

Okpara Calls For Shift In Buckeyes' Mentality



Ohio State's loss to Michigan State on Sunday followed an all too familiar script for the Buckeyes.

The Buckeyes trailed by as many as 16 points during the first half before cutting the deficit to five midway through the second frame. However, the Spartans controlled the game from there and outscored Ohio State 24-8 over the contest's final 11:24 to run away with a 62-41 win at Value City Arena. As has been the case several times this season, the Buckeyes just couldn't get over the hump against the Spartans.

To freshman center Felix Okpara, Ohio State's struggles to finish the job stem from the Buckeyes' lacking the necessary mentality to close out games.

"We need more of a dog mentality, that killer mentality," Okpara said on Tuesday. "We have to go out there and try to do what's best for the team and try to play harder and smarter. I feel like we've been lacking that for the past five games now, but we're going to find it out."

Ohio State is 2-11 in games decided by single digits this season, which includes a 10-game losing streak in such contests. While the Buckeyes have shown the necessary fight to keep games close, their inability to take hold of contests has remained a prevalent aspect of their recent losing stretch, in which they've lost 11 of their last 12 games.

Okpara noted that he feels some players are playing too relaxed in crunch time, while also pointing to poor shot selection as a result of players forcing the action on the offensive end of the floor.

"Some games I see our guys trying to press, trying to get the big shot instead of just taking it one point, one possession at a time," Okpara said. "Sometimes we've, as players, seen guys playing relaxed and pretty much — I wouldn't say giving up — but still playing a little bit relaxed."

Forward and team captain Zed Key said he agreed with Okpara's criticism of the team's mentality in tight games while pointing to areas that need to be cleaned up in those scenarios, including effort on

the defensive end of the floor.

“He’s right,” Key said. “Guys need to value defense a little bit more and get stops because defense wins games. Obviously, we’ve been struggling in that department but every day we’re trying to get better.”

With seven games remaining in the regular season, and Ohio State’s NCAA Tournament aspirations fading away, Okpara said the Buckeyes’ play in the recent stretch is not indicative of their talent level but added that something needs to change fast.

“It’s the way we’re losing, I think that’s the issue right now,” Okpara said. “I feel like the way we’re losing right now, it’s just not us, like the coaching staff has said.

“I know we’re better than this,” he continued. “I’m not going to sit here and call out names, but I feel like we need more guys to step up.”