

Ohio State's Comeback Bid Falls Short, Season Ends In 71-61 Loss To Villanova



After Ohio State's opening-round victory over Loyola Chicago, 54-41, junior forward E.J. Liddell spoke at length about the importance of a strong start for these Buckeyes, about setting the rules for the game and needing to take that mentality into the next round.

"I'm not surprised. I feel like when we start out, the first four minutes, that determines the game. We set the rules," Liddell said. "And I felt like we came out here and did a great job on the defensive end, great communication. And we played with an edge tonight. Played like the underdogs. We have to keep playing like that because people have been counting us out big time. We've got to have that same mindset next game."

A few hours later, the Buckeyes would learn that they'd be squaring off with the second-seeded Villanova Wildcats. Liddell was right - those early minutes would determine the game, but unlike against the Ramblers, Ohio State was the team having the rules set for it against Jay Wright's Wildcats. Villanova jumped out to a 17-7 lead less than six minutes into the game behind 10 points from star guard Collin Gillespie, which proved just enough to withstand a furious Buckeye comeback to claim a 71-61 edge that ended Ohio State's season.

Those early minutes certainly weren't pretty for the Buckeyes. Villanova knocked down eight of its first 12 games of the game while Ohio State started 2-of-11 shooting. When Ohio State locked in on Gillespie - who had exploited Ohio State's perimeter defense to the tune of 10 points - he dished to Caleb Daniels, Eric Dixon and Jermaine Samuels for easy baskets. Liddell and Malaki Branham pitched in moments of brilliance, but the rest of the Buckeyes struggled to score, putting more of a strain on the stars.

Ohio State entered the half trailing by 11, 39-28, but it did so after a half of dealing with issues that it didn't seem to have much of a solution for, buoyed by 12 points from Liddell, eight from Branham and just five combined from Eugene Brown III, Jamari Wheeler and Kyle Young, the three other starters for

the afternoon.

Dixon opened the second half with a hook shot and a 3-pointer to give the Wildcats their largest lead of the game at 44-29, the deficit of which held into the first media break of the half at 48-33.

With its season teetering on the edge, Ohio State mustered a response to pull back within single digits. Branham pulled the Buckeyes out of the break with a midrange pull-up jumper, added two more points with a jumper on the next possession, enabled by a Kyle Young offensive board, and then Young knocked down a basket of his own to give OSU six straight, cutting the deficit down to 48-39 and forcing a Wright timeout.

The Buckeye push wasn't finished, despite a Justin Moore 3-pointer that pushed the Wildcats back ahead by 12 shortly away from that timeout. That bucket gave Villanova 55 points with 11:59 to play, but the Wildcats would not hit 60 for the game until the 7:33 mark. In the interim, Ohio State - led not by Liddell, but by Branham and by effort plays from Zed Key and Young - pitched in 10 points of its own, cutting the deficit down to four points with a Branham jumper (his sixth straight make) at the 7:51 mark, 57-53. A Villanova triple briefly blunted the Buckeye run, but a Liddell turnaround and a Wheeler 3-pointer turned aside the Wildcat answer, bringing Ohio State within a few as two points for the first time since 9-7.

In the flurry of the run, though, Ohio State sustained another major blow. In a fight for positioning down low, Young drifted and bumped his head into the shoulder of a Villanova bystander. Fresh out of concussion protocol, Young was taken to the locker room and could not return. Without its effort leader, Ohio State just seemed to run out of gas.

The Wildcats held the ball for nearly 70 seconds after Wheeler cut the lead to two, recovering the ball after a Liddell block, snagging an offensive rebound from a Gillispie 3-pointer and eventually finding two points for Samuels while going more than a minute without allowing the Buckeyes an offensive possession. Key clinked in a free throw to bring the Buckeyes back within a triple, but a Gillispie jumper and a Dixon 3-pointer surrounded Ohio State's coffin with nails, and despite a Branham runner with 58 seconds to play to cut the lead back to six, Villanova's free throw shooting hammered them in and closed Ohio State's season.

Samuels knocked in a pair right off of the Branham make, the Buckeye freshman came up short on a midrange try a possession later, Liddell met the same fate after a miss VU free throw, and Gillespie all but ended the game with his 19th and 20th points.

Branham led the Buckeyes with 23 points, and will now enter into a critical decision cycle regarding his future in Columbus with the NBA expected to come knocking. Liddell, who has played his final game with Ohio State, finished with 17 points, while Key added 11 rebounds to help the Buckeyes to a rare win in the rebound category, 35-31. Gillespie's 20 led Villanova, with 17 from Samuels, 13 from Dixon and 11 from Daniels.