

BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

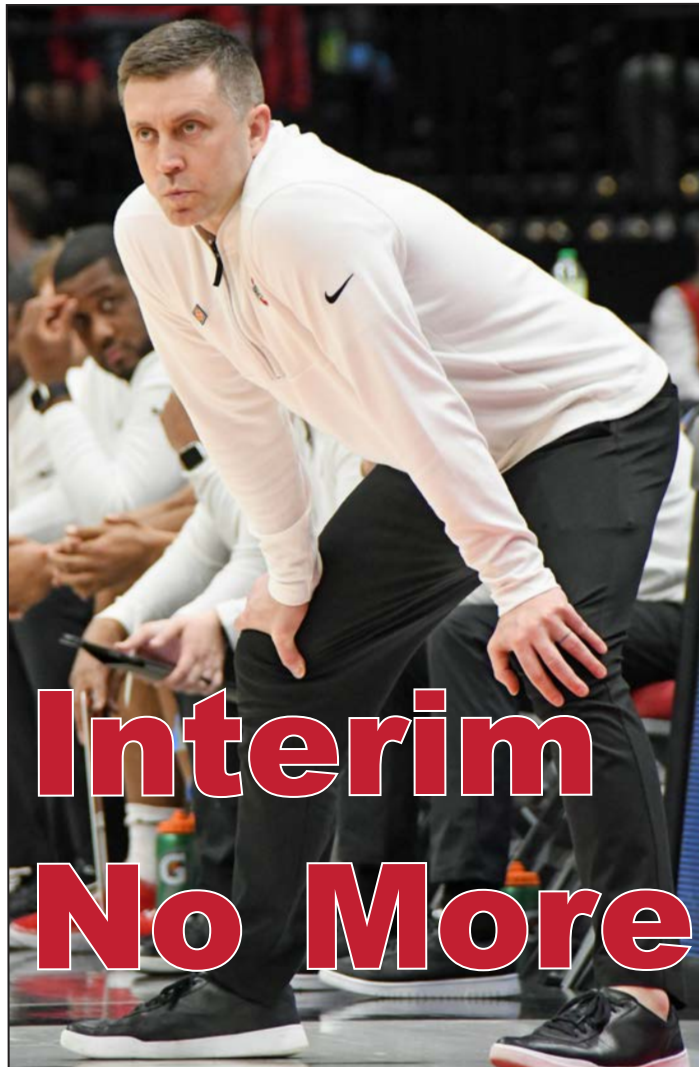
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Vol. 43, No. 19

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

April 6, 2024



Interim No More

SONNY BROCKWAY

MOVING ON UP — Ohio State promoted interim men's basketball head coach Jake Diebler (pictured) to the full-time position on March 17 after a strong close to the season following the firing of Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14. Diebler is the 15th head coach in program history and the first to be hired from within since Randy Ayers in 1989.

Diebler Sheds Interim Tag, Named 15th Head Coach Of Buckeye Men's Hoops

By **PATRICK ENGELS**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Two days after assuming interim head-coaching duties in the wake of former Ohio State men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann's dismissal on Feb. 14, 37-year-old Jake Diebler sat in front of a group of reporters at Value City Arena and made his intentions clear on how the assistant coach was preparing to take on this daunting challenge.

Now serving as the face of a reeling program in shock over the timing and abrupt nature of the firing for the remainder of the season — which then included just six more regular-season games and a likely short stint at the Big Ten tournament in Minneapolis — Diebler emphasized that this was not an opportunity for him to audition for the head-coaching job.

Rather, he felt he had an obligation to serve the Ohio State program — one he had spent nearly half of his coaching career a part of, with another four years spent watching his younger brother, former guard Jon Diebler, don the scarlet and gray — the only way he knew how.

"I don't know if I really spend any time thinking about that," Diebler said on Feb. 16, roughly a month before he was named the 15th Ohio State men's basketball head coach on March 17. "I'm viewing this as almost like a stewardship of this program for the time being. I want to really focus on doing that as best I can, because I care about this program so much.

"Our guys care about this program, and I need to care about them and spend all my mental space and energy on that. Right now, I'm solely focused on serving our guys well and this program well."

Diebler's initial comments appeared — at least at the beginning of his tenure as the Buckeyes' interim leader — to match the opinions of those both within and outside the program.

With incoming athletic director Ross Bjork leading the head-coaching search and current athletic director Gene Smith monitoring close by, many people familiar with the program believed Ohio State was gearing up to make a big splash and bring in an experienced, high-profile name. Bjork said himself that he was prioritizing experience when sorting through candidates, telling The Columbus Dispatch in late February that "experience in the head-coaching chair matters."

This approach appeared more of a reality when names began to circulate. As the days went by, veteran Division I coaches such as Florida Atlantic's Dusty May, Creighton's Greg McDermott, Xavier's Sean Miller and South Carolina's Lamont Paris all emerged as people to watch, with May — who eventually assumed the head-coaching position at Michigan on March 24 — even engaging in preliminary talks with Buckeyes brass.

But back in Columbus, there was another more familiar name whose candidacy for the position was becoming impossible to ignore. Squarely under the guidance of Diebler — the son of recently retired Ohio high school basketball coaching legend Keith Diebler and a Gibsonburg, Ohio, native who had just two games of head-coaching experience (both filling in for an ill Holtmann) under his belt before his elevation to interim leader — for the final three weeks of the regular season, the energy around the Buckeye program began to shift with each passing game.

Implementing a high-paced, high-intensity style of play that was bound together by a culture of togetherness and family, Ohio State first dethroned No. 2 Purdue in Diebler's debut on Feb. 18 — just four days after Holtmann's firing.

Ohio State then secured a dramatic come-from-behind road victory over Tom Izzo and Michigan State on Feb. 25, snapping a program-record 17-game road losing streak. Then came another two home wins over NCAA Tournament-bound Nebraska on Feb. 29 and spiraling Michigan on March 3, winding up with a 73-51 road victory against Rutgers on March 10.

When the dust settled on the regular season — and after the Buckeyes tacked on another win over Iowa in the second round of the Big Ten tournament on March 14 — Diebler had thrust an Ohio State team that owned a 14-11 record and 4-10 mark in the Big Ten on Feb. 14 back onto the NCAA Tournament bubble with six convincing wins in seven tries.

"I'll say this, we're 6-1," Diebler told Big Ten Network's Andy Katz after the win over Iowa. "It's not me. We're 6-1. Our guys have come together. They've battled. We've raised our toughness and togetherness, and that's been the biggest difference."

While the Buckeyes' NCAA Tournament hopes dissolved one day later after a 77-74 loss to Illinois in the Big Ten tournament quarterfinals, leading them to accept a bid

Continued On Page 8

OPINION

Will Michigan's NCAA Bill Ever Come Due?

Webster's tells us that karma is a spiritual belief that is all about cause and effect. The thinking is that if you put good into the world, that good eventually comes back to you. If you choose to do harm, well...

I don't know if you believe in that sort of thing, but it sure seems like the piper's bill is coming due at Michigan.

The national championship Jim Harbaugh might (or might not) have circumvented the rules to win obviously resulted in a huge payday for the coach, who accepted a five-year contract worth an estimated \$80 million from the NFL's Los Angeles Chargers. Back in Ann Arbor, however, the NCAA continues its investigation into Harbaugh's questionable recruiting tactics as well as the sign-stealing scandal every maize and blue-wearing fan has convinced him- or herself is fake news concocted in Ryan Day's secret basement laboratory.

While the wheels of NCAA justice grind slowly, the black clouds are still beginning to gather around the Michigan football program.

New head coach Sherrone Moore had to overhaul his staff when Harbaugh took defensive coordinator Jesse Minter, defensive line coach (and recruiting coordinator) Rick Elston, defensive backs coach (and co-defensive coordinator) Steve Clinkscale, and strength coach Ben Herbert with him to Los Angeles, running backs coach Mike Hart was not retained, and special teams coordinator Jay Harbaugh (Jim's son) took a similar position with the NFL's Seattle Seahawks.

No sooner had Moore put the finishing touches on assembling his staff than he lost one member when defensive line coach Greg Scruggs resigned March 21 less than a week after a DUI arrest.

A few days later, during a spring practice non-contact drill, three-year starting safety Rod Moore (no relation to the head coach) tore his ACL. Moore was named to the All-Big Ten third team last season after registering 38 tackles and four interceptions, and Ohio State undoubtedly remembers his game-clinching pick in the final seconds of Michigan's 30-24 win against the Buckeyes last November.

Since torn ACLs typically take nine to 12 months to fully recover, Moore will likely miss the entire 2024 season, and that is a huge blow for a Michigan team that had lost its other starting safety from a year ago when Keon Sabb transferred to Alabama.

