

Ohio State Looking To Keep Positive Momentum Going, Break Road Losing Streak Against Minnesota



In the midst of a tumultuous week that included the firing of seven-year head coach Chris Holtmann and the subsequent hiring of interim head coach Jake Diebler, Ohio State received a significant boost to its psyche when it picked up a massive upset win over No. 2 Purdue at home on Sunday. It was a victory that not only served as a relief for the team after a winter filled with disappointment, but also infused some extra confidence and juice for those within the program that they can continue playing at a high level across the last five games of the season.

“I think a game like that can certainly raise the collective confidence in the room,” Diebler said. “We showed some real improvement in that game, and even if by some chance they win on a buzzer beater or something like that, that doesn’t take away some of the improvement you have. But listen, results matter, I certainly understand that. And it feels better, after you win a game like that.”

Ohio State will look to use this confidence boost to their benefit and start a winning streak for the first time since in conference play on Thursday night when it travels to Minneapolis for a matchup with the 16-9 Gophers, a team that the then-Holtmann-led Buckeyes already defeated at home Dec. 3, but has won four of their last six games in conference play.

Despite already boasting a 84-74 win over Minnesota earlier in the year, Diebler acknowledged that getting another victory over the Gophers will be a much tougher task on the road, where the Buckeyes currently hold a program record-tying 16-game losing streak. The coach said that his team can put themselves in the best position to break this streak if they maintain the same level of intensity on the road that they had at home, a renewed team-wide mentality under Diebler that has already led to productive practices and a significant upset victory over the Boilermakers.

“If our aggressiveness, at times — maybe our shot doesn’t go in, or the aggressiveness defensively somehow results in a basket — we can’t flinch,” Diebler said. “They’re certainly going to be more comfortable at home, but we have to stay true to our mentality, and we have to stay true to playing really, really hard, playing with urgency and playing together.

“I believe those things can put us in position at the end of the game, and that’s what you want. In Big Ten play, that’s what it’s all about. You want to be in position at the end, and the players step up. That’s what happens. It’s our job to certainly put them in the right spots. But to me, you significantly decrease your chances (to win) if you don’t keep an aggressive and fearless mentality. So we have to do that both

as players and staff.”

One way Diebler and Ohio State can sustain this level of aggressiveness and intensity is by once again turning to the bench to ensure that each player is as fresh as they can be throughout the game. This is a strategy that the coach said he and his staff used to their benefit against Purdue, where 11 Buckeyes saw time on the floor, with nine of them — including true freshman Scotty Middleton and Devin Royal — logging 15 or more minutes.

“We know going into the (Purdue) game, at least specifically in the first half, that we were going to go deeper into our bench than what we had been doing,” he said. “The urgency and the pace at which we practiced at for the few days leading into the game was revealing to me that, in order to play that way, come game-time, we may need to get into our bench a little bit more.

“There were some guys who needed to be open to at least give them an opportunity to get out there and show some things. But from one through 15, our buy-in was really good for those practices. And I think that warranted at least some opportunity.”

Ohio State’s deeper lineup can also help them better defend against Minnesota’s top scorers, many of whom have given the team fits in prior matchups. One Gopher both Diebler and his players are circling in their gameplans is junior forward Dawson Garcia, the leading scorer on the team — and sixth best scorer in the Big Ten — at 17.5 points per game. He has racked up 28 and 36 points, respectively, in his last two games against the Buckeyes.

Both Diebler and senior center Zed Key said Garcia has garnered the attention of the team in the days leading up to Thursday’s game, with the Buckeyes committing to — just like in the Purdue game against center Zach Edey — a total team effort in the paint to limit his production.

“He certainly has earned our full attention with that performance he had here earlier in the year,” Diebler said. “We’ll work on matchups and things like that. Our post defense, as we did last game, has to be a collective effort. And his versatility certainly presented us some problems (on Dec. 3). (He has) bothered a lot of teams this year. He’s a really good player. He’s got a ton of experience.”

“I played against him in AAU, and he was a tough matchup then,” Key said. “He’s a great player, he knows his strengths on the court, and he plays into them. He’s a key factor, obviously. He’s the leading scorer, leading rebounder. And we have to hone in on that and take away his strengths and try to limit his strengths. We know that he’s going to be fired up, ready to go tomorrow to play against us. So we just need to lock in on the details and try to limit his strengths.”

Regardless of the challenge Garcia and his team presents on the road, Diebler said he has full faith in his players to rise to the occasion and play their best brand of basketball Thursday night at Minnesota’s Williams Arena, as they have continued to show the right temperament and mentality to keep the positive momentum moving forward.

“I’ve been impressed with how they’ve been able to turn the page, and I’ve been impressed with just the collective mindset and toughness,” Diebler said. “You have to give our leadership in that locker room a lot of credit....But regardless of what that result (against Purdue) was, you don’t play the way we played without some high, high level character guys in your locker room, considering everything that they had just gone through.

“So that’s what we have in there. We have to keep pulling that out. we have to keep leaning into that. But our leadership has been really impressive. There’s no reason to believe it won’t continue to be that way. There’s going to be added adversity on the road, we just have to stay together and stay aggressive.”

Ohio State’s game against the Gophers will tip off in Minneapolis at 8 p.m. Thursday night and will air live on Big Ten Network.