

Taking Stock Of Ohio State's Freshmen As Nonconference Finale Approaches



The members of Ohio State's top-10 2022 recruiting class have wasted no time proving their worth to the Buckeye basketball program, playing a key role in OSU's 8-3 start. With only a matchup against Alabama A&M on Dec. 29 separating the Buckeyes from Big Ten play, Ohio State's freshmen have shown growth through OSU's first 11 games.

As Holtmann predicted numerous times during the offseason, the Buckeyes, as a whole, have produced at the rate of their freshmen through 11 games. Forward Brice Sensabaugh has been a reliable bucket-getter, guard Bruce Thornton has taken on the primary ballhandler and facilitator roles with ease, center Felix Okpara has become a rim protection option and guard Roddy Gayle Jr. has showcased strong two-way play in the backcourt during their first month of collegiate action.

As Big Ten play approaches, Sensabaugh noted that the first-year Buckeyes will need to dig into the lessons they learned from their nonconference slate while the competition gets more difficult going forward.

"(We) just have to continue to build, obviously we have a new team so just continue to build and learn with each other," Sensabaugh said. "Obviously, we had a Big Ten matchup already and that was a tough one too, great Rutgers team. (We just) learn from that and continue to build."

No game showcased the freshman class' impact on the Buckeyes more than OSU's 96-59 win over St. Francis (Pa.) on Dec. 3, in which the previously mentioned first-year players each scored in double figures. While Ohio State continues to jell, Holtmann was prideful of the strides made by his freshman class to this point in the season.

"It's good just to see (the freshmen) play," Holtmann said. "Sometimes guys will play these kinds of minutes and sometimes they won't play these kinds of minutes, so when they have these minutes in front of them, they obviously have to continue to grow and get better."

Sensabaugh has been an offensive spark for the Buckeyes so far this season, dropping a team-best 15.3 points per game, despite playing just the sixth-most minutes on the team. Sensabaugh has largely carried OSU's second unit — but has also started a trio of games in relief of guard Isaac Likekele, who has missed time due to personal reasons — with 51.3 percent shooting (59 of 115), which is supported by an elite 48.9 percent mark (23 of 47) from beyond the arc.

While Sensabaugh has blossomed into one of Ohio State's most effective offensive weapons through the Buckeyes' first 11 games, there are still glaring areas of his game that need improvement. The Orlando, Fla., native has shown defensive lapses while also dishing out just 15 assists compared to 17 turnovers.

Sensabaugh noted that he's still getting acclimated to the demands of college basketball but is staying the course going forward.

"It was definitely a wake-up call for me. Obviously, it's a big jump from high school with the pace and the strength," Sensabaugh said. "(I'm) just locking in personally and learning from the older guys and the coaches as well, what it really takes to be a Big Ten player.

"(I'm) just kind of flipping the switch here, recently, and just looking to continue growing and showing more on the court."

As Sensabaugh has given Ohio State a scoring boost, Thornton has grown into a reliable option with the ball in his hands. Thornton has served as the Buckeyes' starting point guard all season and has done so with the poise of a veteran.

"(Bruce) is really tough," Holtmann said. "He really does have great poise. He's used to winning, and as much as anybody I've ever coached, at a young age he plays to win. Not every kid plays to win, or understands what playing to win looks like. He was extremely well-coached in high school and understands what playing to win is."

While Thornton has provided Ohio State with solid playmaking, averaging 3.2 assists per game, his growth as a scorer has largely stood out through his first 11 games. After failing to reach double figures in his first three games, Thornton has hit the 10-point mark in seven of the last eight contests. As his confidence continues to grow, Thornton has posted averages of 10.6 points per game while shooting 47.2 percent (17 of 36) from three.

Gayle joins Thornton in the backcourt and has been lauded for his defensive play to this point in the season, as he has tallied three blocks and five steals through 11 games. On the offensive end, Gayle averages 4.6 points on 43.8 percent shooting (21 of 48). Gayle's athleticism has stood out to this point, and he's emerged as a driving threat, which helps opens up different opportunities for the Ohio State offense.

"He's a two-way player, his defense is just ahead of his offense right now," Holtmann said. "And that's fine, we need his defensive presence. And he's not a bad offensive player, he's still reading the game.

"He's a really good kid and I think he's only going to get better in front of our eyes," he added.

Okpara has grown into a defensive specialist for the Buckeyes, especially around the rim, tallying 11 blocks and seven steals through 11 games, while showcasing deceptive lateral quickness despite his 6-11 frame. Okpara adds 4.3 points and 3.8 rebounds per game.

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