

Ohio State Poised To Start 2024 On Strong Note Against Rutgers, Learn From Last Season's Big Ten Mistakes



Last season, the Ohio State men's basketball program entered their first Big Ten home game of the New Year with an impressive 10-3 record and lofty expectations for the rest of the year. What ensued for the Buckeyes the rest of the season was likely the worst-case scenario for Holtmann's program, where they dropped 14 of 15 games to fall out of postseason contention by February, creating doubts from fans regarding the status and success of the program moving forward.

The Buckeyes face an all-too familiar scenario to start 2024, where they will enter their first conference game of the New Year — this one against Rutgers on Wednesday night — with a 10-2 overall record and a rekindled energy around the team. This time around, however, Holtmann said his team is poised to learn from last season's mistakes and keep the positive momentum moving forward into the brunt of conference play.

"We've talked about (last year)," Holtmann said, "We've talked about some of the challenges that we faced. In some ways, we have looked at those as a really positive thing for us here in terms of learning from that experience and moving forward. (January) is a different schedule than what you play in November and December. It's apples and oranges. It's the challenge of league play all over the country.

"Those who are in it, they get it," he continued. "Those who have coached, or played or observed college basketball, they get it, they understand it. Not everybody is going to understand it. For us, we have to stay focused on just getting better and learning from every opportunity in front of us. And the challenge is just to keep learning and growing. I've been pleased with is the commitment of this group to do just that up to this point."

Ohio State's quest to avenge last season's Big Ten losses begins Wednesday night at Value City Arena,

where they will host head coach Steve Pikiell and his 8-4 Rutgers Scarlet Knights. Pikiell, who has turned around the program in his eight years as head coach, taking them to the NCAA Tournaments in the past three seasons, may not have the same level of talent on his roster this year compared to years prior, but they still possess a formidable and physical defense that has caught the attention of Holtmann and his program.

“(Rutgers is a) good, tough-minded team,” Holtmann said. “They are physical, have great length across the board. So it will be a great challenge.

“Their length, their physicality (will present challenges for Ohio State’s offense),” he continued. “We’re going to see a combination of different defenses, and they’re really good at all of them. They press, which can take you out of things. Their press does a great job of being disruptive, yet at the same time, shortening the shot clock...You can just tell they have great defenders, but they also have a team-wide commitment to it. And a lot of it is anchored by one of the best shot-blockers in the country.”

Rutgers’ ability to take opposing offenses out of rhythm and create havoc on defense is reflected in the statistics, where they enter the matchup against Ohio State as the No. 1-ranked scoring defense in the Big Ten — as well as the No. 11 ranked-defense in the nation — at 61.4 points per game. They also enter the New Year forcing the second-most turnovers in the Big Ten (191) and the most blocked shots (71), the latter of which is anchored by standout center Cliff Omoruyi, who ranks third in the nation with 41 swats.

Holtmann said that his team must counteract the Scarlet Knights’ imposing defense by matching the opponent’s toughness and intensity on the offensive end, an effort that will likely be put on the shoulders of Ohio State’s primary ball-handlers of guards Bruce Thornton, Roddy Gayle Jr. and Dale Bonner.

“We need to prepare them as well as we can and make sure that we’re being aggressive, appropriately aggressive, against it,” Holtmann said. “It’s hard to mimic their size and length and speed. A little bit like the West Virginia zone, where it took us a minute to figure it out. And then once we had much better movement in the second half, we really attacked it well. I think there’ll be some moments where we have to figure some things out, but you want to stay aggressive in terms of your attack.”

Ohio State’s matchup with the defensive-minded Scarlet Knights will tip off at 7 p.m. and be broadcast on Big Ten Network.