

Ohio State Looks To Get Back On Track Against Merrimack



Following a 1-1 start the season, Ohio State will look to get back to above .500 on Wednesday night when they host mid-major Merrimack of the Northeast Conference. This will not be an easy task for the Buckeyes, however, as the Warriors enter the matchup with a 2-1 record and a formidable zone defense that has caught the attention of head coach Chris Holtmann and his team.

Speaking with the media on Tuesday, Holtmann said Merrimack's vaunted zone defense — orchestrated by seventh-year head coach Joe Gallo — along with its fearless play style will present his team with a number of challenges Wednesday night. This is something the Coach said he and his team have been preparing for all week leading up to the matchup.

"Merrimack is a team that really has a terrific and unique style of play," Holtmann said. "Their zone is outstanding. They've got aggressive guards, they're disciplined. They obviously had a great year last year. So it's a good program. good team, used to winning and having success. And like I said, aggressive guards, they have good size. And they're just really disruptive and active in their zone."

The Warriors are coming off a 2022-23 campaign where they went 18-16 and finished with a solid 12-4 record in the Northeast Conference, a performance that earned them a No. 1 seed in the conference tournament and a trip to the conference championship game, which resulted in a tight 67-66 loss to eventual NCAA tournament darlings Fairleigh Dickinson.

Most of the team's success last season was attributed to that zone defense, which held opponents to just 62.3 points per game and 42.5 percent shooting, numbers that ranked second and first in the conference, respectively. With the Warriors showing out on defense to start the season again, giving up just 68.0 points per game on a Northeast Conference-leading 41.6 percent shooting, this could pose a stiff challenge for a Buckeyes team that has gotten off to an inconsistent start on offense.

"It's unique," Holtmann said. "It's almost like they're forcing you to play left-handed. "They're well

coached in terms of their zone principles. They do a great job coaching them, making sure they're active. They play really hard, and they're disruptive, they're really disruptive.

To attack this defense, the Buckeyes will likely look to rely on top scorers Bruce Thornton and Roddy Gayle Jr., who have both shown that they are capable of taking a game over with strong overall performances in their first two games against Oakland and Texas A&M. But they will also attempt to attack the Warriors through by attacking the offensive glass off of misses, something that sophomore guard Evan Mahaffey said can be a potential area of weakness for their opponent.

"With their zone, they're really, really active on the ball and in passing lanes," Mahaffey said. "They really rely on their steals to turn you over. So it's really just about once you get the shot goes up in the air, it's hard to find somebody that blocks out, because everybody's in the zone, and not matched up man-to-man demand. That's what makes it a little bit easier on us. But as long as we take care of the ball and get shots at the rim, I feel like we have a good chance of coming down with the ball,"

While Merrimack is known for their defense, their offense is no slouch either. The Warriors have been led this season by a pair of young guards in sophomore Jordan Derkack and freshman Adam Clark, who enter the matchup ranked third and sixth in the conference with 16.3 and 13.3 points per game, respectively. Clark's efforts have allowed him to be named NEC Rookie of the Week on Nov. 13. In the frontcourt, the team is spearheaded by graduate Samba Diallo and sophomore Bryan Etumnu, who have their own inside with 8.9 points and 4.7 rebounds per contest.

While the Warriors can attack opposing teams at many angles, Holtmann and the Buckeyes feel that they have put in a strong week of preparation to combat those strengths. But the Coach knows these efforts won't matter if his team does not execute against Merrimack's zone during the game.

"You obviously can practice against it, but it does take a little bit of a feel once you get in the game," Holtmann said. "And we'll prepare them as well as we can. I think we've had good preparation. When you see it you're going to see it every possession for 40 minutes. I think that's part of the reason why they've gotten so good at it because it's their staple, and it's what they do."