The Wolverines were already facing roster upheaval for their 2024 season. They lost a whopping 17 players from the 22 who started opposing Washington in the national championship game – a total that rises to 18 with the loss of Moore. Michigan also watched a handful of valuable backups follow Sabb's lead and depart the program through the transfer portal.

All of that has happened since Harbaugh raised the national title trophy in Houston on Jan. 8, and still the NCAA has yet to weigh in on whether that title was won fairly.

In mid-February, Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel told reporters it had been several weeks since the school had received any update on the two ongoing investigations – one related to alleged recruiting violations during the 2020 pandemic, and the other about the sign-stealing allegations that led to the resignation of analyst Connor Stallions and the firing of linebackers coach Chris Partridge.

Anyone with any knowledge of the way the NCAA operates understands the investigation arm of the college sports governing body often moves at a glacial pace. Additionally, with all of the intrinsic problems brought forth by unlimited NIL money and the transfer portal being used as free agency, the NCAA might

think pursuing the cases against Harbaugh is no longer worth its time or effort, especially since the coach is now in the NFL and virtually untouchable.

But if the NCAA reaches the conclusion that there should be no punishment because the chief perpetrator has left town, then it might as well shutter its offices and fade into the shadow of history.



According to the old Chinese proverb, karma has no menu; you get served what you deserve. Whether it will be the Michigan football program or the NCAA itself getting its just deserts remains to be seen.

Mock Or Mockery?

Now that I have you focused away from March Madness and back to football, it won't be long until the NFL holds its annual three-day draft extravaganza, this time beginning April 25 in downtown Detroit.

Mock drafts are almost as inescapable as death and taxes, but they help to pass the time while coaches, scouts and owners try to outguess one another until it's time to actually make a selection. Most mockups that I have seen agree the Chicago Bears will select USC quarterback Caleb Williams with the No. 1 overall pick with LSU quarterback Jayden Daniels going No. 2 to the Washington Commanders.

After that, it seems to be a total guess-a-thon with projected trades and moves up and down the board. I will say this. It doesn't take much expertise to realize Ohio State receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. should be the first non-quarterback taken. Had I been the Bears, I might have been tempted to keep Justin Fields and draft Harrison, giving an honest-to-goodness weapon to the quarterback Chicago took at No. 1 just three years ago. But what do I know?

With the mock draft he released March 27, NFL draft analyst Matt Miller follows the conventional line of thinking with regard to Williams and Daniels. Then he has Minnesota trading up for New England's pick at No. 3 overall to grab North Carolina QB Drake Maye.

And then, Miller goes completely off the rails. He envisions Denver sending three first-round picks to Arizona to draft Michigan quarterback J.J. McCarthy at No. 4 overall. Miller's rationale is that Broncos head coach Sean Payton will mold McCarthy into the second coming of Drew Brees.

First of all, McCarthy is very much still a work in progress. Yes, he was 27-1 as a starter at Michigan, and yes, he led the Wolverines to their national championship last season. But to compare him to Brees is ludicrous.

By the time Brees united with Payton in New Orleans, Brees had already thrown for 11,792 yards at Purdue (still a Big Ten career record) and another 12,348 yards in five seasons with the Chargers. McCarthy totaled 6,226 yards during his college career.

As we all know by now, the NFL draft is a giant crapshoot especially with regard to quarterbacks. First-rounders just since 2021 include the likes of Kenny Pickett, Trey Lance, Mac Jones and Fields, each of whom has already been traded from the teams that origi-

nally drafted them. Meanwhile, Brock Purdy, the very last player selected in the 2022 draft, led San Francisco to a berth in Super Bowl LVIII in February.

Last year, Carolina made the blunder of the draft when it passed over C.J. Stroud at No. 1 for Bryce Young. Stroud turned around a team that had finished 3-13-1 the year before and earned NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year honors while leading Houston to its first playoff berth in four years. Meanwhile, the Panthers went from a 7-10 record to a 2-15 finish as Young was sacked 62 times for a league-leading 477 yards and threw three pick-sixes among his 10 interceptions.

The good news for Carolina is that because it dealt away this year's No.1 pick in order to draft Young at the top of last year's draft, it can't make the same colossal blunder two years in a row. That distinction will be reserved for whatever team elevates McCarthy into the top half of the first round.

Basketball Postmortems

Who could have guessed on Valentine's Day that fans would fall in love again with the Ohio State men's basketball team while the women would end their season with a whimper, jilted in their attempt to return to the Elite Eight?

One day after the men's team dropped a 62-54 decision at Wisconsin for its 16th consecutive road loss, head coach Chris Holtmann was fired and replaced by assistant Jake Diebler. After that, the Buckeyes seemed to find another gear and won eight of their last 11 games before finishing with a 79-77 loss to Georgia in the NIT quarterfinals.

While the men were in disarray on Valentine's Day, the women were enjoying an 80-47 romp over Nebraska, extending a winning streak that would eventually reach 15 games on their way to the Big Ten regular-season championship.

Then, suddenly, Kevin McGuff's team hit the skids, losing three of its last four games, including a 75-63 decision to Duke in the second round of the NCAA tournament, a game in which the Buckeyes had led by as many as 16 points with five minutes to go in the first half.

Diebler, who had the interim tag removed March 17 after being rewarded with a five-year contract, was able to transform what had appeared to be a team simply going through the motions at the end of the Holtmann era. There are many theories as to how Diebler accomplished that, but most are simply conjecture.

Comparing the first 25 games under Holtmann against the final 11 with Diebler calling the shots doesn't really show much. The Buckeyes shot slightly better (46.2 percent to 44.5) and scored slightly higher (77.9 points per game to 74.4) after the coaching change. It just seemed that once Diebler took over, the team played with a renewed sense of vigor.

Quite the opposite regarding the women, who seemed to stand around and wait for something good to happen during their stretch swoon. That was especially true during the regular-season finale loss at Iowa, the second-round Big Ten tournament loss to Maryland, and the early NCAA exit against Duke. Ohio State was outbounded in those three games by a lopsided margin of 131-82.

Shooting occasionally goes cold as it did against Maryland. Other teams can devise a defensive strategy to shut down a particular player such as Duke did effectively against OSU sharpshooter Jacy Sheldon. But when you get outbounded by an eye-popping average of more than 16 per game, you shouldn't expect to win.



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PUBLISHER
Frank Moskowitz

ASSISTANT PUBLISHER
Becky Roberts

MANAGING EDITOR EMERITUS
Mark Rea

EDITOR
Braden Moles

ASSISTANT PUBLISHER EMERITUS
Karen Wachsman 1944-1999

PHOTOGRAPHY
Sonny Brockway Terry Gilliam
Kevin Dye Josh Winslow

CONTRIBUTORS

David Breithaupt Mark Schmetzer
Bill Conley Steve Siegfried
Patrick Engels Jeff Svoboda
Rich Exner Mike Wachsman
Craig Merz Greg Wilson
Bob Roehm

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVES
Paula Serra Ron Friedman

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Diebler's Leadership Outweighed Experience

Continued From Page 1

to the NIT, the end-of-season stretch under Diebler marked a dramatic turnaround for the program that was largely unforeseen in the middle of February.

For Bjork, what was once an inspiring story became an impressive showing of leadership and coaching ability that he could not dismiss, causing him to believe that the right person for the job was not a big name outside of the program, but rather a Buckeye lifer who was right on campus.

"We laid out a very specific profile about what we envisioned for Ohio State basketball," Bjork said during Diebler's introductory press conference on March 18. "Passion; energy; create a program; identity; a track record of player development; a recruiting machine, especially here in the Midwest and in the state of Ohio; strong leadership skills that can galvanize Buckeye Nation; someone who understands and also can capitalize in modern-day college athletics; born-to-coach. Jake Diebler fits each one of those characteristics, and then some.

"As we looked at all the characteristic, we just thought, 'Look, if we know where we're going, let's pull the trigger.' He's the real deal. He knows how to live at the highest level of college basketball. He's seen it in action. So to me, that made up for the lack of long-term head-coaching experience, because he just fits where we are in this program right now."

Checked Every Box

While Bjork and Ohio State may have begun the search with the intention of hiring a big-name head coach, the incoming athletic director said it became clearer with each passing game that Diebler possessed the qualifications needed to thrive as the Buckeye leader, starting with his sound in-game performances.

Bjork, who admitted that he was on a sabbatical in February when he first received a call from Smith to begin a head-coaching search, said Diebler initially flashed with his ability to make the proper in-game adjustments and transform his team into a more high-paced and high-intensity operation, two qualities that he thought allowed him to out-scheme some of the more experienced coaches in the Big Ten.

During Ohio State's 6-1 run, Diebler and the Buckeyes bested veteran coaches such as Izzo, Purdue's Matt Painter, Nebraska's Fred Hoiberg and Iowa's Fran McCaffrey, among others.

