

Ohio State Head Coach Chris Holtmann Sees Benefits In Utilizing Guard-Heavy Lineup



Ohio State pulled off one of its biggest wins of the season on Saturday, defeating UCLA 67-60 in the CBS Sports Classic, and they did so by utilizing a strength in their roster that head coach Chris Holtmann thinks his team can continue to use to their benefit.

With the Buckeyes clinging to a single-digit lead — one that was trimmed to as low as three points — in the final minutes of the game, the coach decided to go small, inserting fifth-year guard Dale Bonner into the game with 2:07 left to create a guard-heavy lineup that also consisted of sophomore standouts Roddy Gayle Jr. and Bruce Thornton.

This decision paid off for Holtmann, where they were able to space the floor and stymie UCLA's pressure defense to close out the game on a 9-5 run and hang onto the 67-60 victory. Holtmann said on his weekly radio appearance with 97.1 The Fan on Monday that this lineup of guards Bonner, Gayle and Thornton not only guided the team to victory against the Bruins, but can also help his team have success in late-game situations moving forward, where they can rely on them to handle the ball and limit turnovers.

In the final 2:07 of the game, the Buckeyes did not commit a turnover against UCLA's press and also connected on four of their six free throws attempts, with all of the makes coming from Gayle.

"I think that will be a lot for us late," Holtmann said. "We'll play that lineup a lot, because of the ball-handling. I'd like to be able to play three guards consistently here moving forward these next couple years. Roddy's length and size allows us to do that. But that's going to be a critical lineup for us late as well, because of the ball-handling and free-throw shooting."

Holtmann pointed to a particular inbounds play late in the second half against UCLA where his team particularly benefited from having three guards on the floor. During this play, Holtmann put all five of his players on the out of bounds line to defend against the Bruins press before passing it into Gayle,

who was fouled and sent to the line.

“We got it right where we wanted to,” Holtmann said. “Roddy got to the free-throw line, Bruce broke the press. (Assistant coach) Mike Netti did a good job (of drawing up the play), he’s in charge of our late-game special situations. We ran it on the fly a couple of times in practice and our guys executed it really well...Jamison (Battle) and Dale cleared the floor out, and we were able to get those guys open.”

Holtmann recognized that having three ball-dominant guards on the floor throughout the rest of the season can pose a major advantage for his team moving forward, particularly if Gayle and Thornton continue to emerge as a formidable one-two punch. But he also pointed to the play of Bonner as a key component to the Buckeyes’ backcourt success moving forward, something that can take this team to another level in 2023-24.

“I just can’t emphasize how important he’s going to be for us this year,” Holtmann said. “He has to be able to be a ‘plus.’ In the two games we’ve lost, we’ve needed more from (Bonner), when I look back at it. And when we played well, when we beat Alabama, he was fantastic. When we beat UCLA, he was fantastic. So we really do need that out of him.”