

Ohio State Head Coach Chris Holtmann Provides Injury Updates, Previews Matchup With Northwestern



The No. 21 Ohio State men's basketball team bounced back after its 17-point loss at Minnesota with an impressive 79-68 victory at Rutgers. Next, the Buckeyes (9-3, 3-3) will take on Northwestern (6-4, 3-3) at Value City Arena on Jan. 13 at 7 p.m.

Chris Holtmann's squad will attempt to avenge a 71-70 loss at Northwestern on Dec. 26, which marked a 3-0 start in the Big Ten for the Wildcats. Since, Chris Collins' Wildcats dropped three straight contests to then-No. 10 Iowa, then-No. 16 Michigan, and then-No. 14 Illinois.

Holtmann spoke to members of the media previewing the Buckeyes' battle with Northwestern on Jan. 12. What follows is a rundown paraphrasing what the fourth-year head coach said:

Opening Statement:

- Getting prepared for a really good Northwestern team that's having a good year. Obviously, they beat us a few weeks ago in their building. They've got great skill and great ability to score the ball. They've got really good positional length. As always, Chris (Collins) does an excellent job putting your defense in difficult positions. Like any team, they've gone through a gauntlet of a schedule here like we're all going to face in this league. It will be another great challenge.

Update on senior guard Jimmy Sotos, fifth-year senior guard C.J. Walker, and sophomore center Ibrahima Diallo?

- C.J. and Ibrahima are both out with injuries. Ibrahima is still returning from his MCL sprain. C.J. is returning from torn ligaments in his hand. Jimmy continues to be evaluated, so no definitive word on him.

Freshman guard Meechie Johnson replacing Sotos?

- I think that's something that we'll keep somewhat close to the vest. We're looking at all options at this point. I think it will require guys to move around to different positions if Jimmy's not

available. I've got confidence in Meechie. It's a lot to ask for a young man who just joined the program to play in a Big Ten game of this caliber. But he will play.

Motivate from loss at Northwestern?

- Any time you lose, that stays with you. As much as anything right now, you're trying to play better. You're trying to have more productive possessions. Our challenge is can we be better than the last time we played them. Our focus is trying to see if we can play more quality basketball.

What went wrong last time that you can learn from?

- We turned it over a few too many times and that led to easy scores for them. They've got really good positional length at every position.

Meechie's progression since joining the program?

- He's done a good job for us. It's a lot to ask of a young man. I don't think we anticipated that he could be counted on as much as he is right now. He's a really confident kid, which helps, but it's just a lot to throw at him. We're talking about a guy who just started live practice two weeks ago. I know he's anxious and he's looking forward to it. We've got to simplify some things for him, so he's not overthinking. It's such a unique situation with our injuries that we're relying on everybody to step up.

Rebounding success?

- We're a little bit bigger at some of the guard spots. I think that has helped, and E.J., Kyle and (freshman) Zed (Key) at those forward spots, they're good rebounders. And (fourth-year junior wing) Justice (Sueing) is a good rebounder. (Freshman wing) Gene (Brown) has helped with that, (fourth-year junior wing) Musa (Jallow) has helped with that, Justice has helped with that. We've got to get better on the defensive glass, and we've got to continue to emphasize the offensive glass as part of our offensive efficiency.

Anticipate you could play sophomore forward E.J. Liddell and senior forward Kyle Young so much together?

- No, I don't think I did. We anticipated that as a staff that that was the look we wanted to go with. But it's really evolved since our first practice. We've made some changes to our system after observing them playing together through the first 30 practices. When we're playing well, those guys are at the center of it.

Do you consider either E.J. or Kyle a center?

- No, if you're going to number them, you're just going to number them just to designate. But they're both forwards. It's how a lot of college basketball is played.

C.J. Walker leading from the bench?

- He's disappointed but he's in great spirits. He's a great teammate, he led from the front to the bench in the Rutgers game. He leads in practice. He's anxious to get back, but I just don't know right now how that thing is going to heal. We've heard a number of timeframes on that, so we just

don't know.

Confidence level in your team?

- I really like our group, I like our team. I feel good about this group of guys, but I don't really spend a whole lot of time stepping back right now because you're just in the midst of the daily grind and preparing your team to get better. Like every team, we're going to face adversity, but I love coaching this group. I'm really optimistic at some point we'll get the injuries behind us.

NCAA announcing the tourney in Indiana?

- It's a smart idea to put it in one city to get it in a place where they can control some of the outside factors, and trying to mitigate risk. Outside of that, I haven't given it too much thought. Coaches are kind of in hole, we don't spend too much time looking at stuff outside of what affects our team.

Racial inequity?

- I think in general my first responsibility is to our players. That's what their families did when they sent them here under our care. That's my first responsibility, and what impacts them, bothers them, and dating back to the summer and all the conversation that came from that. I didn't get into this profession just to be a basketball coach, I got into this profession to have an impact on young men and help them see the world from a bigger perspective. And I've probably learned even more from them. We had a conversation about what happened when we were at Rutgers, and I'll keep that between us.

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