"I wasn't breaking down film, necessari-

ly," Bjork said. "But you see the momentum swings. Do you call the right timeout? Do you sub? Do you make a defensive adjustment? He made the defensive adjustments. Playing guys who maybe hadn't played a lot through the year, getting more rotation and getting the style of play, that's coaching. You're going to recruit to that and use that as a selling point."

"To me, you have the wherewithal or you don't. If you break down the moves that were made during games, he outcoached coaches that have been doing this a long time. Clearly, he has his dad in his ear and sort of that born-to-coach mentality."

Diebler's in-game coaching caught the attention of Bjork, but the veteran administrator was also impressed by the way he carried himself on and off the hardwood.

Bjork said that despite not being in Columbus until March 1, when he began serving as an advisor to Smith, he saw Diebler emerge as a selfless and fearless leader who can handle the responsibilities that come with being the singular face of a program, a trait that he thought became even more apparent once he arrived on campus and met with Diebler himself.

"I saw it in that Purdue game, and I thought he was actually going to play," Bjork said. "I think he was on the court a couple times. To me, you saw the energy, you saw the connectivity, you saw that he was maybe going to open up the style of play a little bit more. So you saw all of those things. And then, when I came to the game on March 3, I saw the environment and what it's capable of. I saw the way we played. We hammered (Michigan) in the second half. That was awesome to see. So all of those elements just came together.

"People are born to do this," he added. "There's innate leadership abilities that you see manifest in conversations, in interactions, the way he carried himself in the media. He never made it about self-preservation, that he's doing everything to manipulate it to get the job. He was doing everything to do what's best with the program at this time."

While Diebler possessed the core traits Bjork was looking for in a head coach, Bjork still wanted to ensure that no stone was left unturned during his first coaching search at Ohio State. Utilizing the search firm Collegiate Sports Associates – the same company Ohio State used to hire Bjork from Texas A&M in January – Bjork said he spoke either virtually or in person with nearly 50 candidates, many of whom were qualified coaches whom the university could have

hired.

"We could've waited on a lot of people," Bjork said. "There are a lot of people who wanted this job. All the people that we talked to – the 49 coaches, the people that we met with in person, the people that we met with on Zoom – this was an attractive job."

Bjork declined to go into specifics on the names that received the most consideration for the position – the only reported conversation being with May. But he did say that many of these candidates lacked another core characteristic for the position that Diebler championed during his interview, that being familiarity with the program.

Bjork noted that Diebler further separated himself from other candidates with his rich knowledge of the expectations and culture surrounding Ohio State basketball, one that could allow him to better and more quickly relate to his players, fan base and university. Relatability was a trait Bjork said several former Ohio State players also valued in a head coach, a key piece of intel that helped him identify Diebler as the right person for the job.

"It's the connectivity that he already has within the program," Bjork said. "The fact that his brother played here, so he knows how to relate to that former player group and he knows how to relate to the fans. He can galvanize that, because he's got the wherewithal. He's not afraid to go out and carry himself in public.

"You could go after a big name, but if it takes them six months to figure the place out – this is a massive place. You have to have the wherewithal to understand, 'OK, football is football here.' We want basketball to be at a big stage. Diebler has seen that here. You bring somebody else in, do they have that wherewithal? Do they understand the dynamics? Do they understand that you have to relate to people here?"

"It's not just, 'I'm going to go coach on Saturday or Tuesday night and then go back home.' No, you have to do all the things that it takes to connect here. Jake has that vs. somebody that may not have seen it or relate to that."

With Diebler meeting each of the criteria Bjork laid out for a potential head coach, Ohio State soon turned its attention to finalizing a deal. As the season neared its end and the Buckeyes awaited their postseason fate following the loss to Illinois on March 15, Bjork said he and the university worked quickly to officially name Diebler the program's head coach, an effort that he thought needed to be a swift process to give the players and program full transparency as they entered a hectic period of postseason play and potential offseason changes.

"(March 16-17) is a key weekend," Bjork said. "You have Selection Sunday. You have the transfer portal. We wanted to make a postseason run, but I knew that you had to have some kind of clarity going into this weekend and going into this week.

"There are a lot of jobs open, so if we homed in on the right person, let's just pull the trigger and let's make it happen. Let's provide clarity for our roster. Let's provide clarity in recruiting, let's provide clarity in the transfer world, that this is our guy, and let's go."

"We could have waited into April, and then we might be standing here with who? With what? Did our team play in the NIT? All of those uncertainties were part of the factor that said if he checks the boxes as far as the profile, this is our guy."

Bjork and Ohio State put those words into action on March 16 when he and Dan Cloran, executive associate athletic director for development and sport administration, paid a visit to Diebler's house to finalize the terms of the deal to make him Ohio State's next head coach.

While Diebler admitted that the meeting was an anxious few hours, Bjork said that the time he spent that night with his soon-to-be new coach, his wife, Jordyn, and their three children, Jackson, Jaymes and Jessa, only further validated his decision to hand Diebler the keys.

It allowed him to see Diebler as not just a men's basketball coach, but an authentic and faith-driven family man, all of which were qualities that – along with his other basketball-related traits – made him the right person at the right time for Ohio State.

"When Dan and I went to the Diebler house – I'll try not to get emotional about this – to make the official offer, I asked Jordyn and Jake, 'Are you ready to be the first family of Ohio State basketball?' Of course, they said yes," Bjork said. "This was what was really neat. The passion, the spiritual faith, the family, the vision, the energy, all of that was present in that moment. That's what it's all about. This is a family, and that's what it means to be a Buckeye.

"In that moment, it really struck me that this is a calling for Jake Diebler – Ohio native, son of a coach. He had to work for everything that he's achieved. Hard work defines Jake Diebler. He played the game at a high level. His brother played here. So really, in the living room, in the kitchen, it just made all of this feel right. I'm so confident in the future of Buckeye basketball. It's time to bring out those ladders. It's time to bring out those scissors."

Time For Work

Diebler's blazing start as the Buckeyes' interim head coach earned him a five-year, \$12.5 million deal, a long-term commitment for Ohio State that Bjork indicated was made due to his new leader's strong vision for the future of Buckeyes' basketball.

"It may be easy to say that we just walked right down the hallway – it's an easy pick and we could just name him our head coach," Bjork said. "But we pressed Jake on what it takes to build championships, what it takes to make changes as the leader of the program. We asked him about modern-day athletics.

"We have a program that is ready to excel. We have a program that's ready to take flight. And with the right kind of adjustments, we know that we could cut down nets and raise those ladders that we expect. Every time we checked the profile, the values of Ohio State, the beacon was Jake. It just kept pointing to the fact that he's the right guy."

But what exactly is Diebler's vision for the future of Ohio State basketball?

For Diebler – who acknowledged af-

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COVER STORY

ter his introductory press conference that things feel different now that he has shed the interim tag – a successful tenure may start with him being able to retain the core of his roster next season. This is an area where Holtmann – who was named on March 14 as the new men's basketball coach at DePaul – often struggled during his seven-year tenure with the Buckeyes, with players such as D.J. Carton (Marquette), Meechie Johnson (South Carolina) and Jaedon Ledee (San Diego State) all transferring from Ohio State and having success at other schools.

With the transfer portal becoming an increasing factor in college basketball due to the advent of NIL and high booster influence, Diebler will have to work to secure at least another year's worth of commitment from his most productive players from this past season. It's a group that includes starting sophomores Roddy Gayle Jr., Felix Okpara and Bruce Thornton along with upstart freshman Devin Royal, all of whom will likely garner transfer interest from other programs this offseason. The Buckeyes have already lost one impact player to the portal in freshman guard Scotty Middleton, who announced on April 1 that he is transferring.

Diebler acknowledged the importance of keeping these Buckeyes on the roster next season, saying that while other responsibilities of being a full-time head coach such as recruiting and player development are integral to a program's success, roster retention might be at the top of his priority list this offseason.

"We're going to continue to view through the lens of what best sets us up to achieve our goals," Diebler said on March 18. "High school recruiting is really, really important in that. So is the transfer portal. And then roster retention is probably of greatest importance."

"(Gayle, Thornton and Okpara) have poured their heart and soul into this program," he added on March 26. "I think they've really embraced the way we've wanted to play, the changes we've made. They've played well in their own way, and they're growing. I'm proud of them for that. Those three are a big part of the leadership, too, of us finishing the way that we have."

Aside from player retention, Diebler's next step as head coach will be finalizing a staff for next season and beyond. When asked about what he values in a coaching staff, Diebler said that he would like to assemble a group of experienced assistants who can add to the tight-knit culture he is creating and be well-versed in the areas he may struggle as a first-time head coach.

