

Preview: Ohio State Not Getting Caught Up In Allure Of UConn Ahead Of Sweet 16 Matchup



When No. 3 Ohio State and No. 2 UConn take the floor on Saturday with a trip to the Elite Eight on the line, perhaps the biggest battle for the Buckeyes will be looking past the daunting nature of the Huskies – not in their play on the court, necessarily, but in their historical pedigree that has made them one of the greatest programs in the history of the sports.

UConn head coach Geno Auriemma has claimed 11 national championships with the Huskies dating back to 1995, and he's come close on many other occasions, notching 22 appearances in the Final Four and has at least made it to the Sweet 16 in every season dating back to 1994. That doesn't even speak to the Huskies' dominance within their conference, with the program boasting 27 conference tournament titles and 27 regular-season championships under Auriemma.

That's the type of challenge that awaits Ohio State this weekend and stands in the way of the Buckeyes making their first appearance in the Elite Eight since 1993.

"As coaches we always say, 'Well, if they showed up wearing a different jersey, Illinois or something, maybe we'd play a little differently,'" Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff said. "I think that you do you have to kind of get over the fact that you're playing an iconic program and make it more about the players in the game and all that type of stuff and try to take that out as much as you can, which is probably easier said than done, but that is something we'll be mindful of."

That attitude has permeated to his players. While freshman forward Cotie McMahon admitted after the team's win over North Carolina that she was excited at the prospect of facing UConn, she said since that the Buckeyes are not trying to make it anything more than it is.

"They're a good team, but all the teams we played are good team," she said. "It's just another game for us, and I'm sure it's just another game for them."

Both teams might be treating it as just another game, but it has the potential to offer one of the more exciting matchups of the tournament thus far. Ohio State and UConn both have top-25 offenses, with the Buckeyes averaging 80.4 points and the Huskies scoring 76.3 points per game, though UConn is a better defensive outlet by allowing just 58.4 points per game, compared to 68.2 points for Ohio State.

Like Ohio State, the Huskies have dealt with several injuries in the backcourt this season. Guard Paige Bueckers, who won AP Player of the Year in the 2021-22 season, suffered a torn ACL in the preseason,

and guard Azzi Fudd just recently returned for UConn after missing 14 games in the middle of the season with a knee injury.

When taking the floor for the Huskies, Fudd averages 15.2 points per game on 46.6 percent shooting from the field. Guard Nika Muhl has started all but one game for UConn this season, averaging 7.7 points on 41.3 percent shooting, and she's far and away the Huskies' assist leader, dishing out 8.0 assists per game, which ranks second in the country behind Iowa guard Caitlin Clark's 8.6 assists per game.

"They're a really good team," Ohio State guard Taylor Mikesell said. "They don't ever beat themselves; they're very skilled in that sense. They have a really good post presence and a lot of good guard play, so we'll continue to watch film and get ready for them on Saturday."

That presence in the post will look familiar for Ohio State, as forward Dorca Juhasz - who played her first three seasons of college basketball with the Buckeyes - has been a standout at UConn, averaging 15.2 points on 50.3 percent shooting and a team-high 9.9 rebounds per game.

"She's a really good player," McGuff said. "She had a great career here and she's continued to do good things there. It seems like forever ago that she was here, things are going so quickly, but I think we've evolved in a really positive direction, and she's done well there, so win-win for all of us."

But Juhasz isn't even the most notable post player on the team, as forward Aaliyah Edwards - who leads the team with 17.0 points per game on 58.9 percent shooting and adds 9.0 rebounds per contest, for good measure - is a semifinalist for Naismith Player of the Year and earned AP third-team honors this season.

"She's a great player, and I think one of the things that makes her so special is just she's an incredible athlete, but she can play around the basket and on the perimeter, so her versatility makes her really unique," McGuff said.

UConn also has an additional pair of forwards averaging double-digit scoring, with Lou Lopez Senechal posting 15.3 points and Aubrey Griffin scoring 11.6 points, so there will be no shortage of scorers that Ohio State will have to keep an eye out for.

Drawing the post assignment is forward Eboni Walker, who has taken that role on in recent weeks with her emergence in Ohio State's starting lineup. Walker had a standout performance in Ohio State's win over North Carolina, notching a career-high 15 points while adding seven rebounds and a 7 of 8 mark from the charity stripe, and McGuff is hoping that momentum carries through against the Huskies.

"She had a great game against North Carolina. We don't win that game if she doesn't play like she did," he said. "We've seen this in practice and we've seen glimpses in games. We've all been waiting for it to come together and it really did against North Carolina, and couldn't have been a better time for that to happen. But I told her afterwards, 'We've been waiting for this breakthrough performance, and now you've kind of told on yourself and this is the expectation for as long as we get to play this year.'"

Ohio State enters as an underdog against UConn, but it's a position the Buckeyes have been comfortable playing from this season. It's still going to take a significant effort to go blow-for-blow with the Huskies, but there are paths to victory for Ohio State.

UConn does not turn opponents over at a particularly high rate, with opposing teams averaging just 14.2 turnovers per game. The Huskies, meanwhile, turn the ball over 16.2 times per contest, which could make them susceptible if the Buckeyes are able to establish their press.

Maximizing possessions will be key for Ohio State, as UConn – especially going against the Buckeyes' defense, which allows opposing teams to shoot 42.6 percent from the field – is going to score, and the Buckeyes will be looking to turn this game into a race that the Huskies might not be prepared for.

That isn't the only path for an Ohio State victory, as the Buckeyes could also rely on a big game from any one of McMahan, Mikesell, guard Jacy Sheldon or even guard Taylor Thierry, but it's one area Ohio State will key in on ahead of this big matchup.

"This is huge. I mean, anytime you have the opportunity to play in March Madness and this tournament, it's a really special opportunity and then doing it for our university is really special," Ohio State guard Jacy Sheldon said. "We're not going to take it for granted. We're going to give it our best like we have every game, and we kind of preach just giving it our all every day and when we get on the court, giving it our 100 percent. That's what we're going to continue to do and that's what we rely on."

And if Ohio State is able to overcome UConn, it would take the program to heights not seen since the days of Katie Smith and signal a shift for the Buckeyes moving forward.

"My expectations are that we get past the Sweet 16, we go to the Elite Eight, we give ourselves a chance to go the Final Four," McGuff said. "It's a great opportunity to do that, and I think we have a team that's good enough to do it. Now we just have to go execute and beat a great team to get there. I think it would be validation of where I think we are right now and where I think we're going with this program."

Ohio State and UConn will tip off at 4 p.m. from Climate Pledge Arena in Seattle, with the game set to be broadcast nationally on ABC.