

Ohio State Head Coach Jake Diebler Looking For More Production Out Of Frontcourt



Since enduring an all-too familiar difficult stretch in early January in which it lost four games in five tries, Ohio State has turned its 2024-25 season around with much better play as of late.

The Buckeyes are winners of four of their last six games, a successful stretch that included two double-digit wins and a pair of resume-boosting NCAA tournament victories and has them squarely in the 68-team field as of Tuesday, sitting as a projected No. 9 seed in the Big Dance per ESPN's Joe Lunardi.

But while the Buckeyes have shown promise in the last three weeks of play, they still haven't been unable to fully untap their potential and further secure their spot in the NCAA tournament, and that may be due in large part to their lack of production and consistency in the frontcourt.

Since defeating No. 11 Purdue on the road on Jan. 21 — a victory that seemed to act as a springboard for more positive play — Ohio State has received limited production from its big men, especially at the center position.

Although sophomore forward Devin Royal has continued his breakout season in that stretch by averaging 13.5 points and 7.5 rebounds per game, the Buckeyes' three most-used centers — sophomores Aaron Bradshaw and Sean Stewart and true freshman Ivan Njegovan — have combined for just 3.4 points, 2.4 rebounds, 0.8 blocks and 2.8 fouls per contest.

According to Ohio State head coach Jake Diebler, this type of inefficiency is simply not going to cut it if his team is to take that next step and become a postseason contender.

"I think our collective frontcourt in general has another level to get to and it raises our ceiling tremendously if they can get there," Diebler said at a press conference held at Value City Arena on Monday. "I was disappointed last game in our efficiency in the paint, I felt like we could have been more efficient. And then our offensive rebounding, with Devin (Royal) not being out there when he was

(against Nebraska), not being full strength, we needed someone to step into those roles and we didn't do it well enough."

Diebler said that the Buckeyes' big men haven't been able to play with great efficiency as of late because of their lack of poise, a main area of weakness of late that has allowed opposing teams to take advantage in the frontcourt by both drawing fouls and getting offensive rebounds.

In their last six games, the Buckeyes' three centers have collected more fouls (47) than rebounds (41), with Stewart fouling out in his last three games and Bradshaw fouling out in the Buckeyes' 83-64 road win over Penn State on Jan. 31.

These issues, according to Diebler, were especially evident in their 79-71 loss to Nebraska on Sunday, when they were unable to control the paint without the full services of Royal — who missed time and is day-to-day with a lower-body injury he suffered in the first half — and faced a 37-28 disadvantage in rebounds and a 40-26 disadvantage in paint points while also committing numerous fouls inside that led to easy free throws.

"I think in general when we're inefficient in the paint, we're sped up," Diebler said. "We're playing too fast. Last night (against Nebraska) for example, when I was talking to those guys, they don't have someone who's going to just go block your shot out of the air. Take your time, play off two feet. You don't need to rush and try to beat someone to the rim because they're not a high shot-blocking team like some other teams we may play."

Diebler did say that these frontcourt struggles may also be attributed to the lack of cohesion and overall practice the group has had this season.

He admitted that the fact that Stewart missed most of summer camp and some of fall practice due to injury and Bradshaw sat out for seven games in the middle of the season due to a now-closed university investigation into an alleged domestic incident has played a role into their slowed development, as both of them were viewed as potentially high-impact transfer pickups at the beginning of the year.

"The choppiness to their availability has impacted their growth," Diebler said. "I think that's fair to say."

But with Bradshaw and Stewart both now fully back in the lineup and participating in practice together, the Buckeyes' coach does believe that his two portal pickups — as well as the whole frontcourt as a whole — can take significant steps forward and play their best brand of basketball during the most important stretch of the season.

"I told those guys, we need (good play) down the stretch," Diebler said. "And they can do it. They've shown that they can do it. We're really rolling if we can get two, three, four guys in that unit all playing at that level on the same night."

Bradshaw, Stewart and the rest of the Buckeyes' big men will look to take that next step forward against Washington (12-11, 3-9 Big Ten) Wednesday night at Value City Arena, which boasts one of the conference's top big men in preseason All-Big Ten forward Great Osobor (15.6 points, 8.7 rebounds). The game will tip off at 8:30 p.m. and air on Big Ten Network.