Diebler said this type of synergy between head coach and staff can allow him to continue utilizing the strengths he had as an assistant coach in the head coaching chair, with building relationships through recruiting at the top of that list.

"There's a character profile that is kind of a non-negotiable," he said. "We want to bring in guys who are relatable, who care about helping guys grow on and off the court. Great work ethics. And there are some great (assistants) who are already here."

"But a lot of it is being honest with myself about what I do well. I love to recruit. I love to get in the gym with players. I realized I can't do that at the same capacity that I may have before, but I want to build a staff that



SONNY BROCKWAY

NEW PRIORITIES – Moving from assistant coach to head coach will bring about many new responsibilities for newly-appointed coach Jake Diebler, including roster retention and the handling of the program's NIL.

still allows me to do some of those things. I want to be able to get in the gym and work out with guys. Maybe not every single day like I did before, but certainly regularly.

"I want to be significantly involved in recruiting because the relationship that is formed in the recruiting process – we've gotten to see how impactful that can be. It's a big part of why I think I was able to coach these guys. Certainly, they're great guys and care a ton about Ohio State, but that relationship was a big factor."

Diebler found a significant piece to that puzzle on March 25 when he hired former Ohio State assistant and USC Upstate head coach Dave Dickerson as an assistant, a move that came just two days after former assistant Jack Owens left the program to join Holtmann's staff at DePaul. The 56-year-old Dickerson was previously an assistant on Thad Matta's staff from 2010-17 and an associate head coach for his final six seasons at Ohio State.

Diebler also finished the season out with two other full-time assistants in Brandon Bailey and Mike Netti, while director of professional development Terence Dials and special assistant to the head coach Nick Kellogg also served in coaching roles, though it was not clear as Buckeye Sports Bulletin went to press whether the plan is to have them on staff next season.

Regardless of how his coaching staff or roster fills out in the coming months, Diebler vowed to attack his new role with the same energy and passion he displayed during his previous role as interim head coach. For him, serving the program the best he can is the only way he knows to coach, a showing of authenticity that he is confident will never waver throughout his tenure leading the Buckeyes.

"What drives me is to serve this program as best as I possibly can," he said. "That's not going to change. It's not going to change once we are able to win a championship. That's not going to change when we go through adversity. It's not going to be different five years from now, or however much longer I'm able to serve. Time will change things, certainly, but the motivation behind how we're going to take this program to where it belongs will not."

A Taste Of Madness

Before even thinking about filling out a staff and retaining his roster for next season, Diebler's first order of business as head coach was to determine how the rest of this past campaign would unfold.

Just hours after Diebler's hiring was announced, the new head coach was tasked with gauging his team's interest in continuing the season into the NIT, where they were to receive a bid to the 32-team field on March 17.

With the finality of the season up in the air, Diebler said he and his staff let the players decide what direction they wanted to take, giving each person on the roster a chance to share their perspective on the situation with the team inside the locker room. After each player spoke, the answer became abundantly clear. The Buckeyes wanted to continue their season into postseason play under Diebler and compete for a championship in the NIT, a nearly program-wide decision that he said was a testament to the character and commitment of the team.

"Most of the guys said the same thing," Diebler said on 97.1 The Fan on March 18. "They wanted to play as long as everybody wanted to play. It wasn't hard to get to the conclusion that this was ultimately what

they wanted to do. It says a lot about the guys we have that they want to play and they want to compete. You're seeing across the country that a lot of teams aren't doing that. Our guys love to play, and they're a really competitive bunch."

Diebler viewed this opportunity to keep playing as a win-win for his program, as it not only would give Ohio State's younger players such as Gayle, Thornton, Okpara and Royal a first taste of tournament play and a chance to continue developing their respective games but also would afford veteran Buckeyes such as Jamison Battle, Dale Bonner and senior forward Zed Key the chance to cut down the nets in their final season with the Scarlet and Gray.

"We have some guys who want to continue to grow as players and gain more experience," Diebler said before the tournament. "All offseason, we'll work and we'll grow. But you can't simulate game reps. We want to get as many game reps that we can get. That's for the young guys. There are also some guys where this is their last college ball. We want to honor what they've done, how they've served this program and finished out the way that they have."

Diebler's words were validated in the ensuing week of postseason play. Earning the No. 2 overall seed in the NIT, the Buckeyes built upon their success from the regular season with an extended run in the bracket, securing first- and second-round victories over Cornell and No. 3 Virginia Tech in front of an inspired Value City Arena crowd before ultimately ending their season in the quarterfinal round to fourth-seeded Georgia at home on March 26.

While the end result may not have been what Diebler and his program envisioned heading into the tournament, Ohio State still managed to pick up a pair of hard-fought postseason wins and extend its season into the final week of March, a reality most would have scoffed at in the middle of February.

For Diebler, the Buckeyes' three-game run in the NIT only added to the foundation and culture he quickly installed at the end of the season, providing the program with great momentum and optimism heading into the new era of Ohio State basketball.

"The way we played, the urgency and the aggressiveness we played with, the toughness we played with, the togetherness we played with, those are things we want to be about moving forward," he said. "We were able to see those things serve us well in the Big Ten and in the postseason. I think that's really valuable."

"We have to be able to bottle that up. And as we transition – after we get a break – as our guys transition to offseason work, we need to remember what that felt like and be able to keep taking it to another level."

The NIT also provided another opportunity for those closely following the team to see what the future of Ohio State basketball can look like under Diebler's leadership, a tenure that could mark the start of a more successful and exciting time for the program.

"I think you can look at these 'X' amount of games and see what he's done to change this program in such a short amount of time," Battle said after the loss to Georgia. "There's no secret sauce, but I've said it a couple of games ago. 'Whatever a coach has to have, he has it!'"

Buckeyes Impressed By Diebler's Leadership

Ohio State head coach Jake Diebler has earned a significant amount of praise since he was named interim leader on Feb. 14 (and later full-time head coach on March 17) and that support has been especially voiced by those within the Buckeye locker room.

COURT REPORT Patrick Engels

Throughout Diebler's 8-3 run as both interim and full-time head coach, many players – most of whom were directly recruited by Diebler in high school or through the transfer portal – were complimentary of the way their coach was able to guide the team through an end-of-season run full of adversity and change.

Sophomore guard and leading scorer Bruce Thornton told the media after the team's Big Ten tournament quarterfinal loss to Illinois on March 15 that he felt his coach made the most of his opportunity in the interim chair despite facing the steep challenge of assuming head-coaching duties following a midseason coaching change.

"It was very difficult to be put in this situation and be the head coach literally out of the womb," Thornton said. "I know it was always his dream, his desire to be a head coach, but he probably never thought that it would be this soon. But he had the opportunity in front of him, and he took full advantage of it."

Fellow sophomore guard and backcourt mate Roddy Gayle Jr. expressed a similar sentiment following the loss to the Illini. Gayle pointed to Diebler's ability to keep his team levelheaded and prepared in the weeks after Chris Holtmann's firing as something that impressed him the most about his coach, an effort that he thinks helped the Buckeyes stay motivated and confident during the final stretch of the season.

"I think Coach Diebler did an amazing job," Gayle said. "He led us. He didn't know what was going on, either. I feel like he did an amazing job of being able to lead us and give us faith and hope to finish the season out the way we wanted to and put us in the position we are in."

Diebler's display of leadership and preparedness ultimately helped the 37-year-old land the full-time head-coaching role at Ohio State, a scenario that many thought was unlikely when he first took over in mid-February. But Diebler's new title – which came with a five-year, \$12.5 million contract – did not stop those within the locker room from delivering praise.

One of those players who were most complimentary of Diebler in the days following his hiring was fifth-year guard Jamison Battle. He said Diebler stayed true to his core values while in the head-coaching chair, a showing of authenticity that he added has impressed him since Ohio State contacted him out of the transfer portal.

