

Ohio State Battling To Maintain Rhythm Through Breaks



Ohio State was prepared for potential game cancellations during the 2020-21 season. College basketball as a whole had made major adjustments to play the season at all after COVID-19 had cut short the previous season and forced every American sport into various bubbles to avoid positive tests, and the Buckeyes adjusted accordingly. They knew that lost matchups were a distinct possibility and had contingency plans wherever needed.

Despite the circumstances, last season went off with very few hitches in Columbus. Instead, a year later, with significantly lower expectations of cancellations or anything of the sort, Ohio State has been crushed with delays and forced into a start-and-stop schedule that it has yet to fully break from. Ohio State missed three games in December because of COVID. An outbreak at Nebraska postponed a fourth matchup on Jan. 22, and mechanical issues paired with inclement weather kept Iowa out of Columbus for a fifth lost game on Feb. 3.

Now, as the Buckeyes hope to get back onto the court against Maryland Feb. 6, they do so with immense caution because of their experiences thus far — caution they expected to only need last season.

“It’s certainly adversity that we really didn’t face last year when we tried to anticipate multiple breaks,” assistant coach Jake Diebler said. “We were fortunate in that regard. But this year, (that’s not the case).”

In and out of the surprise breaks, Ohio State has found maintaining its momentum a larger challenge than any other.

“The hardest part is getting that rhythm,” Diebler continued. “The leaders on our team have helped us practice well during these breaks which is really important, and it can be hard to maintain that level of practice, especially in January and February when you’re used to playing games every two or three days. Give them credit for helping us have good practice and for keeping us prepared. Hopefully, we won’t have any more issues so we can get into a great rhythm down the stretch here.

“Obviously we aren’t the only ones in the country who have dealt with something like this, but the hardest part for us as a staff is that it’s been hard to get into a rhythm as a team. It felt like we were

really starting to play well when we had our first extended break there before Christmas. Clearly, it took us some time when we came back from that to get back to where we were before that break. As we were getting back and getting into what felt like a rhythm, the Nebraska game gets canceled and we had that stretch where we didn't play a game for nine days. And now here we are again in a similar situation."

This squad has faced plenty of non-COVID issues too. Starting forward Justice Sueing played only two games before a reagravated lower body injury shut him down for several months, from which he still has yet to return. Point guards Meechie Johnson Jr. and Jamari Wheeler have dealt with injuries too, leaving Ohio State dangerously thin at point guard.

"It's been really fluid for us all season, Meechie missed some time, Jamari missed a game, obviously the Justice situation," Diebler said. "Part of the job as a staff is that you plan and build for what you anticipate your roster is going to look like but you have to anticipate every year that there will be injuries and guys will miss games. We've unfortunately had more than we ever would have imagined going into the season and Justice was certainly a huge part of our plans this offseason and leading into this season."

Depth issues at guard can be tied back to COVID, too. The Buckeyes planned originally around having guard Duane Washington Jr. back for his senior season, but the NBA decision date was pushed back by a month, and ultimately, he decided to turn pro. With less time to work with, Ohio State had to adjust its plan on the fly and was without enough time to grab any more players out of the portal.

"This offseason was unique too because everything was pushed back," Diebler said. "The decision date for the NBA was pushed back a month and Duane was one of those guys right on the cusp between staying and leaving.

But as the calendar turns to February (and in turn the final stretch of the regular season) Ohio State feels that it's finally generating some stability and consistency. Everyone but Sueing and Seth Towns is healthy and ready to play, the Buckeyes haven't had any major outbreaks since that lengthy December break and the Big Ten seems to be turning a corner in general. Now, if everything holds, the Buckeyes can just focus on the action on the court.

"Those were challenges, but I think we've started to get — at least from a lineup standpoint — some consistency as we've gotten everybody who has played this year back to healthy, with Justice being the exception there," Diebler said. "It's been a challenge but you have to adjust and I think that's something that Chris Holtmann does an unbelievable job with, he's able to adjust on the fly at such an elite level. He's helped us as a program manage it pretty well."