

Bruce Thornton Expected To Play Against Virginia Tech In NIT, Scotty Middleton Still With Family



Ohio State head coach Jake Diebler provided updates on the availability of two key Buckeyes for Saturday night's contest against No. 3 seed Virginia Tech Friday morning.

Speaking with the media over Zoom, Diebler said that sophomore guard Bruce Thornton is expected to play in Ohio State's second round NIT contest after suffering a sprained ankle late in the Buckeyes' game against Cornell, while freshman guard Scotty Middleton remains away from the team as he continues to attend to a family matter, putting his status for Saturday's contest in question.

"Bruce was able to practice some yesterday, and we're anticipating him being available," Diebler said. "Scotty's currently still with his family, and our thoughts and prayers are with him. So no further updates on (Middleton's status) yet."

Thornton's likely availability against the Hokies will be a significant boost for the Buckeyes' backcourt on Saturday, as the sophomore is Ohio State's unquestioned team leader along with its leading scorer and facilitator at 15.9 points and 4.6 assists per game. Thornton had nine points on 3-of-7 shooting along with four assists and four rebounds when he exited the game for good against Cornell with 10:18 remaining.

Middleton has been absent from the team and with his family since early this week, which forced him to also miss the Buckeyes' win against Cornell on Tuesday. If Middleton stays with his family through Saturday and is unable to suit up against the Hokies, Ohio State will once again be without one of its top bench contributors.

Before his absence, Middleton was an integral part of the Buckeyes' late-season success, averaging 6.3 points, 1.6 rebounds and 0.9 steals per contest in his last eight games, while also shooting 47.2 percent

from the field and a gaudy 65.0 percent from three.

Middleton's absence could force Diebler to dig deeper into his bench and call on secondary backcourt pieces such as freshman and sophomore guards Taison Chatman and Bowen Hardman to play extended minutes. Chatman and Hardman logged a combined seven minutes against Cornell, with Hardman making the most contributions with a key three-pointer in the second half.

Diebler said that regardless of Middleton's absence, he wants to continue utilizing his bench pieces as much as possible for the rest of this season — a clear emphasis since Diebler took over as head coach on Feb. 14 — with Chatman and Hardman included.

"Bowen stepped up," Diebler said. "We needed some shooting at that time. And he knows — I told him this, 'If you have any little bit of space, you have to let it fly.' That was a courageous shot, really. And Taison's done some really good things for us these last few weeks.

"We want to keep giving those guys minutes and experience. But we'll utilize our depth again. As far as what that looks like, a lot of that is feel in-game. We go into the game with the intentionality to play more guys. And then as it goes, throughout the flow of it, it becomes a feel of who's playing well and what matchups (work best). So that's the plan."