"You look at what he's done, obviously,

2023-24 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

22-14 Overall (9-11 Big Ten) Final season statistics

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Rebounds		PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
									O-D	T-Avg.						
THORNTON, Bruce	35-35	1177-33.6	181-424	.427	58-174	.333	130-153	.850	15-114	129-3.7	59-1	168	42	1	41	550-15.7
BATTLE, Jamison	35-35	1099-31.4	179-382	.469	91-210	.433	88-95	.926	42-140	182-5.2	71-1	49	55	8	14	537-15.3
GAYLE JR., Roddy	36-35	1114-30.9	169-376	.449	29-102	.284	119-143	.832	36-129	165-4.6	76-0	110	87	6	27	486-13.5
KEY, Zed	36-2	554-15.4	82-161	.509	3-12	.250	71-100	.710	66-81	147-4.1	72-0	18	29	23	15	238-6.6
OKPARA, Felix	35-34	824-23.5	99-169	.586	0-6	.000	33-56	.589	79-145	224-6.4	100-5	18	34	83	14	231-6.6
BONNER, Dale	36-2	694-19.3	60-183	.328	27-93	.290	30-46	.652	7-75	82-2.3	37-0	43	26	3	29	177-4.9
ROYAL, Devin	33-0	371-11.2	59-116	.509	3-20	.150	34-48	.708	33-45	78-2.4	62-1	12	28	10	10	155-4.7
MIDDLETON, Scotty	30-1	459-15.3	47-118	.398	28-62	.452	10-20	.500	11-32	43-1.4	27-0	20	18	7	11	132-4.4
MAHAFFEY, Evan	36-35	795-22.1	63-146	.432	2-17	.118	26-42	.619	46-105	151-4.2	87-3	60	33	25	37	154-4.3
HARDMAN, Bowen	18-0	76-4.2	11-25	.440	9-21	.429	2-4	.500	0-8	8-0.4	1-0	0	0	0	1	33-1.8
BAUMANN, Colby	4-0	07-1.6	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	5-6	.833	0-0	0-0.0	0-0	0	0	0	0	5-1.3
CHATMAN, Taison	17-0	71-4.2	6-18	.333	4-15	.267	1-2	.500	2-6	8-0.5	9-0	6	9	0	0	17-1.0
PARKS, Austin	9-0	20-2.2	1-1	1.000	0-0	.000	1-2	.500	0-5	5-0.6	3-0	1	1	0	1	3-0.3
ETZLER, Kalen	7-0	14-2.0	0-5	.000	0-4	.000	0-0	.000	1-4	5-0.7	4-0	2	2	0	1	0-0.0
SPENCER, Owen	2-1	06-2.8	0-2	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	0-0	0-0.0	3-0	0	0	0	0	0-0.0
Team									56-52	108			17			
Total	36	7280	957-2126	.450	254-736	.345	550-717	.767	394-941	1335-37.1	611-11	507	381	166	201	2718-75.5
Opponents	36	7275	913-2133	.428	249-717	.347	453-638	.710	376-859	1235-34.3	655-14	429	388	98	183	2528-70.2

he's a leader of men," Battle said on March 19 following Ohio State's first-round NIT win over Cornell. "I think that's what it takes to be a coach in this day and age. He's all about relationships. I know I can speak on it, the relationship I had with him before coming here, and him recruiting me and him getting me here. That was part of the reason I came here.

"He's really never changed over this time. He's always around us. He's always with us. He's coming to the trainer room, seeing what's up, saying what's up to the guys. He's on the court working out with guys. So it's just stuff like that, when you see that, you know he's got it."

Battle also expressed after the season-ending loss to Georgia in the NIT that he is confident the team can continue to build upon the positive momentum they created under Diebler's watch this season and he is excited to see what the Buckeyes can accomplish in the future.

"I know he's not satisfied," Battle said. "He doesn't want to live on these eight games that we've played. He wants to build something himself and start something new, and I think that's what he's going to do. That's the type of brand he is as a person, the type of character he has. So it's exciting to see just because of how much hard work he's put in with us."

Freshman Guard Middleton Enters Transfer Portal

Ohio State freshman guard Scotty Middleton announced April 1 that he is entering the transfer portal after just one season with the Buckeyes.

"It has been an honor to suit up for Ohio State for this past season," Middleton wrote on Twitter. "I will cherish the memories and relationships I've built forever. I have decided to enter the NCAA transfer portal and go through the NBA draft process while maintaining my college eligibility."

Middleton – who has three seasons of eligibility remaining – joined Ohio State as a four-star prospect out of Sunrise Christian in Wichita, Kan. He appeared in 30 games this season for the Buckeyes (with one start) and averaged 4.4 points and 1.4 rebounds on 39.8 percent shooting in 15.3 minutes

per contest.

He scored what turned out to be a season-high 13 points in the first game of the season against Oakland, doing so on 4-of-7 shooting and adding a season-high eight rebounds. His freshman campaign and Ohio State career were cut short by three games when he missed the Buckeyes' entire NIT run to tend to a family matter.

With both Middleton and Battle moving on from the program, Ohio State is likely to search the transfer portal for a reliable option on the wing, though freshman Devin Royal and sophomore Evan Mahaffey could fill that role and are expected back in Columbus next season.

Leading NIL Collective Backs Diebler Hire

Ohio State and Diebler also received an important backing from the program's largest NIL collective in the days following the hiring.

The Foundation – the top NIL collective for both Ohio State football and men's basketball that includes five former Buckeye ballers on its board – released a public statement on March 19 saying that it is both excited to work with Diebler and ready to provide the necessary funds needed for both recruiting and the transfer portal to help the program succeed during his tenure.

"We believe in Diebler and have supported him since the beginning," the statement read. "Our group has had several conversations and meetings with (incoming athletic director Ross Bjork) about our relationship with Jake and how he has been great to work with The Foundation.

"We have ample funds raised and pledged from donors who are close with Jake. We are ready to make a big splash in basketball, just like we did for football in January. We're locked and loaded and ready to go. We are going to work with him to bring the first Ohio State championship back to The Ohio State University since 1960. It can happen next season."

The Foundation's strong public backing of Diebler and the men's basketball program could prove essential for the Buckeyes moving forward this season and beyond as they look to both retain their core players

from this past season and bring in high-profile recruits and transfers.

The importance of player retention is something Diebler has consistently stressed since he was officially named Ohio State's head coach, saying that it may even take precedence over other aspects such as recruiting and the transfer portal. This emphasis – coupled with The Foundation's financial support – will be critical in bringing back the Buckeyes' most impactful young players, a group that includes sophomores Gayle, Thornton and Felix Okpara along with Royal, all of whom could garner transfer interest from other teams and their respective collectives. Ohio State has already lost Middleton to the transfer portal.

But The Foundation could also help fortify Diebler's roster by bringing in a group of high-profile impact transfers similar to that of the football team's portal additions this winter, which included projected safety Caleb Downs, quarterback Will Howard and running back Quinshon Judkins, among others.

While Ohio State has yet to show any official interest in specific transfers, the team's top collective has already publicly suggested that they are interested in assisting with the potential reunion between Ohio State and former South Carolina guard Meechie Johnson.

When Johnson – who spent his first two collegiate seasons at Ohio State before playing his next two with the Gamecocks, where he was the team's leading scorer this season at 14.1 points per game – announced his entry to the portal on March 25, The Foundation's official Twitter account made its interest in bringing him back to Columbus known, responding to the announcement of the news with eyeball and Buckeye emojis.

Basketball Great James Congratulates Diebler

Ohio State's hiring of Diebler also garnered the support of one of the more recognizable names and biggest superstars in the world of sports.

Shortly after Diebler was officially hired as Ohio State's head coach on March 17, four-time NBA champion and all-time NBA scoring leader LeBron

OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

James congratulated the coach on his new gig on his Instagram, sharing a post made by Ohio State's men's basketball account that featured Diebler and writing "CONGRATS DIEBS!!!!" to his more than 159 million followers.

James is no stranger to Ohio State and the men's basketball program. James and his son, Bronny, paid a visit to Columbus in September 2023 to meet with Holtmann and the Buckeyes, who emerged as one of three finalists to sign the high-profile recruit along with USC and Oregon before the younger James eventually signed with the Trojans.

The James family – this time without LeBron – returned to Ohio State this past October as Los Angeles Sierra Canyon three-star shooting guard Bryce James (6-4, 180) – LeBron's youngest son – paid an unofficial visit to Holtmann and the Buckeyes. Bryce was offered a scholarship by Ohio State while he was on campus on Oct. 8, and Diebler was reportedly heavily involved in both Bryce and Bronny James' recruitments.

James, who said on many occasions that he would have committed to Ohio State if he had been required to play a year of college basketball instead of declaring for the NBA out of Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary in 2003, has also gifted merchandise and athletic gear to the program in years past.

Hardman Enters Transfer Portal

Ohio State sophomore guard Bowen Hardman entered his name in the transfer portal on March 28 after two seasons with the Buckeyes.

Hardman, a former three-star prospect out of Cincinnati Princeton, saw limited action in his short Ohio State career, logging just 3.8 minutes and 1.8 points per game in 25 appearances. He did make a slight impact from beyond the arc in his two seasons in Columbus, however, netting 13 of his 28 three-point attempts, good for 46.4 percent.

While Hardman's defense mostly prevented him from garnering significant playing time from either Holtmann or Diebler, his success as a spot-up three-point shooter did earn him a slight uptick in minutes this season.

