

Ohio State Interim Head Coach Jake Diebler Says Buckeyes “Absolutely” Deserve To Be In NCAA Tournament Conversation



In a scenario that was virtually inconceivable a month ago, the Ohio State men’s basketball team has an opportunity to play their way into the NCAA Tournament with a strong showing in the Big Ten Tournament this week, a quest that will begin Thursday night with a matchup against No. 7 seed Iowa at 6:30 p.m., followed by a tilt against No. 2 seed and 13th-ranked Illinois on Friday night if the Buckeyes can defeat the Hawkeyes.

Ending the regular season on a four-game winning streak and a stretch of five wins in the final six contests, Ohio State will still likely need to win both of those games to at least receive consideration for an at-large NCAA Tournament berth, with an appearance in the Big Ten semifinal on Saturday or conference championship game on Sunday significantly boosting its chances.

While the Buckeyes still have work to do in order to best position themselves for a berth in the Big Dance, interim head coach Jake Diebler feels that his team’s blazing finish to the regular season and overall strength of resume should have already attracted the attention of the NCAA selection committee.

“Absolutely, absolutely,” Diebler said Monday when asked if his team deserves to be in the NCAA Tournament conversation. “I’m no expert on all the metrics that go into making that decision, but I would think a couple of our top wins would stack up against anybody in the country. We’ve now stacked together some road wins. Also, the momentum that we have, and the way that we’ve been playing lately, I think there are a lot of positives that would help our case.

“But I would absolutely (think) that we deserve to be in the conversation, and that includes the total body of work.”

Diebler, who boasts a 5-1 record as Buckeyes’ head coach since taking over for the relieved Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14, continued to use his team’s strong finish to the regular season to advocate for

their NCAA Tournament chances. He thinks the committee should value the success they had at the end of the season — a stretch that included wins over No. 2 Purdue on Feb. 18, likely NCAA Tournament-bound Michigan State and Nebraska on Feb. 29 and Feb. 25, rival Michigan on March 3 and Rutgers on March 10 — more so than their struggles at the beginning of the season because it is a clear indicator that the team is playing at an elite level and peaking at the right time.

“If it were up to me, (the way the team finished the regular season) would mean everything, I’d make it mean everything right now,” Diebler joked. “I would hope that (our finish to the season) is certainly taken into consideration. I understand it is a full season, but yeah, if you can give me a seat, I’d stand on the table and make sure that they knew that it was the most important thing.”

To Diebler’s point, the Buckeyes’ finish to the regular season has significantly boosted their NCAA Tournament resume. Ohio State has jumped to 55th in the NET rankings — an algorithm used by the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee that is set up to reward teams who have quality wins — five spots higher than Seton Hall of the Big East, who is projected by many outlets as a No. 10 seed in the Big Dance.

The Buckeyes’ resume has mostly been strengthened by their upset win over the Boilermakers and come-from-behind road victory over Michigan State last month — both of which are considered “Quad 1” wins, which includes home games against teams ranked within the top 30 of the NET, neutral site games against teams within the top 50, and away games against teams within the top 75.

Since Purdue is ranked No. 2 in the NET and the Spartans ranking No. 24, the Buckeyes now have three Quad 1 wins, with the other coming on Nov. 24 at a neutral site against Alabama, who is No. 8 in the NET. That is the same amount as the Tide as well as presumed NCAA Tournament teams Gonzaga, San Diego State and St. Johns.

The Buckeyes were also able to pick up their first two “Quad 2” victories — which covers home wins over teams ranked 31-75 in the NET, neutral wins against teams ranked 51-100 and away wins against teams ranked 76-135 — by defeating Nebraska (No. 37) at home and Rutgers (No. 102) on the road.

With Ohio State picking up four more quality wins — with a Quad 2 win over Iowa (No. 60) and Quad 1 win over Illinois (No. 15) also in the cards this week — Diebler and the Buckeyes will have the opportunity to make an even stronger case to the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee this weekend in Minneapolis.

But, regardless of this chance to boost their resume — which Diebler said he and his team are well aware of — the coach said that the focus still needs to remain on taking care of business against the Hawkeyes on Thursday night and letting everything else take care of itself, an effort to stay the course that he thinks will be player-led.

“We’ve talked openly about what’s at stake,” Diebler said. “Our guys, the leadership of this team have helped everyone keep the main thing the main thing, though. And that is (being) focused on the next game. None of that stuff matters without us being prepared and giving our absolute best on Thursday.”