

# Ohio State Falls To Rutgers, 66-64



Road games haven't been very friendly to much of anybody in the Big Ten this season. Fans are back in arenas and more than happy to remind opposing players of it, and it seems harder than ever to claim wins away from home, regardless of opponent. Chris Holtmann's Buckeyes are no exception, holding a perfect 10-0 record in Value City Arena but just a 3-4 mark away from home (1-1 in neutral site games) entering their Feb. 9 matchup at Rutgers.

And despite holding just a 13-9 record on the season entering the game, Rutgers' home-court advantage has been just as strong this season as anyone else's. The Scarlet Knights held an 11-2 mark in Jersey Mike's Arena before hosting the Buckeyes, including a December upset of then-No. 1 Purdue and a blowout of then-No. 13 Michigan State only four days before the Buckeyes made the trek out.

Ohio State (14-6, 7-4) found that out the hard way on Feb. 9, falling 66-64 to the Scarlet Knights (14-9, 8-5) despite leading for the vast majority of the second half after a nearly scoreless final four minutes allowed a 10-0 Rutgers run down the stretch, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory for a Buckeye team that was so close to doing what the Boilermakers and Spartans couldn't.

Though the two weren't shooting at an especially impressive clip from the field overall, Ohio State and Rutgers came out of the gates firing from 3-point range. They combined to hit only 11 of the first 23 shots of the game but connected from deep six times - three each. Justin Ahrens, Malaki Branham and Meechie Johnson Jr. all knocked down shots from deep to keep pace with a pair from Rutgers guard Geo Baker and another from forward Ron Harper Jr.

Ahrens's 3-pointer sent the Buckeyes into the under-12-minute break up one point at 17-16, but Ohio State would only find 14 more points in the final 12 minutes of the half, thanks in large part to more than four scoreless minutes after a Branham layup to extend the lead to three points with 10:27 to play. E.J. Liddell snapped the cold spell with a jumper at the 6:04 mark.

It was nearly another two minutes before Ohio State scored again on a Cedric Russell 3-pointer, but thankfully for Holtmann's squad, it wasn't alone in the poor shooting. Rutgers managed only seven

points between the media timeout and Russell's triple, only enough to build out a four-point edge that the Liddell and Russell baskets entirely erased, delivering a 24-23 lead to Ohio State.

That bucket seemed to take the lids off the baskets, as the two combined for 16 points across the final 3:33 of the half, with the Scarlet Knights taking the narrowest of leads into the half after a buzzer-beating Aundre Hyatt jumper at the buzzer gave them 32 points to Ohio State's 31.

A trip to the locker room seemed to do the trick for both offenses. Both sides exploded out of the break, trading baskets nearly at will for the first eight minutes of second-half play. A Branham 3-pointer - his third of the game - gave Ohio State a 48-44 lead with 12:56 to play, but neither team expanded its lead beyond that within those eight minutes.

That was despite a serious disinterest in missing shots on both ends of the court. Ohio State hit six of its first 10 shots - and was perfect on its first six 3-point tries - but Rutgers rattled in eight of its first 12 to reclaim the lead for the first time since the 17:01 mark of the second half at 52-50 with a Paul Mulcahy and-one through some serious contact from Ahrens at the rim.

The Buckeyes answered with a quick Zed Key tip-in to knot the game back up, Mulcahy's heat check went begging and Branham answered with his fourth triple of the game. A Liddell pull-up jumper a possession later gave the Buckeyes their largest lead yet at 57-52. Clifford Omoruyi threw down a monster dunk to quell the OSU momentum, though he didn't do anywhere near as much damage as the next offensive possession would to the Buckeyes.

As they set up off that dunk, Johnson - already donning a protective facemask because of a facial injury suffered in January - badly rolled his ankle, knocking him out of the remainder of the game and forcing an already shorthanded Buckeye team with Eugene Brown III unavailable into a serious search for depth beyond Jamari Wheeler at point guard. Jimmy Sotos filled some space, but it was Wheeler who led the way for the Buckeyes.

It was Wheeler who restarted the Buckeye offense after Johnson's injury too, rattling in his second 3-pointer of the half out of the break to extend Ohio State's lead to six points. It would grow as large as 64-56 with 3:48 to play after a pair of Key free throws, but Rutgers showed off what makes a win in Piscataway such a rare commodity down the stretch.

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Ohio State generated a good look for Branham out of the break but his jumper came up short, and it was again Baker on the other end, drawing a foul on Key and knocking down two free throws to take a 66-64 lead for RU. The Buckeyes drew up a play for Branham out of the break that looked promising for a split second before Harper flew in for a block with just over three seconds to play, and Rutgers again blocked Ohio State's final attempt - and Ahrens 3-point try - to close out the game on its 10-0 run, holding the Buckeyes scoreless for nearly the final four minutes of play.