Coming off a freshman season when he saw playing time only at the end of games that had already been decided, Hardman earned his first impactful minutes as a sophomore with Holtmann at the helm, logging seven or more minutes in three conference games against Nebraska on Jan. 23, Northwestern on Jan. 27 and Wisconsin on Feb. 13. Hardman's impact was most felt in Ohio State's 83-69 road loss to the Huskers, where he scored a career-high 11 points on 4-of-8 shooting, including 3-of-7 shooting from deep.

Hardman's playing time was diminished when Diebler took over as interim head coach on Feb. 14, with the sophomore failing to earn more than six minutes of action in his final six appearances.

With Hardman leaving the program, Ohio State – barring any further transfers – will have four scholarship players returning to its backcourt for next season, a group that includes starters Gayle and Thornton along with current true freshman Taison Chatman, and will also add Juni Mobley to the group.

Bittersweet End For Fifth-Year Battle

Ohio State's loss to Georgia in the NIT quarterfinals on March 26 marked the end of the fifth-year Battle's collegiate career, but the disappointing finality of it all did not stop him from reflecting on the joy he experienced while playing the sport he loves.

As the veteran's attempted game-winning three bounced off the rim as the game clock expired – sending the Buckeyes home with a 79-77 loss to the lower-seeded Bulldogs – Battle couldn't help but crack a smile, a reaction that he said expressed the feeling of contentedness he had with his long and eventful college career.

"How can I be mad at that moment?" Battle said. "I've played 100-plus games in college basketball. I've played for five years. I got to play at home. I got to play at Ohio State. I played in the best conference in the (nation). How could I be mad at that? How can I be mad at that one single moment?"

"Yes, there's always going to be an end to something. But I think back on what I did in my college career and the growth that I had, just the times that I had with so many different people. There are so many different people I met. It's just a culmination of those things. You can never take that stuff for granted. And there's no reason for me to sit back and be like, 'Oh, man, it's over.' It's over, but I know there is something in the future for me."

It's been an eventful college basketball career for the veteran Battle – who recorded his 2,000th career point in the first half of the Buckeyes' loss to the Bulldogs – one that includes 138 games played and over 4,800 minutes logged for three different Division I programs.

Despite entering college in 2019 as a zero-star forward out of Minneapolis De La Salle, Battle made his mark at his first stop at mid-major George Washington. There, he quickly became one of the top players in the Atlantic 10, averaging 11.8 points and 5.2 rebounds as a freshman before increasing those averages to 17.3 points and 5.2 rebounds as a sophomore.

Battle's strong start to his career earned him transfer interest from Power Five schools, allowing him to return to his home state and play for head coach Ben Johnson and Minnesota for two seasons. He became one of the leading forces on the Gophers from 2021-23, starting each of his 56 games with the program and averaging 15.1 points and 4.8 rebounds per contest along with 33.9 percent shooting from deep.

But while Battle took pride in playing in his home state for those two seasons, it was his one year in Columbus that he will look back on most fondly. He said after the Georgia game that he enjoyed this season more than any of the previous four due to the chemistry and togetherness that existed on the team.

"We didn't make the (NCAA) Tournament, but in the end, this group is the most fun I've had," Battle said. "This is the most connected I've been with a team. I didn't take it for granted. I lived out every moment. I can't help but be sad that it's over, but be glad that it happened."

For Battle, it is these types of moments that made him proud to represent the Scarlet and Gray for his final collegiate season, a unique experience that he will take with him as he enters the next phase of his basketball career.

"I'm just so thankful that I had the opportunity to come to Columbus, to come to Ohio State and such an immense university," he said. "I felt the support of fans for these last however many games. In the end, I was just so blessed and so fortunate to have a five-year career in college, to score 2,000 points, to win some games and go to the NIT!"

Mobley, White Still Committed To Diebler-Led Program

Following Holtmann's firing on Feb. 14, Ohio State's two signees for the class of 2024 – Mobley (6-0, 150) and Ottawa (Ohio) Glandorf three-star small forward Colin White (6-6, 180) – both indicated that they were committed to the program but keeping a close eye on the program's direction.

That commitment was ensured following news of Diebler's hiring, with Mobley and White both confirming their allegiance to the now-Diebler-led Buckeyes on March 17.

According to The Columbus Dispatch, Mobley – the nation's 50th-best prospect and fifth-best combo guard who committed to Ohio State in October 2022 – and his family met with Diebler in Columbus after the hiring was made, where the high school senior guard doubled down on his desire to play for the Buckeyes.

Mobley's commitment ensures that an elite offensive talent will be joining Ohio State next season. He averaged 19.9 points and 5.0 assists per game for Wasatch Academy during Nike EYBL Scholastic League play.

White, the nation's 184th-best prospect and seventh-best prospect in Ohio, also expressed his allegiance to Ohio State, saying that he is looking forward to learning under the tutelage of Diebler, who was his primary recruiter in the months before White's commitment last August.

"Colin is committed to the Buckeyes and is extremely excited to play for Coach Diebler," Terry White, Colin's father, told the Dispatch. "We are extremely excited for Coach Diebler and his family. The Ohio State University and Buckeye Nation will be proud of the men's basketball program, and we are extremely excited and blessed to be a part of it."

White will enter the program following a sensational senior season and career at Ottawa-Glandorf. He led the Titans to a fourth straight Division III regional championship by averaging 24.9 points, 8.2 rebounds, 3.1 assists and 2.6 points heading into the team's Division III state semifinal matchup against Canal Winchester, an impressive stat line that helped him to be named Ohio Mr. Basketball on March 20.

White – who eclipsed 2,000 career points during Ottawa-Glandorf's 61-59 loss to Canal Winchester on March 22 – is now the 12th Ohio State signee to earn the distinction and the third in four years, joining Royal in 2022 and Malaki Branham in 2021.

"Colin's tough, he's smart, he's versatile," Diebler said on March 22. "I think Colin has a bright future here in this program. What I love about him most is he loves this place. His high school career is impressive. To go to four straight semifinals, that's pretty rare."

With both Mobley and White now set to play for Ohio State, Diebler said his program is adding two high-character and talented individuals who both bleed scarlet and gray, a reality that he said gets him

excited for the potential of this Buckeyes' squad next season.

"Both of our freshmen coming in – (White) and Juni Mobley – they love Ohio State," Diebler said. "And they care a great deal about this place and this program. Aside from their abilities – they're both talented, certainly – that excites me the most."

Holtmann Hired As DePaul's Head Coach

It took exactly one month for Holtmann to find a new home. The former Ohio State leader was named on March 14 as the next head men's basketball coach at DePaul, a reported six-year deal that will allow him to rejoin the Big East coaching ranks and begin turning around a Blue Demons program that is coming off the worst season in program history.

"I am very excited about this opportunity to be the head men's basketball coach at DePaul," Holtmann said in a statement. "During this process, I was extremely impressed with the commitment, eagerness and vision of (DePaul athletic director) DeWayne Peevy and President (Robert) Manuel to build a successful Big East basketball program. My wife, Lori, and our daughter, Nora, look forward to getting to Chicago and spending time in the DePaul community. We can't wait to get to work!"

Holtmann, who was fired by Ohio State and athletic director Gene Smith on Feb. 14 following a stretch of nine losses in 11 games, joins a DePaul program that finished the season with a 3-29 record and 0-20 conference record, both of which were the worst marks in program history. The Blue Demons fired head coach Tony Stubblefield on Jan. 22 after three losing seasons and are seeking their first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2003-04.

"There will be difficult days," Holtmann said at his introductory press conference on March 18. "And as (Peevy) said to me yesterday when I arrived, (I'm) ready to help build this brick by brick. There will be difficult days when you're competing at the highest level. I see these challenges – we see these challenges, our family, our staff – as (a) great opportunity. ... A great opportunity to hear our names called on Selection Sunday for the first time in a couple of decades. We will get there."

Holtmann will look to put DePaul back on the map in the Big East, a league where he has had previous success leading Butler. The former Buckeye coach racked up a 70-31 record and three straight NCAA Tournament appearances while leading the Bulldogs from 2014-17, a run that also included him winning Big East Coach of the Year in 2016-17.

The hiring makes DePaul the fourth Division I program Holtmann has led in his 14-year head coaching career, joining Gardner-Webb of the Big South Conference (2010-13), Butler and Ohio State (2017-24).

In his seven seasons leading the Buckeyes, Holtmann amassed a 137-86 record and took the program to the NCAA Tournament in four of his first five seasons, with the lone missed appearance occurring in 2020 when the NCAA canceled the Big Dance due to COVID-19. But his tenure was ultimately defined by a poor stretch of play from 2022-24, where he held a 30-30 overall record and a 9-25 mark in Big Ten play before his dismissal.

Media Reacts To Ohio State Hiring Diebler

By **GREG WILSON**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

After Chris Holtmann was fired on Feb. 14, interim head coach Jake Diebler was able to take a team that had lost seven of its last nine games and earn a berth in the NIT, as well as shed the interim tag to become Ohio State's full-time coach on March 17.

