

Chris Holtmann Sees Improvements, But Challenges Team To Better Handle Adversity



After back-to-back convincing road losses to Nebraska and Northwestern, Ohio State hoped for a more positive outcome when it returned to the friendly confines of Value City Arena on Tuesday night, where it had won 9 of its 11 games this season. That did not materialize for the Buckeyes on their home floor, where - in front of a late-arriving and early-exiting crowd of 10,285 fans - Ohio State dropped its third-consecutive double-digit loss and six defeats in its last seven games to No. 14 Illinois, 87-75.

The Buckeyes' loss, while less lopsided than the last two, presented an all-too familiar scenario for head coach Chris Holtmann's squad this season. The team built a promising 28-23 lead with 6:47 left in the first half but were outscored 18-7 the rest of the period — and 64-47 for the remainder of the game.

The progression of Tuesday night's contest mirrored many of the Buckeyes' losses in January, with the team also holding, then blowing, similar leads against Indiana on Jan. 6, Wisconsin on Jan. 10, Michigan on Jan. 15 and Nebraska on Jan. 23. These types of trends have emerged as one of the leading factors in Ohio State's January struggles, a showing of weakness that Holtmann said his team must change if they want to return to their winning ways in February.

"I don't think right now we're responding great to adversity," Holtmann said. "We have to get better (with) the adversity of the game, handling the adversity of the game better. Could some of what happened last year be impacting that? Maybe? I don't know. But I think we have to get better at handling adversity to the game. That's the biggest thing for us as coaches and players, that has to be better. When you have a couple of missed front ends on one-and-ones, or a team makes a little bit of a run, can you respond better? And I think that's a step for this team that we have to get better in, for sure."

A prime example of Ohio State not being able to respond to a strong run by the opponent occurred during the previously mentioned sequence at the end of the first half, where the Buckeyes held a five-point lead but found themselves trailing by seven at the end of the period. Ohio State made just one of

nine shots and missed three of its four free throws in this stretch, a period of poor play Holtmann said was “critical” in determining the team’s eventual double-digit loss.

“It was a critical stretch,” Holtmann said. “We missed two front-end one-and-ones, we had a wide open three we missed and we had a pull-up that we missed...That was a critical momentum stretch for sure.”

While Holtmann pointed to his team’s shooting struggles as something that hindered his group, he also pointed to the team’s overall defense as an area that needs improvement moving forward. The Buckeyes had an efficient night on offense — shooting 50.0 percent from the field and scoring 75 points — but they still allowed the Illini to outpace them, with the away team shooting at a 51.7 percent clip and making seven of its 17 attempts from three and 18 of its 20 tries from the free-throw line.

When asked about the current identity of his defense, the coach said his group — who also relinquished 14 second-chance points and 44 points in the paint — needs to compete with more intensity and aggression at that end, a mentality that Holtmann also challenged his team to adopt after their 83-69 loss to Nebraska.

“We need to be nastier,” Holtmann said after the Illinois game. “We need to be much nastier. We need to play with more force.”

Despite laying out the areas his team needs to improve upon, Holtmann acknowledged that his group did show some signs of life against the heavily-favored Illini, particularly on the offensive end. While that performance was still not good enough to put a tally back in the win column, he added that it could serve as a positive sign for his program as they desperately search for some answers heading into the final two months of the season.

“I feel like there were stretches where we played much better, much better than the other night,” Holtmann said. “But it’s not long enough to be able to beat a good team. And it clearly wasn’t good enough to put ourselves in position to beat a good team. Certainly, we played better than we did the other night, maybe better than our last game-and-a-half.

“Did we play a little bit harder,” he continued. “Did we play better? Were we more crisp offensively in stretches? All of those things, I think, ring true. But I want to validate that with the film. And if it did, then we’ll build upon that.”