

Ohio State Hoping To Continue Positive Momentum Into NIT Under Newly-Hired Jake Diebler



Following Ohio State's loss to Illinois last Friday in the Big Ten Tournament, the future of the Buckeyes' program — both in the near and distant future — seemed unclear.

While the loss all but guaranteed the Buckeyes would be left out of contention of the NCAA Tournament, there were still many questions surrounding whether or not the team would keep the season going into postseason play and accept a bid to the NIT. On top of that, the program was still without a full-time head coach, with the Buckeyes reportedly narrowing its list of candidates down to Florida Atlantic's Dusty May and interim head coach Jake Diebler.

Things became significantly clearer for Ohio State just two days later. On Sunday, incoming athletic director Ross Bjork officially hired Diebler as the full-time men's basketball coach on Sunday, a significant move that was followed with the program accepting a bid to the NIT as a No. 2 seed later that night, giving the now-Diebler-led Buckeyes a chance to further extend their season into March.

Diebler, who admitted that he had some "anxious" moments in the days between the team's loss to Illinois and his hiring, said that his team's decision to keep playing and participate in the NIT stemmed from a candid locker room conversation he had with his players last weekend, where he made sure that each player could speak about what they wanted to do before making a final decision.

This, according to the now-full-time coach, led to an obvious collective group decision to keep playing — something many notable high-major programs who missed the NCAA Tournament declined to do — a commitment to finishing the season strong that Diebler said served as a testament to the team's character and competitive spirit.

"Most of the guys said the same thing," Diebler said on his weekly radio spot with 97.1's Paul Keels and

Ron Stokes. "They wanted to play as long as everybody wanted to play. It wasn't hard to get to the conclusion that this was ultimately what they wanted to do. So we're going to serve them and get them ready. We're going to give everything we have (Tuesday) night."

"It says a lot about the guys we have, that they want to play and they want to compete. You're seeing across the country that a lot of teams aren't doing that. Our guys love to play, and they're a really competitive bunch."

Diebler, whose team is set to play in the NIT for the first time since 2016 and host Cornell of the Ivy League in the first round Tuesday night at Value City Arena, said he sees great value in his team competing for a championship in the 32-team bracket, as it can give his young team an extra opportunity to play more meaningful games in March.

The coach thinks these games can serve to further aid the development of key impact freshmen — such as guard Scotty Middleton and forward Devin Royal — and give his players who have yet to experience postseason basketball a chance to compete in a do-or-die environment, while also giving his outgoing seniors and fifth years an opportunity to end their careers with a championship.

"We have some guys who want to continue to grow as players and gain more experience," Diebler said. "All offseason, we'll work and we'll grow. But you can't simulate game reps. So we want to get as many game reps that we can get."

"That's for the young guys. There are also some guys where this is their last college ball. And we want to honor what they've done, how they've served this program and finished out the way that they have."

For Diebler and Ohio State, that first opportunity will come at home on Tuesday, when the Buckeyes welcome a Cornell program to Columbus who is making its first NIT appearance after a regular season in which it went 11-3 in conference play. The Big Red (22-7), led by eight-year head coach Brian Earl, boast the Ivy League's top-rated offense at 82.1 points per game, a mark that also ranks 17th in the nation.

These efforts are spearheaded by senior and junior guards Chris Manon and Nazir Williams, who average 12.5 and 11.4 points per game, respectively, on a combined 50.1 percent shooting. Cornell will be without senior forward Keller Boothby for the NIT, however, who transferred from the program on Monday after playing 5.6 points and 1.7 rebounds in 16.5 minutes per game.

Diebler said the Big Red, much like Ohio State's last opponent Illinois, can disrupt opposing defensive gameplans with their unique style of play and offensive depth and versatility, making for a tough guard that his team will need to be prepared to take on right from tip-off.

"(They're) really talented offensively," Diebler said. "They have a lot of depth with guys who could score. They play a unique style, there's going to be a lot of space. They're also aggressive defensively, they turn teams over a lot. We have a lot of respect for them. They're a good team and we have to bring our very best."

Despite the apparent challenge facing Ohio State, particularly on the defensive end, on Tuesday night, Diebler said he is confident his team will come out of the gates as a unified and motivated front, one which is playing to prove that their 6-2 finish in the regular season is more than just a fluke, but instead a sign of greener pastures to come moving forward in the Diebler era.

“They feel like there is still something to prove,” Diebler said. “We felt like we were an NCAA Tournament-caliber team. And I think, in their mind, they want to go show people that.”

The Buckeyes’ first-round matchup against Cornell will tip off at 7 p.m. Tuesday night and air on ESPN2. The NIT is also serving as the guinea pig for several experimental NCAA rule changes this season, including a widened free throw lane from 12 to 16 feet and an adjusted second-half media timeout schedule that will occur following the 17, 14, eight, and four-minute marks.