

Ohio State Looks To Carry Improved Play Into Big Ten Tournament



For much of the 2023 calendar year, the Ohio State men's basketball team has greatly underwhelmed expectations.

After taking down Northwestern on New Year's Day to move to 10-3, the Buckeyes slid on a 1-14 stretch during much of January and February, falling to 11-17 — including a 3-14 mark in Big Ten play. But after bottoming out on a two-game road trip against Iowa and then-No. 3 Purdue, losing by a combined 44 points to the Hawkeyes and Boilermakers, the Buckeyes seemingly turned a corner.

Although Ohio State fell to Penn State 75-71 on Feb. 23, the game set the tone for a stretch of improved play across the Buckeyes' final four games of the regular season. Following the loss to the Nittany Lions, the Buckeyes pieced together back-to-back home wins over Illinois and Maryland, winning consecutive games for the first time since triumphing over Alabama A&M and Northwestern on Dec. 29 and Jan. 1. While the regular season ended with a loss to Michigan State on Saturday in East Lansing, the Buckeyes were still left encouraged by the way they closed out the campaign.

"For the team, I thought (the recent stretch) was very important," guard Isaac Likekele said. "Mainly the younger guys need to see things. Sometimes it's hard for us to tell them things without them seeing it, so I believe that they needed to see a couple of wins in the win column."

Prior to the Penn State game, the Buckeyes were in the midst of their roughest stretch of play during the Chris Holtmann era. During the 15 game losing stretch — in which the Buckeyes endured losing streaks of five and nine games — Ohio State averaged just 66.0 points per game while shooting a lowly 42.6 percent — including a 34.0 percent mark from beyond the arc. While the Buckeyes' shooting numbers left much to be desired, their ability to share the ball also took a sharp decline as Ohio State registered just 9.0 assists per game, compared to 9.7 turnovers per game, during the losing stretch.

In the last three games, Ohio State has upped its offensive efficiency — scoring 74.3 points per game

while shooting 50.0 percent — en route to a 2-1 record in the span. Ohio State also registered 95.2 percent shooting from the charity stripe during the run. The Buckeyes are also sharing the ball at a higher level, averaging 11.3 assists to 9.3 turnovers per game during the stretch. While it's obviously a very small sample size in an otherwise rough campaign, Holtmann recognized the improvements the Buckeyes have made offensively heading into the post season.

"I think our most effective reason has been our (off-ball) movement and our ball movement and us trusting the pass more," head coach Chris Holtmann said. "We have played really, really good offensive basketball this last stretch. We've moved it, we've also made some shots where we had some guys that were maybe struggling to not make open looks that are now making open looks.

"You have guys playing with a lot of confidence right now offensively."

Ohio State's defense and rebounding have also seen marked improvements during the recent stretch, as the Buckeyes outrebounded their opponents in all three games by a combined 92-72 advantage. On defense, the Buckeyes held opponents to 68.7 points per game — down from 73.7 points during the 15-game losing stretch.

As the Buckeyes showed they still have the ability to collect wins and hang tough throughout games during the late stages of Big Ten play, Likekele noted Ohio State has to emulate the way its played across the past four games in order to give itself a chance to make a run in the Big Ten Tournament — with its only avenue to a berth in the NCAA Tournament coming with a Big Ten Tournament title.

"We just kept trusting the process and listening to coach," Likekele said. "He kept telling us that we weren't playing the correct way or in the correct manner, so he kept drilling it into us in practice until we did.

"We just feel like we've been playing better and better," he continued. "Hopefully all of that can accumulate into a lot of wins coming into this tournament. We're just going to keep trying to playing the right way and focus on the process."