

Ohio State Ready To Defend Home Court Against No. 4 Seed Georgia In NIT Quarterfinals



Ohio State received a pleasant surprise Sunday afternoon when No. 4 seed Georgia went on the road and dethroned No. 1 seed Wake Forest 72-66, a result that gifts the Buckeyes one final home game this season against the Bulldogs on Tuesday night.

Playing at Value City Arena has been kind to head coach Jake Diebler and Ohio State down the stretch this season, with the Buckeyes emerging victorious in each of their last five home games since Diebler assumed the reins from Chris Holtmann in mid-February.

It's an impressive stretch that includes upset wins over NCAA Tournament teams Purdue — a No. 1 seed in the Big Dance — and Nebraska, a No. 9 seed, a resounding victory over Michigan on Senior Day and two hard-fought wins against Cornell and Virginia Tech in the first two rounds of the NIT, a recent string of home-cooking that Diebler said could once again play in their favor against the Bulldogs.

“The atmosphere (at home) has been awesome,” Diebler said at the Value City Arena practice floor on Monday. “Buckeye Nation has been incredible. The NutHouse has been there. We’ve felt the presence of our fans in both of these games. And I think it’s helped us particularly down the stretch...We certainly welcome the opportunity to be in the Schott, and we’re thankful we get to do that one more time for our fans and our guys on our team.”

While Ohio State will have the benefit of home-court advantage over the Bulldogs in this quarterfinal matchup — where it currently sits as an 8.5-point favorite — Ohio State will still have its hands full with a Georgia team that, like the Buckeyes, appears to be surging at the right time.

The Bulldogs, led by second-year head coach and former Florida leader Mike White, started similarly to Ohio State in the beginning of the season, jumping out to a 14-5 record in their first 19 games with notable wins over Georgia Tech, Wake Forest, Arkansas and LSU. But White’s team sputtered the rest of the way in conference play, dropping 10 of their final 13 contests en route to a disappointing 6-12 final mark in the SEC.

Like Ohio State, Georgia went 1-1 in its conference tournament to secure a berth to the NIT as a No. 4 seed — their first berth in postseason play in seven seasons.

This is an opportunity that the Bulldogs have taken advantage of. Georgia started its NIT run with a close 78-76 win over Xavier at home on March 19 and followed it with the previously mentioned upset win over Wake Forest on Sunday, a two-game stretch that has been powered by its offense.

Georgia shot 43.5 percent from the floor and an impressive 44.7 percent from three in its two wins, both of which are upticks from its shooting averages this season. The Bulldogs' surging offense — one which also enters the game with five players averaging at least 9.5 points per game — has caught the eye of Diebler, who applauded them for its versatility and toughness, among other things.

"I have a ton of respect for Coach White going back to when we were in the SEC together," Diebler said. "I think he is a really good coach. His teams play tough. And he's usually had some really good guard play. Go back and look at his time with Florida.

"So I think with Georgia, there's a great deal of versatility from a scoring standpoint when you look at their roster. They have seven guys who are at seven points or more on the season. So he's a good coach, they have good players, and we have to have a great day of practice and get ready."

To Diebler's point, Georgia has been led by its backcourt this season, with graduate and senior guards Noah Thomasson and Jabri Adbur-Rahim leading the team at 12.9 and 12.2 points per game on a combined 38.6 percent shooting from the field and a 35.3 percent clip from three. With Adbur-Rahim likely out of the contest due to a foot injury that has sidelined him for the last five games, however, the Bulldogs will need to once again call on Thomasson — who has scored 27 points in the two NIT games — to carry the load.

Georgia may also need to increasingly rely upon true freshman guard Silas Demary Jr., a former four-star prospect in the 2023 class, who has started 34 of Georgia's 35 games this season and averaged 9.6 points and 3.8 rebounds per contest.

Regardless of where Georgia may get its scoring from, Diebler knows that the Buckeyes must play their absolute best game if they want to advance to the NIT's Final Four at historic Hinkle Fieldhouse in Indianapolis next week, an opportunity to advance the season into April that his team would thoroughly embrace.

"You always remember the NIT being in Madison Square Garden — the finals and the Final Four. But I played in Hinkle. It's an awesome venue. We have to handle our business, but hopefully we get an opportunity to play there."

Ohio State and Georgia will tip off at Value City Arena 7 p.m., with the game set to air live on ESPN.

The Buckeyes are likely returning the services of freshman guard Scotty Middleton, who has rejoined the team this week after tending to a family matter, while sophomore guard Bruce Thornton is also likely to play after suffering a leg contusion late in the Buckeyes' second-round win over Virginia Tech.