

Ohio State Falters Late, Snaps Three-Game Winning Streak In 87-79 Loss To No. 18 Illinois



Ohio State (13-9, 5-6) snapped its three-game winning streak on Sunday with a heartbreaking 87-79 defeat to No. 18 Illinois (15-7, 7-5) in front of 15,544 fans inside the State Farm Center in which it froze on offense late and got blitzed in the paint to squander an 11-point second-half lead.

In a back-and-forth affair that included numerous momentum-swinging runs by both teams, it was the favored Illini who prevailed and delivered the final blow of the game.

Trailing by five with just under eight minutes left in the contest, they forced Diebler's team to miss 13 of their last 18 shots and scored 24 of the game's final 35 points — a stretch that included a back-breaking 15-0 run that elapsed nearly five minutes — to hand Ohio State its first loss in 16 days.

Ohio State knew it was entrenched in a rock fight from the start when it saw its early 14-6 lead turn into a 23-19 deficit due to a 17-5 Illini run that was capped by a Morez Johnson Jr. dunk with 11:44 left.

The Buckeyes reclaimed momentum by holding the Illini without a field goal for the next 6:49 and going on a 15-2 run to lead 34-25 with 5:08 left in the half following a Thornton steal and transition layup. But Illinois climbed right back with a 10-0 sequence that put it ahead 35-34 with 2:44 left.

Ohio State drew last blood in the hectic first half with an 8-1 closing run that put it up 42-36. Five of those points during that final stretch came from Royal, who scored 19 first-half points on 8-of-12 shooting.

Ohio State extended that run to 18-6 after Thornton and Mobley combined for eight of its first 10 points to put it up 52-41 with 15:53 left. But just like they were in the first half, the Illini weren't deterred by the Buckeyes' blitz. Instead, they made eight of their next nine shots to tie the game at 59 following a three-point play by freshman forward Will Riley.

Ohio State looked like it was going to take back control when it went back up 68-63 with 7:43 left after another Thornton three — his fourth of the afternoon — but things flipped on a dime when Illinois ran away with the game and went on a long 15-0 run to take a 78-68 lead with just 2:45 left. With the

Buckeyes scrambling to close the gap and make one final push, Illinois closed out the eight-point win by making nine of their final 12 free throws down the stretch.

Ohio State, which shot just 11-of-36 (30.6 percent) from the field in the second half, was led by Royal, who had his second-highest scoring outing of his career with 29 points on 10-of-18 shooting along with a team-high seven rebounds. Thornton (22) and Mobley (18) anchored the backcourt on a combined 13-of-39 shooting (33.3 percent) and accounted for each of the Buckeyes' six assists.

Illinois was powered on the stat sheets by Riley with 24 points on 7-of-9 shooting, but the comeback was in large part due to the efforts of Johnson Jr., who had 14 points and a career-high 15 rebounds to help the Illini hold a commanding 43-31 advantage in rebounds and 52-30 edge in the paint.