

Women's Basketball Year In Review: Rikki Harris



Entering the season for Ohio State women's basketball, there was no shortage of depth at guard.

The Buckeyes returned starters in Jacy Sheldon and Taylor Mikesell, and also brought back Madison Greene after she missed the previous season with a knee injury. Ohio State added Emma Shumate from the transfer portal, and with the rise of Taylor Thierry who can play anywhere on the court for the Buckeyes, it put little pressure on any one of the team's guards, Rikki Harris included.

But, like the previous season when Greene went down and Harris was forced into the starting lineup – a role she excelled in, averaging 8.0 points, 4.6 rebounds and 2.8 assists over the final 19 games of the season – Harris was once again forced into extended action this season.

Sheldon played in just five games before missing the majority of the season, and Greene suffered yet another season-ending knee injury, and Ohio State's extended depth at guard was suddenly depleted. Harris had come off the bench through the first 12 games of the season, averaging 5.8 points, 4.3 rebounds and 2.2 assists in just 20 minutes per contest.

She would start all but one of Ohio State's next 16 games to close the regular season, helping lead the team to a historic start and through a tumultuous stretch that saw the Buckeyes enter the conference tournament on a 4-6 run. But Harris provided a calming force for Ohio State, able to stabilize the team amidst Greene's injury and Sheldon's extended absence from the lineup.

"The thing about Rikki is that she's a really bright kid, high basketball IQ. We've technically played her at four positions this year," head coach Kevin McGuff said. "She knows exactly where she's supposed to be and can help people get in the spots they're supposed to be in. So, she does a really good job keeping us organized."

Harris' impact was felt at both ends of the floor. For the entire season, she averaged 6.6 points, 4.1 rebounds and 3.2 assists on just 32.2 percent shooting, but her contributions were felt more in her ability to distribute the ball. She finished with at least five assists in 11 games, including a pair of contests in which she dished out eight assists, including her first game in the starting lineup after Greene's injury.

She stood out as well on the defensive end as a key cog in Ohio State's defensive press. She averaged 1.6 steals per game and had at least three steals on nine different occasions.

"Playing with Rikki is amazing. She's an amazing defensive player and is always making the right decisions," forward Rebeka Mikulasikova said. "She passes me the ball all the time, and she's just a very smart player. I think she's very intelligent with the way she plays."

Harris paced the Buckeyes throughout the season, usually chipping in a few points while often competing for the team lead in rebounds and assists. But her presence was most felt near the end of the season, when she helped Ohio State enter the Big Ten Tournament with some serious momentum.

After scoring 15 points in a 67-55 win at Penn State on Feb. 16, the Buckeyes were on the road again just four days later, set to visit Michigan in Ann Arbor. On a team with scorers such as Cotie McMahon and Mikesell, Thierry led the way for the Buckeyes with a career-high 23 points on 7-of-9 shooting, and added four rebounds, five assists and seven steals for one of the best and most well-rounded performances in her three seasons with the Buckeyes.

"(Harris) was outstanding tonight," McGuff said. "Not only just her numbers were great, but her leadership, her intensity and communication with everybody to keep them on the same page and keep them going was great. We ask a lot of her. We play her at all kinds of different positions, and whatever we ask, she tries to do it."

Harris came off the bench again once Sheldon returned in the NCAA Tournament, averaging just 2.3 points, 2.3 rebounds and 1.3 assists on 18.2 percent shooting in 16 minutes per contest. While she struggled over those four games - likely to do with the increased competition Ohio State faced - a defined role entering next season should help to best utilize Harris.

Considering Sheldon's return for a fifth season and the presumed return of Greene from injury, not to mention Shumate and Thierry both returning as well as the addition of Celeste Taylor, the pressure should once again not be on Harris once the season begins, likely to be utilized as first off the bench. But, if the situation arises, Ohio State can feel comfortable knowing she can step into the lineup and get things done for the Buckeyes.