

Branham, Liddell Still First Round Picks In ESPN Mock Draft



Ohio State standouts Malaki Branham and E.J. Liddell, both of whom have declared for the NBA Draft, are still generating first-round buzz if the latest ESPN mock draft is to be believed. The latter has already announced his intention to sign with an agent, ending his Ohio State tenure, but this placement for the former could prove tremendously important. The freshman guard declared in his draft announcement that he would remain in contention and end his Ohio State career with a first round projection, and it seems that his stock is unlikely to dip below that as it currently stands.

"I will be testing the draft waters while keeping my college eligibility intact," Branham said. "I want to find the best situation and the right fit for me. I am staying in the draft if I'm in the first round because I believe if someone gives me four years to prove myself, I have no doubt that they will love what they're getting."

In the latest ESPN projection, Branham is tabbed as the No. 17 pick to the Indiana Pacers, while Liddell has slipped a bit from his midseason projections at the back-end of the lottery and checks in at No. 22 to the Denver Nuggets. In Branham's latest write-up, he's praised for his performance across Ohio State's pair of NCAA Tournament games.

"Branham looked like the best player on the floor against Villanova, despite only being a freshman," ESPN's Jonathan Givony writes. "Ohio State has gradually shifted most of their offense to run through him as the season has progressed, and he did a great job of making shots to keep the game close before the Buckeyes eventually bowed out. Branham's size, frame, length, scoring instincts and shot-making prowess off the dribble (44 percent shooter) and with his feet set (43 percent) make his game look seamlessly translatable for what the NBA is looking for at his position.

"He got to his spots in the mid-range and rose up beautifully with his high release point, and showed he can do a little more than that too by facilitating for others and showing competitiveness defensively one-on-one. While he has some things to work with as a ball-handler and off-ball defender, the fact that he's

18 years old, has made such impressive strides as the season moved on and plays with a unique combination of aggressiveness and poise could put him in lottery conversations.”

Liddell has not been the subject of a new write-up since, but it seems that both players could play themselves into better positioning with an impressive showing in the pre-draft circuit, which will kick into full gear in short order with the end of the college basketball season.