

Young Buckeyes Look For Streak-Snapping Win Against Veteran Penn State Squad



After picking up a pair of losses on the road, extending its losing streak to eight games, Ohio State returns to Value City Arena to host Penn State, kicking off a three-game homestand, on Thursday.

The Nittany Lions (16-11, 7-9 Big Ten) bring the most experienced roster in college basketball into Columbus, boasting an average of 4.02 years of Division I basketball played per player, while the Buckeyes (11-16, 3-13) are coming off a loss at Purdue in which they started four freshmen.

“You can see the connection, the communication, you can just tell they’ve been through it,” guard Bruce Thornton said of Penn State. “You just see how everybody responds as a team when stuff doesn’t go their way.”

The crown jewel of Penn State’s veteran squad is none other than point guard Jalen Pickett, who is having a career season for the Nittany Lions while emerging as a challenger for Big Ten Player of the Year honor alongside Purdue’s Zach Edey and Indiana’s Trayce Jackson-Davis. Pickett leads the Nittany Lions with 18.6 points per game while shooting 52.3 percent from the field and 37.8 percent from three-point range.

While Pickett’s scoring ability stands out, he also propels the Nittany Lion offense with his play-making ability. The Rochester, N.Y., native sits at fourth in the country with 7.0 assists per game, while carving out a 3.2 assist-to-turnover ratio — ranking second in the Big Ten behind Iowa’s Connor McCaffery. Pickett also produces a team-high 7.4 rebounds per game.

In Penn State’s last two games, Pickett carried the Nittany Lions to victory by producing 41 points against Illinois on Feb. 14 and 32 points against Minnesota on Saturday. As Pickett has elevated his game further during the recent stretch, head coach Chris Holtmann acknowledged that he’ll be a load to defend on Thursday.

“He’s a tremendous player,” Holtmann said. “He’s a guy that can post up and score it like a big man. He can also shoot behind ball screens. He can make threes in the open floor. He makes the right play and is a tremendous passer.”

While Pickett serves as a do-it-all player for the Nittany Lions, Penn State also boasts one of the most potent three-point shooting attacks in the country. The Nittany Lions sink 10.9 threes per game (fourth in the nation) on 27.9 attempts (ninth in the nation), which is good for a 38.9 percent mark from deep — the 12th-best percentage in the country.

Leading Penn State’s efforts from beyond the arc are guards Seth Lundy and Andrew Funk, who serve as the Nittany Lions’ second and third options behind Pickett. Lundy produces 14.4 points per game while connecting on 44.1 percent from three-point range on 6.2 attempts while Funk hits on 41.2 percent of his 7.4 attempts from deep to average 12.6 points per game.

“How well they shoot the three, at really all five spots, puts a lot on your defense,” Holtmann said. “Their spacing offensively because of their shooting and the gravity that creates, just puts you in a really difficult spot.”

As Ohio State seeks to put an end to its long losing streak, Holtmann recognized the value of playing veteran teams like Penn State has on the younger Buckeye roster.

“When you look at it, and you see what is successful and has been successful, certainly in the Big Ten and beyond, I get it, starting four freshmen has not necessarily, consistently been a recipe for success,” Holtmann said. “The reality is, those guys gaining experience is and was a huge priority for us this year. And it will be important for us to continue to do that down the stretch.”

The Buckeyes and Nittany Lions tip-off at 6:30 p.m. on FS1.