ohio State's 80-73 loss against Maryland on Sunday, freshman center Felix Okpara received his first career start but quickly found himself in foul trouble, causing the Buckeyes to play small on several occasions.

"Where I sensed (Zed's absence) the most is when we played a team, and I've competed against (Maryland head coach Kevin Willard) a number of times, both at Butler and then last year when he was at Seton Hall, when we've played against a team like that, that changes their defenses, I think the ability to kind of play through (Zed) and him to play with his physicality, with his back to the basket, and his rebounding," Holtmann said. "We certainly still could have lost with a fully healthy Zed, I don't want to attribute it all to that by any stretch. Maryland deserves credit.

"But if you said, 'Hey what are the specific areas?' It was the lack of physicality in the paint that he provides, certainly the offensive and defensive rebounding that I think we missed with him, and just Zed's ability to get guys in foul trouble because of how physical he is in the low post," he continued. "We don't have another guy like that. That's not Felix's game right now, he's just a different post player."

After Key went down against Purdue, Okpara did an admirable job filling in for the star big, holding Boilermakers 7-4 center Zach Edey to 16 points on 6-of-11 shooting, while tallying a trio of blocks — including one on a dunk attempt by Edey.

When Okpara came off the floor, the Buckeyes were required to go small. Holtmann largely utilized 6-7

guard Eugene Brown III as the primary defender on Edey in stretches. The Buckeyes were forced to turn to their small-ball lineup much more against Maryland after Okpara picked up a pair of fouls in the game's first nine minutes and entered halftime with a trio of infractions.

"It's a learning experience for Felix," Holtmann said. "His last two fouls of the half were, I think, legitimate fouls. His first one, I have some argument about, but he's just got to learn in this particular situation. The last foul, he needed to let go because we needed him in the game."

With limited options of big men in the rotation, Holtmann emphasized that Okpara will need to remain out of foul trouble and be available as much as possible.

"In his defense, we didn't put him in a great position because we went for a couple of shot fakes on his last foul," Holtmann said. "It is a conversation we had with him going into the game and it's a conversation we'll continue to have because his value right now is he needs to be able to give us 20 to 25 good minutes because his size and length are so valuable."