

Ohio State Forward Devin Royal Continuing To Progress In Freshman Season



Entering Ohio State as a highly coveted four-star prospect out of Pickerington Central High School — where he led his team to two straight D1 state title game appearances and won Ohio’s Mr. Basketball in 2023 — freshman forward Devin Royal was seen by many as the next Buckeye in line to have instant success in their first year with the program.

That reality did not necessarily come to fruition early on in his freshman season. In the first 20 games of his collegiate career (Nov. 6 to Feb. 6), Royal struggled to make an impact as he battled through injury and illness, logging just eight minutes a game and averaging 3.1 points on 51.1 percent shooting along with 2.6 rebounds per contest.

Throughout the last month of play, however, Royal has seemed to rebound from that slow start and shift his game into another gear. Garnering more playing time from interim head coach Jake Diebler — who has committed to utilizing more of his bench towards the end of the season — the freshman forward has elevated his play in every way, averaging 6.2 points and 2.6 rebounds per contest while shooting an efficient 63.2 percent from the field.

When asked on Feb. 28 about what has caused Royal’s progression into a reliable bench scorer for Ohio State, Diebler said he feels the former four-star has begun to ease into the college game and gain comfortability in the Buckeyes’ system, a gradual period of development that Diebler said he expects from young players entering the program.

“I think we’re starting to see the game slow down for him a little bit, on both sides of the ball,” Diebler said. “This year was always going to be a little bit of a transition period for him because he’s shifting, positionally from who he was as a high school player to who he’s going to become in college. He has always been tough. He’s always had good feel.

“We’ve been spoiled here, the last couple years, with some of what freshmen have been able to

accomplish. And that's not the norm. And everybody's journey is different. I think Devin has figured out, these last six weeks, how to really run his race well."

Diebler, who said that recruiting Royal to Ohio State out of Pickerington Central was a "no-brainer," due to his toughness and consistent production on the court, pointed to the freshman's growing confidence and poise as the main improvements of his game that has helped the freshman develop the most across the season. The coach added that these traits were on full display during Ohio State's come-from-behind 60-57 win over Michigan State on Feb. 25, where Royal logged a career-high 14 points on a perfect 6-of-6 shooting and — perhaps most importantly, according to Diebler — helped ignite Dale Bonner's game-winning three by successfully inbounding the ball to a closely defended Bruce Thornton.

"He's playing with a great deal of confidence," Diebler said. "We have a great deal of belief in him. I hope he feels that, I think he feels that. Listen, he has been critical in some of these games. Obviously, his numbers against Michigan State were impressive — his efficiency, the timeliness of some of his baskets. The most impressive thing he did, though, was taking the ball out of bounds (on the last play of the game) in that moment, in my opinion. That, to me, showed not just the conditioning improvement, or the physicality improvement, or things like that. It showed (that) the game is slowing down for him."

"I feel like we just needed some type of spark, a little energy," Royal said after the Michigan State win. "I gave all the energy I had until I was tired or needed a timeout. I just gave all my energy and made the best of it."

Despite the praise from his head coach, Diebler still sees many areas where Royal can improve upon his game, mostly by limiting his fouling and playing with more controlled — rather than reckless — aggression while also improving his three-point shooting. But the coach added that — based on the work ethic Royal has shown in practice — he is confident his freshman can make the necessary improvements and turn into a special player for Ohio State down the line, following in the footsteps of another successful first-year Buckeye of the past.

"It's very similar to (former Ohio State forward and 2022 NBA Draft selection) E.J. Liddell," Diebler said. "They're not the same player, but you saw his game expand from one year to the next. And I think Devin's showing real growth this season, and he'll add to that this offseason because he works so hard."

"Once that really happens, there's something special to be had there. And he's worked and he's earned the right to improve and play like he has. I think he has a really, really bright future and hopefully some really bright moments here the rest of this season."