Before the hiring, several different names were rumored to be the possible next head coach for the Buckeyes – including former Florida Atlantic coach Dusty May, who has since been hired by Michigan – but incoming athletic director Ross Bjork elected for the in-house promotion, giving Diebler a five-year deal to coach the Buckeyes.

With a new leader in place for the men's basketball program, here are some reactions from the media about Ohio State hiring Diebler:

"Diebler's 6-2 record as interim (as of March 19) is such a small sample size that it's fair to wonder what happens after another 10, 50 and 100 games. It's one thing to connect with players in the locker room, another to communicate in the huddle when the Buckeyes trail by 10 with five minutes to play. Or lead by three with five seconds left. And how well can Diebler deliver the tough-love message that mediocre won't cut it at Ohio State?"

"Time will tell, but there is something to be said for hiring a 37-year-old straight shooter who feels called not only to coach, but to coach at Ohio State. Diebler will give everything he has, and is, to make this program successful. To make these players successful.

"Among the greatest lines in any sports movie comes from 'Hoosiers,' when Hickory High coach Norman Dale tells his players, 'I love you guys.' ... People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Diebler cares deeply.

"Ohio State's new coach wants to give back and pay forward. He also wants to win. It's easy to believe he will. After all, in many ways he already has."

— **Rob Oller,**
The Columbus Dispatch

"College sports are a much different place than they were 10 years ago, and college basketball provides the most extreme example of that. Every offseason the transfer portal is flooded with players, and head coaching jobs open up at the same rate.

"Bjork couldn't act slowly on this decision. If he thought he had a high-quality roster on his hands, then he'd be at the risk of losing it if he moved too slowly or made the wrong hire.

"All that work Diebler had done on the recruiting trail over the past five years would have been for nothing, as the next coach would essentially be starting from scratch. ... Bjork saw a chance to avoid that while still checking off all the other boxes he was looking for.

"Diebler recruited practically the entire roster he's inheriting, including the two members of a 2024 class in Juni Mobley and Colin White. He's an Ohio native from a well-known basketball family in the state with a legendary high school basketball coach for a

father and a former OSU standout, Jon, for a little brother."

— **Stephen Means,**
Cleveland.com

"I do not like the idea of hurriedly promoting the 37-year-old assistant of the guy you just paid \$12 million to hit the road. I adore it. ... OK, maybe that's too strong, and I'm just a sucker for a great story. I'll concede it is possible. Diebler is a great story.

"The coach's son from northwest Ohio did not just run with his opportunity in the big chair this season. He left it in the dust, redirecting a team so aimless it would have followed its GPS straight into the Olentangy River all the way to the doorstep of the NCAA Tournament.

"While any hire based on a small sample size is a big gamble, Diebler feels like the right guy at the right time for Ohio State. ... He earned his shot, and incoming athletic director Ross Bjork recognized a risk worth taking.

"It would have been natural for the new boss from Texas A&M to covet a splash with his first big hire and bring in a bigger name, be it Xavier's Sean Miller (no thanks) or Florida Atlantic's Dusty May (sure, if he would have taken the job).

"But Bjork kept an open mind and showed an admirable measure of humility. The more he watched Diebler, the more he realized it may be time to rip up his original list.

"Evoking the run-and-gun stylings of his dad, Keith – whose teams aspire to take 80 shots per game – the Buckeyes have played faster, harder, and executed with confidence at the end of games. ... This was more than a spark. It was a very good coach pressing all the right buttons and his team responding.

"Call me crazy, but the bet here is Diebler keeps Ohio State's core of talent together, keeps the recruiting momentum going, and elevates the program into a Big Ten contender.

"I like the gamble, and I suspect the Buckeyes will like the reward."

— **David Briggs,**
The Toledo Blade

"As for Diebler, I had a boss one time – let's call him Mr. Bucknuts – who always liked to say, 'My philosophy is to believe in the man, not the plan.'

"That is definitely the case here with Diebler. He is the genuine article based on what we saw from him when he was placed on the firing line these last four weeks. He produced at a level well beyond his years or experience should have allowed him.

"Granted, it helped that everybody – from the assistants, to the players, to the support staff, to the strength coach, to the equipment staff and his two, yes, two athletic directors – were on board and gave him every bit of support he needed to flourish in this role.

"Let's look at the coaches he beat: Purdue's Matt Painter, Michigan State's Tom Izzo, Nebraska's Fred Hoiberg, Michigan's Juwan Howard, Rutgers' Steve Pikiell and Iowa's Fran McCaffery. That's six coaches with a combined 112 years on the bench and a combined 2,296 wins. There are probably three or four legitimate Hall of Famers on that list!

"There is precedent for this move. When Gary Williams left OSU for Maryland in the spring of 1989, AD Jim Jones elevated Randy Ayers – a man with no previous head coaching experience – to the top job. Ayers led OSU to the NCAA each of his first three years and a pair of Big Ten titles with Jim Jackson starring on those teams. Yes, things went off the rails after that. But whoever got this job, the big thing will be to sustain success.

"On the football side, Ryan Day's only head coaching experience came in the three games Urban Meyer missed early in the 2018 season. When Meyer retired at the end of that season, (Gene) Smith and Meyer knew they had a winner on their hands with Day. He has won two Big Ten titles and been to three College Football Playoffs in his first five years. The program is positioned to threaten for national championships for years to come, so, yeah, I'd say that move worked out pretty well."

— **Steve Helwagen,**
247Sports

"Since Diebler took over, the Buckeyes have looked like a different team, playing faster, utilizing a deeper bench, and operating at a higher level at the end of games than they have in a couple of years. They have looked calm at the end of games. They have reflected their head coach.

"By all appearances, Jake Diebler has gotten the most out of this team down the

stretch, and if not for some questionable calls in the Big Ten Tournament against Illinois on (March 15), he would have gotten even more out of them. That clearly meant something to incoming OSU athletic director Ross Bjork.

"He is the kind of guy you'd hope the next head coach would be able to keep. So if you want him around, why not keep him around? This was Ohio State cutting out the middle man. Jumping to the back of the book. Skipping ahead to the good part.

"If Ohio State had gone with a mid-level coach, they were much more likely to land another Holtmann than another Matta. So if insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, is hiring Jake Diebler the sanest thing that Ohio State could have done?"

"They were choosing between unproven mid-level coaches who have had one or two good years who they don't know, or somebody who is unproven but they do know and they like what they've seen. Neither is a great scenario, and both come with not quite enough information. This may pan out. It may not. That's the nature of the business.

"Ohio State was not going to land a proven head coach from a top-level program, so if this isn't a home run, you just go and hire the same type of mid-level coach you were going to hire anyway, because those guys are around all the time. Jake Diebler may not be."

— **Tony Gerdeman,**
Buckeye Huddle



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Diebler Trial Run Makes Believer Of New AD

When Ohio State basketball coach Chris Holtmann was fired on Feb. 14, the assumption was that incoming athletic director Ross Bjork would want to make a big splash with his first major decision as Buckeye AD, bringing in a name coach to try to turn Ohio State's basketball fortunes around.

Plenty of names were being mentioned, but a funny thing happened on the way to Bjork's decision. Interim coach Jake Diebler led the struggling Buckeyes to a stunning upset of No. 2 Purdue in his first game at the helm. Other victories followed, including a comeback win over Michigan State and legendary coach Tom Izzo that snapped a 17-game road losing streak dating back more than a year.

Fans and media types began to wonder if Diebler was throwing a monkey wrench into the search, forcing himself into the hiring discussion.

As it turned out, Bjork did make a big splash with his hire, but it was kind of a reverse splash when he surprised many by promoting Diebler on March 17 and by doing it so quickly.

"We laid out a very specific profile about what we envisioned for Ohio State basketball," Bjork said during Diebler's introductory press conference. "Passion; energy; create a program; identity; a track record of player development; a recruiting machine, especially here in the Midwest and in the state of Ohio; strong leadership skills that can galvanize Buckeye Nation; someone who understands and also can capitalize in modern-day college athletics; born-to-coach. Jake Diebler fits each one of those characteristics, and then some.

"As we looked at all the characteristics, we just thought, 'Look, if we know where we're going, let's pull the trigger.' He's the real deal. He knows how to live at the highest level of college basketball. He's seen it in action. So, to me, that made up for the lack of long-term head-coaching experience, because he just fits where we are in this program right now."

It was a bold move, and the stakes became even higher when archrival Michigan hired Dusty May, one of the top choices among Buckeye fans and the media for the OSU job, just a few days later.

Who made the right decision, Bjork or Michigan AD Warde Manuel, will not be known for a few years, but you can bet that fans and observers of both programs will be watching.

