

Ohio State Looking To Get Back In Win Column Against Young, Talented UCLA Team



Following a disappointing road loss to Penn State last Saturday where it blew an 18-point second half lead, Ohio State has been gifted with a full week of practice before they can attempt to get back in the win column. While much of this week has been devoted to correcting the mistakes the Buckeyes made against the Nittany Lions — mostly their defensive and rebounding inefficiencies in the second half — and also giving the team some time off, the program has also used it to prepare for their next opponent in UCLA, who they will face off against on Saturday at the State Farm Center in Atlanta as part of the ninth annual CBS Sports Classic.

Head coach Chris Holtmann, who will be leading the Buckeyes in his eighth CBS Sports Classic game, said on Thursday that the 5-3 Bruins, led by veteran head coach Mick Cronin, pose a formidable challenge for his team due to their overall physicality and imposing presence in the paint and on the defensive end, something he said his team has been preparing to face throughout the week.

“(UCLA) is big, physical, they have great size,” Holtmann said. “They are a typical (Cronin)-led team, they’re physical, they rebound it well. They are probably as good a defensive team as we’ll play all year, certainly the best defensive team we’ve played up to this point, both with their size and their physicality. It’s a well-coached team, and we’re excited about the challenge on Saturday.”

UCLA’s success in the paint starts sophomore forward/center Adem Bona, who has supplanted himself as one of the Pac-12’s most formidable big men in his first eight games this season. After starting 32 of 33 games for Cronin’s talented 31-6 Bruins team last year and securing the Pac-12’s Freshman of the Year Award, the 6-10 Nigerian has taken the next step in his development, ranking second on the team with 13.1 points per game on an impressive 58.6 percent shooting, while also leading the Bruins with 6.4 rebounds per game and 13 total blocks.

“Bona is a returning player who is probably as physical and as hard a playing big as anybody we will play,” Holtmann said. “He’s a terrific player.”

The Bruins' frontcourt, which has allowed the Bruins to have a +6.7 rebounding margin so far this season, also includes coveted freshmen forwards Berke Buyuktuncel of Bursa, Turkey — who signed with the Bruins during the summer after helping lead his home country to a third-place finish and defeat of the United States in the 2023 FIBA U19 World Cup — and Aday Mara (7-3) of Zaragoza, Spain, who also competed for his home country in the FIBA U18 European Championships. Both freshmen were projected as potential lottery picks this offseason in the 2024 NBA Draft, but their stocks have since dropped after they combined to log 5.4 points and 1.7 rebounds per game through the first month of the season.

As for the frontcourt, the Bruins are also filled with top-tier young talent, most notably true freshman guard Sebastian Mack, who has burst on the scene for UCLA averaging a team-high 13.6 points per game along with total assists, 14 steals and 36 rebounds. Holtmann said he is impressed with Mack's ability to make an impact on the team at such an early stage in his collegiate career.

"He's just a really good player, really talented," Holtmann said. "You just see how he's going to continue to get better as the season goes on, and I know from what I understand, that they have high expectations for him. So it's going to be a great matchup for our guys."

With the Bruins possessing loads of young and explosive talent, along with an established veteran in junior forward and Utah transfer Lazar Stefanovic (11.5 points, 6.3 rebounds), Holtmann said his team must be ready to be at their best on Saturday if they want to return to their winning ways and avenge last weekend's loss to Penn State, something he thinks his group is poised to accomplish.

"Our guys understand, for the most part, they know how college basketball works," Holtmann said. "It's a lot of games. And sometimes you're going to have great wins, and you're going to have some tough losses. And it's about how you respond in both those situations. So we'll see how we respond."