

Buckeyes Express Interest In Accepting Postseason Bid To NIT



Ohio State's NCAA Tournament aspirations all but evaporated after Friday night's 77-74 loss to No. 13 Illinois in the Big Ten Tournament Quarterfinal, but for many within the program, they still see an avenue where they can continue the 2023-24 season in postseason play.

While the Buckeyes, who entered Saturday's slate of conference tournament games in ESPN "Bracketologist" Joe Lunardi's "Next Four Out," are unlikely to receive a berth in the Big Dance, there is still a strong likelihood that they can earn a bid to the National Invitational Tournament, or NIT, on Sunday night, an opportunity to keep playing that many on the team — starting with interim head coach Jake Diebler — said they want and deserve to accept.

"We've earned the right to play in the postseason," Diebler said in Ohio State's locker room following the loss Friday night. "Considering where we were to where we are now, it's such a great thing. We may have fallen a little short (of the NCAA Tournament), we'll see. We've worked our way onto the bubble. But I think the postseason is absolutely there for us, in some way. And we'll have a lot of guys who embrace that."

"I've had a lot of fun with this group," he added. "These guys are a joy to coach. If we do play, there's a championship to be won. And I know the competitive spirit of this group. So I would anticipate that if (they want to play), they'll be ready to go."

To Diebler's point, several players expressed their interest in accepting a bid to the NIT in the locker room following the game. Among those who are embracing that opportunity are sophomore guards Roddy Gayle Jr. and Bruce Thornton, both of whom have yet to play in an NCAA or NIT Tournament game in their first two respective seasons with the program.

Gayle, who saw an increased role on the team this season after serving in a primarily reserve role as a freshman, starting 32 of the team's 33 games and ranking third on the team in scoring with 13.5 points per game, said he wants to keep playing to compete for a championship and maximize his time with this 2023-24 Ohio State squad, a group that he admitted will have some different faces next season.

"I feel like there's a lot more basketball left to be played with this team," sophomore guard Roddy Gayle Jr. said. "I'm not ready for it to be over, especially with this group of guys. Next year might not look the same. So I want to just take advantage of the time I have left with these guys."

"We are amazing competitor," he continued. "If it is the NIT, I feel like we can make a really good run and show the world what we're capable of."

While Okpara also expressed a similar sentiment, saying he "for sure" thinks his team would want to compete in the postseason, Thornton was perhaps the most adamant on playing. The Buckeyes' leading scorer and third-team All-Big Ten guard said he feels a personal obligation as team captain to serve the program and his teammates as best as possible for as long as possible this season, participation in the NIT included.

"Of course," Thornton said when asked if he wants to play in the postseason. "I definitely want to represent that 'Ohio State' across my chest. It doesn't matter how many games I play with that 'Ohio State' across my chest, I'm going to play my hardest, 100 percent, each and every time. It's bigger than me. It's all about my guys and the program, Buckeye Nation, who is behind us each and every game. So I'm always proud to put that "O-H" on my chest."

"If we play the way we've been playing, staying connected, keep fighting, I feel like we can have some success in the postseason."

Not everyone in the locker room had a clear answer on their interest in playing, however. One notable Buckeye who declined to express if he or his team is interested is fifth-year forward Jamison Battle, who emerged as the catalyst of the Buckeyes' offense in the Big Ten Tournament, averaging 22.0 points, 6.0 rebounds and 3.5 assists in their two games.

Battle, who's Ohio State and collegiate career would end if the Buckeyes do not play in the postseason, was firm in his stance that this would be a "team decision," one that is not directly in the fifth-year's control.

"We'll see what happens," Battle said. "I'm not going to answer any questions (about that) because I'm not the one who makes that decision. So we'll see."

Ohio State freshmen Scotty Middleton and Devin Royal — who each saw increased time as the season progressed and have three more years of eligibility left with the program — expressed a similar sentiment, with Middleton saying that he and his teammates need some time to think about the situation and make a unified decision.

"I think all of us just need to take this game in, get a little rest and then come back as a team to talk about," he said."

Regardless of Ohio State has played its last game of the 2023-24 season or not, Diebler — who recently emerged as a final candidate to fill the open head coaching vacancy alongside Florida Atlantic's Dusty May, according to the Columbus Dispatch — said he is proud of the way his team has battled and put themselves even in position to compete in the postseason, an opportunity that he thinks many outside the program did not believe could happen when he first took over for the relieved Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14.

"In my opinion, we do," Diebler said when asked if his team has more games left in them this season. "I think we've played ourselves into a conversation, and our guys have earned the right, in my opinion, to play in the postseason. If you go back, I don't think anybody thought we would be here. So it's exciting. (Friday night) didn't finish the way we wanted it to. We wanted to keep playing in this Big Ten tournament. It's such a great, great tournament. But our guys have earned the right, certainly, (to keep playing)."

If Ohio State does accept an NIT invitation, its seeding will be revealed at 9:30 p.m. Sunday night on ESPN2.