I was a bit surprised when reading our "media reaction" piece about the hiring of Diebler (see page 25), that the usually cynical press types seemed very positive about Diebler's hiring.

I would have preferred going the safer route. We had just a month to see what Diebler could do before he was promoted. Running a major college basketball program is a 12-month-a-year job, not just one month. We've gotten a decent sample of what he can do on the sidelines. How is he going to do at all of the other phases? None of us know. And as far as his coaching on the court, was his 11-game sample proof of his coaching acumen or just a case of catching a team on an adrenaline rush, being lifted out from under the pall that had to be hanging over the team with all the public speculation surrounding Holtmann. The players are not deaf and blind.

At the least I would not have jumped to make the decision that quickly. Almost any coach who was worth pursuing would have been involved in the postseason, thus otherwise engaged. Why not take your time and see which proven coach was out there and judge their interest? Diebler wasn't going anywhere. They still could have circled back to their interim coach.

A reason Bjork might have acted quickly may have been retention. Ohio State has a solid nucleus of young talent that, should they return, would be a nucleus of veteran talent. If some of

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

the key players defect (Scotty Middleton is already in the portal), then Ohio State might have been better off going with a more experienced coach to rebuild.

"Roster retention is probably of greatest importance," Diebler admitted after his hiring.

Which brings up an interesting point. With the massive changes in college athletics over the past few years concerning NIL and the transfer portal, does a "proven" coach really have that much more experience than Diebler?

Dejà Vu All Over Again

As nearly every Buckeye fan has been reminded by now, the last time Ohio State promoted an assistant coach to head basketball coach was back in 1989, when Randy Ayers was elevated following Gary Williams' departure to Maryland after three seasons. Like Diebler, Ayers had no previous head-coaching experience but still beat out the likes of Nolan Richardson of Arkansas, among others. How serious any of those other candidacies were is unknown, but Richardson, coming off a 25-7 season with the Razorbacks, was thought to be Ayers' stiffest competition.

"We believe we conducted a thorough national search," OSU athletic director Jim Jones said upon the hiring of the 33-year-old Ayers, the first Black head basketball coach at Ohio State and only the fourth in Big Ten history. "We talked to a number of persons for information or recommendations, as well as several potential candidates."

Jones acknowledged that Ayers' lack of head-coaching experience was a consideration in the search.

"As far as I know, there is no one perfect coach in America," Jones said. "I believe Randy fulfills the ideals we were going after. So, we were willing to overlook the fact that he had not been a head coach.

"His hard work, integrity, true concern for our players, commitment to the university and the community, interest in our academic pursuits, ability to teach, enthusiasm and will to win were all important factors for me."

Sounds a little bit like Bjork and the characteristics he mentioned for Diebler above.

I think there is a common recollection that Ayers was not a successful coach at Ohio State. By the end of his tenure, that might have been the case. His Buckeyes were 17-13, 10-8 in conference and finished sixth in the Big Ten his first season of 1989-90 (Williams had been 19-15, 6-12 and eighth in the Big Ten the year before). But in the following two seasons, Ayers' Buckeyes, led by Jim Jackson who was primarily recruited by the young coach, won the Big Ten championship and went to the NCAA Sweet 16 and Elite Eight, respectively. Those were some of the best teams in Ohio State history.

Sadly, by the time Jones fired Ayers in 1997, the Buckeyes had strung together four straight losing seasons and finished no higher than seventh in the conference in those same years.

I have always maintained that Ayers attained success so quickly, and at such a young age, that he ended up losing sight of the details that make a coach and a program great.

Here's hoping that Diebler, a more mature 37, has Ayers' early success and maintains it for years to come.

The Caitlin Effect

Some people love hamburgers. Not that I mind hamburgers, but I *really* love hot dogs. However, I am very picky about my franks. Low-

end dogs upset my stomach. Nathan's Famous hot dogs really fit the bill for me, and I try to get to Nathan's Mondays at the Press Pub on Fifth Avenue, near the former BSB world headquarters and only a few blocks from the new HQ, to enjoy the Nathan's dogs, priced two-for-one, as many Mondays as I can.

On Monday, March 25, I went to enjoy Nathan's at Press Pub. I got there a little late, but there were still a few patrons there, and all seemed to be watching Caitlin Clark and Iowa vs. West Virginia in the NCAA women's basketball tourney. The Mountaineers were putting up more of a fight than perhaps was expected. As the game wore on the remaining crowd started to thin out, and finally it was down to me and one other guy way down the bar, who was clearly wrapped up in the game, giving running commentary to no one in particular.

They announced last call for food. Then they announced last call for drinks. The Mountaineers continued to battle, trailing by just three with 1:07 to go in the game, and the other guy and I didn't budge. The staff finished their clean-up, and we were *still* there, leaving the workers to stand around and wait. Finally, in the waning seconds of the game, the Hawkeyes and Clark had taken sufficient control at the foul line that I was confident there wasn't going to be any miracle comeback on this night – and I was a little uncomfortable holding up the crew – so I was ready to head for home.

I walked down to the other patron, who was going to wait it out to the bitter end, and asked him, "Did you ever think you would see the day where two slobbs like you and me would keep a pub from closing just to watch the end of a women's basketball game?"

I'm not so sure he was wild about me referring to him as a slob (which he wasn't), but he nodded in agreement.

If this had been a women's basketball game other than maybe one with Ohio State involved, I would have been gone once my Nathan's were finished and the first rag came out to wipe down the bar for closing. I suspect my fellow slob, who was long finished with his dinner and drinks, would have been gone as well.

Our hanging around was part of what I call the Caitlin Clark effect. Love her or hate her, it's a whole new world for women's basketball thanks to her.

I maintain evidence of the "effect" could also be seen at Value City Arena this season.

Ohio State was averaging 5,668 fans in its first 10 home games this season. Then Clark and the Hawkeyes helped draw a program-record 18,660 to The Schott on Jan. 21. That was a big part Caitlin, but another part the strong play of the Buckeyes leading up to the game, an overtime win for the Buckeyes.

The real Caitlin "effect" came later.

The Buckeyes averaged 9,120 in the five regular-season home games after that huge crowd, an increase of 3,452 per contest over games before Clark and Iowa came to town. You could say the increase was because of how well Ohio State was playing, but a *61 percent increase in attendance?* Many of the non-hardcore women's fans wouldn't have even known the Buckeyes were playing that well if Clark hadn't drawn so much attention to the team.

That's an effect, and women's basketball will probably never be the same.

A Frank Flashback

As I have mentioned many times through

the years, my first sportswriting job was in the sports information office at Bowling Green State University back in 1977 and '78. One of the more visible BG athletes at the time was Greg Kampe, now the coach of the No. 14-seed Oakland University team that recently upset No. 3 Kentucky in the NCAA tourney, screwing up millions of brackets. One of the reasons Kampe was so visible at BG back in the day was because he played on both the football and basketball teams.

I recall him as being a diminutive (he was listed at 5-9, 170 in an old program I found) over-achiever with a mop of curly hair. I saw a picture of him recently, and he still has a (thinner) mop of curly hair.

It was 46 years ago that I was at Bowling Green. I'm pretty sure I would have written a story on Kampe for the football or basketball program at the time.

Kampe has been at Oakland since 1984, making him the longest-tenured active coach in NCAA Division I. Surely in his time he has had other offers from other schools. His teams have won three Summit League Tournaments (2005, 2010, 2011) and a Horizon League tournament (2024). Kampe was named Summit League Coach of the Year four times (2000, 2007, 2010, 2011) and GLIAC Coach of the Year in 1988. You have to love a guy who is that loyal!

I'm proud that in terms of longevity, I have him beat by three years, having been at BSB since 1981.

If I bumped into Kampe, what would I ask him?

I'd ask him what he remembers from the Great Blizzard of 1978, one of the most pure experiences of my lifetime, as I am sure it is for anyone who lived in northwest Ohio at the time.

By the way, who is a distant second as longest-tenured coach after Kampe? Michigan State's Izzo at 29 seasons.

Business Notes

For those of you who continue to complain about the price of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, I wanted to recount a little story.

I ran into McDonald's on a recent morning and ordered an Egg McMuffin. The lady who took my order, a manager-looking type, rings it in and says, "Oh, they raised that price *again*? This is getting *really* expensive." She said it, not me.

There is a group of BSB readers out there who continue to think Buckeye Sports Bulletin is immune to the business realities of our world which even a behemoth like McDonald's is struggling to deal with. We offer many specials throughout the year to help those readers and are so appreciative of the subscribers who pay full price, even when they receive a money-saving offer, and also those who participate in our VIP program. It makes fighting the good fight easier with that kind of support, and I'm talking emotional support, in addition to financial.

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