

Buckeyes 'Excited' To Welcome Kaleb Wesson Back Ahead Of B1G Tourney



The Ohio State men's basketball team enters the Big Ten tournament after three consecutive conference losses.

While these losses do not bode well for the Buckeyes' tournament hopes, optimism accompanies the return of their leading scorer and rebounder.

Sophomore center Kaleb Wesson will return for Ohio State's conference tournament matchup with Indiana after missing the prior three games. Wesson was suspended March 1 for violating athletic department policy.

"It's always nice just to have one of your teammates, one of the guys you're really close to, being able to play with you out there," senior guard C.J. Jackson said. "And you know, he's had his ups and downs as we have this year, and I'm just excited for him to come back."

The Buckeyes appeared to be poised to finish the regular season strong when they defeated then-No. 22 Iowa, 90-70, on Feb. 26. Wesson led the way with 18 points and 11 rebounds against the Hawkeyes, but it was his final game before his three-game suspension.

Ohio State proceeded to suffer a 25-point loss to then-No. 14 Purdue and an 18-point defeat at the hands of Northwestern, who was on a 10-game losing streak. Then, the Buckeyes looked to be heading toward another lopsided loss before battling back and eventually falling in overtime to then-No. 21 Wisconsin.

Throughout those three games without Wesson the Buckeyes struggled immensely, ranking last in the country in effective field goal percentage. Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann was asked if that was a result of other players trying to do much and overcompensating in Wesson's absence.

"A little bit," Holtmann said. "and that led to some inefficient nights. I think you got to understand we were not a great offensive team before that. So we're kind of a work-in-progress when it comes to that. If you looked at our numbers before that, they were in the bottom half, bottom third of the league.

"So it's always been something that I've been trying to work and figure out what we can do as a coaching staff better, what I need to do better in those situations. So I think it was a byproduct of —

hey, it's a team that's had some offensive struggles, and then we also played some good defensive teams."

After dropping three tough games to conference foes, the Scarlet and Gray welcome Wesson back with open arms.

"It's exciting," sophomore forward Kyle Young said of Wesson's return. "I know we talk a little last week about how big of piece he is, you know, when you're missing something like that — we're all really glad to have him back."

Wesson averages 14.6 points and 6.7 rebounds per game, shooting 51.1 percent from the field, 35.5 percent from three and 72.7 percent from the free-throw line.

Wesson (6-9, 270) is often the subject of controversial calls, which tend to put him in early foul trouble and limit his playing time. Holtmann was asked if he had to pay attention to the heightened emotions that can accompany the Big Ten tournament.

"No caffeine for the next three days, for sure, for him," Holtmann said jokingly.

Another concern with any player, especially a big man, missing three games is conditioning. Fortunately for Wesson, he was allowed to be with the team during his suspension, so he still participated in team workouts and practices.

Wesson also completed additional individual workouts and extra conditioning while being sidelined. Despite the extensive workouts, Holtmann said concerns about fatigue persist because of the inability to simulate the speed of an actual game.

Ohio State's first opponent in the tourney, Indiana, features athletic big men who can use their mobility to create mismatches. Wesson's quickness and stamina will be put to the test in his first game back.

While Wesson's return is critical for the Buckeyes, they're going to need a team effort to make a run, starting with their showdown with the Hoosiers on March 14 at 12:30 p.m. at the United Center in Chicago.

"He's just got to be Kaleb," Holtmann said. "I think I am aware of that. And it's unique — I've never been in a situation, whether it's an injury or suspension, I've never been in a situation where you lose a guy and then he comes back right for the conference tournament, just kind of a unique situation.

"So I don't really have a playbook for what that's going to look like other than he's just got to be Kaleb, and he's got to find a way to impact the game on both ends.

"I think it's important for him, and for us, to not have a false sense of ... 'OK, now that Kaleb's back, everything's fine.' We've got to play well, and Kaleb has to help his team play well now that he's back. And that's the bottom line."

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