

Rutgers' Defense, Physicality Pose Threat To Buckeyes In Big Ten Opener



Ohio State is set to tip off Big Ten play on Thursday after jumping out to a 6-2 start against nonconference opponents. However, the Buckeyes face a tall task in their conference opener, battling a defensive-minded Rutgers team, coming off a massive win over then-No. 10 Indiana on Saturday.

While the Buckeyes have shown several encouraging signs of growth through nonconference play, the Scarlet Knights pose a significant challenge to Ohio State's surging offense. OSU head coach Chris Holtmann emphasized that the Scarlet Knights are no joke defensively and called them one of the best units in the nation.

"(They're) a really tough, well-coached, older team," Holtmann said. "They held Indiana to 48 (points). I think they're one of the best defensive teams in the country, certainly one of the best we'll play. It's always very physical with (Rutgers coach Steve Pikiell's) teams. Again, he does a terrific job and it's going to be a great challenge."

The statistics agree with Holtmann as the Scarlet Knights allow just 54.1 points per game — which is tied for the sixth-best mark in the nation — while holding opposing offenses to 35.4 percent shooting, tied for seventh-best. According to KenPom, Rutgers boasts the sixth-best defensive efficiency rating with an 87.7 mark — which is boosted by the No. 1 three-point defense in the country, as opposing offenses shoot just 20.6 percent from range against the Scarlet Knights.

Roaming the paint for the Scarlet Knights is third-year center Clifford Omoruyi, who ranks fourth in the Big Ten with 1.75 blocks per game. Omoruyi also produces 9.8 rebounds per game, sitting at No. 20 in the nation.

While Omoruyi anchors the defense from the interior, fifth-year guard Caleb McConnell — the reigning Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year — is a pest on the perimeter. McConnell has played in just three games this season after recovering from an injury, but showcased his two-way prowess in the Scarlet

Knights' win over Indiana — dropping 16 points while adding 10 rebounds and a pair of steals.

“(McConnell) is an elite defender,” Holtmann said. “(He has) great length. Last year, we had a chance to ice the game there, and he made an incredible block on Malaki (Branham’s) transition dunk attempt.

“It’s not just him, though. They have a number of disruptive guys but it begins with him,” he continued.

As Omoruyi and McConnell have carried over their stellar defensive play from a season ago, Holtmann noted that this season’s Rutgers team has followed the typical defensive path of previous Pikiell-coached Scarlet Knight units.

“They’re disruptive, they turn you over,” Holtmann said. “They’re great on the glass, on both offensive and defensive glass. They’re long, they’re physical.

“They’ve just got great positional size and length.”