

Rotational Inconsistencies Piling Up During Ohio State's Losing Stretch



Whether head coach Chris Holtmann is trying to find answers to get Ohio State out of its rut, with the team dropping 10 of its last 11 games, or if it has been the nature of how the Buckeyes' deep roster has shaken out, OSU has seen a level of inconsistency regarding its rotation during the recent stretch.

Those inconsistencies came to a head during the Buckeyes' 69-63 loss at the hands of Northwestern on Thursday, as the role of freshman forward Brice Sensabaugh came into question. After being relegated back to the bench, following a stretch in which he started 13 of 14 games, against Michigan on Sunday, Sensabaugh was once again brought off the bench against the Wildcats.

However, in contrast to the 26 minutes he played against the Wolverines, Sensabaugh played just 16 minutes in the loss to the Wildcats and didn't make his first appearance in the game until more than 7:30 had passed in the first half. Holtmann defended Sensabaugh's relatively light night, in terms of minutes, noting that it was part of the rotational plan set forth by the Buckeyes against Northwestern.

"Brice is a freshman, he's being guarded by (the opponent's) best player," Holtmann said following the loss on Thursday. "This not an easy thing for a kid."

"Freshmen have moments, we'll help them the best we can. The young man is fighting hard, give him credit," he continued. "We'll find ways to put him in better positions."

While the situation regarding Sensabaugh's minutes has come into the spotlight after the loss to Northwestern, it's just a piece of some other notable question marks surrounding the handling of the rotation.

The most glaring inconsistency lies in Ohio State's starting lineup. The Buckeyes trotted out the same starting lineup for the first eight games — which consisted of Bruce Thornton, Sean McNeil, Isaac Likekele, Justice Sueing and Zed Key — before Likekele was sidelined due to personal reasons during

the month of December. From that point, Holtmann elected to replace Likekele with Sensabaugh and rolled with that starting five for the next six games.

However, Holtmann adjusted at least one piece of the starting lineup in the next eight games, with some changes coming out of necessity due to injury while other moves appeared to be part of an attempt to find a spark with a certain lineup. Against Michigan, Holtmann returned to the original starting five he trotted out to start the season, opting to pull Sensabaugh off of the bench, and utilized the same lineup against Northwestern.

Although Ohio State's starting lineup has varied for much of Big Ten play, Holtmann noted that he feels it's a fluid situation that can change from game to game.

"I like the balance it gives our lineup right now, in terms of some of the really talented wing players in this league and the ability to guard those guys," Holtmann said on Jan. 23, following the win over Iowa. "I like the balance it gives our team defensively and offensively, but we have multiple guys that can and will start."

Questions were also raised following the Buckeyes' 86-70 loss to Indiana on Jan. 28, primarily regarding the playing time of transfer guard Tanner Holden. Outside of Ohio State's win over Texas Tech on Nov. 23, Holden registered double-digit minutes in each of the Buckeyes' first 19 contests. However, Holden played just six minutes against Illinois on Jan. 24 and five against the Hoosiers on Jan. 28, all of which came after the game was out of reach.

Since then, Holden played five minutes against Wisconsin, didn't appear in the loss to Michigan and registered just six minutes against Northwestern — all of which came in the first half. While Holtmann and Holden have both said this will be a developmental year for the former Wright State guard, the Buckeyes' skipper also acknowledged his decreasing role came as part of an effort to shorten Ohio State's rotation.

"We're trying to find a rotation that's a little bit shorter this time of year," Holtmann said after the loss to the Hoosiers.

While Holtmann has tinkered with the rotation throughout Big Ten play, and roles have shifted as a result of the game-to-game changes, Sueing — who has been pulled in and out of the starting lineup on several occasions during the stretch — said he feels that the players just need to fill the roles they are given on a night-to-night basis.

"Coach Holtmann, at the end of the game, is going to play the players that he feels like he needs at the time, obviously depending on how they're playing," Sueing said on Thursday. "Regardless of who is on the floor, those five guys have to be able to play together well. We all know our strengths and weaknesses and we all know our flaws, we just have to be ready for when your name is called and have to be able to be productive and play hard."