

Okpara Finding Comfort In Bench Role



For several seasons, Ohio State fans clamored for the program to find a true big man that could defend the rim at a high level and impact the game with his size. It appears the Buckeyes may have found that elusive piece in freshman center Felix Okpara.

The 6-11 center from Lagos, Nigeria, has shown flashes of his potential through his first 11 games with the Buckeyes. In two of the last four games, Okpara has reached double figures in scoring, while also continuing to impact opponents on the defensive end at a high level. As Okpara has carved out a solid role for himself on Ohio State's second unit, he noted that he's starting to gain comfort at the collegiate level.

"I've embraced my role on the team," Okpara said after Ohio State's 95-61 win over Maine — in which he scored 10 points and corraled four rebounds — on Wednesday. "It's coming way easier for me. I know I'm coming off the bench and I have to come with great energy. I have to provide, crash the boards and play defense."

Although Okpara plays just 12.7 minutes per game, it's hard to miss him when he's out there. His most notable contributions have come on the defensive end during his short tenure, and he's emerged as Ohio State's most efficient shot-blocker. But Okpara has also shown deceptive athleticism and speed at his height, allowing him to defend along the perimeter and in pick-and-roll actions without much hindrance to his defensive positioning. The Buckeye big man is averaging 1.0 blocks and 0.6 steals per game.

Okpara's most notable defensive output came in Ohio State's 89-84 loss to North Carolina in the CBSSports Classic on Dec. 17, in which he turned away a pair of shots and swiped four steals.

"Defense, that's why I check in," Okpara said. "I try to get defensive rebounds, crash the glass offensively. For me, scoring right now is a bonus. I like to do the little stuff like set screens and dive on the floor."

While his defense is currently ahead of his offense, he's displayed strides offensively from his high school days. Primarily operating around the basket, Okpara has shown a light touch with his shot and his long arms allow him to rack up offensive rebounds and second-chance opportunities. He's also been solid as a rim-runner, scoring a good deal of his buckets as the roller in pick-and-roll situations and in transition.

Okpara has also shown that he's not afraid to shoot from beyond the arc either, hitting his only attempt against St. Francis (Pa.) on Dec. 3. Through his first 11 games, Okpara has posted 4.3 points per game while shooting 62.5 percent.

As Ohio State wraps up its nonconference slate against Alabama A&M on Dec. 28 before beginning Big Ten play in earnest on Jan. 1, head coach Chris Holtmann said he's proud of the growth made by Okpara during nonconference play while pointing to the big man's coachability as a reason for the strides in his game.

"I just love the kid," Holtmann said. "I love how willing he is to continue to grow and get better."