

Buckeyes “Need More” From Veteran Returners Amidst Rough January Stretch



During the first half of Ohio State’s 69-60 loss to Illinois on Tuesday, the veteran duo of Zed Key and Justice Sueing combined for two points and five fouls while the Illini cruised to a 34-26 advantage entering the locker room.

Although Key and Sueing turned their slow starts into a comparatively productive second half — with the duo combining for 19 points on 7-of-13 shooting — head coach Chris Holtmann emphasized that the Buckeyes haven’t gotten enough production from their veteran returners during their adverse January stretch, in which they’ve lost six of their last seven games.

“We need more from them,” Holtmann said. “It’s not just about points, we need more effort plays. We need more production from them. They’re too important to what we’re doing and we rely on them too much with how young we are.”

Key and Sueing had registered strong starts to the season, but have floundered as of late. Prior to the current seven-game stretch, Sueing posted per-game averages of 13.5 points and 5.0 rebounds while dishing out 2.2 assists compared to 1.8 turnovers per contest. Since the Buckeyes’ loss to Purdue on Jan. 5, however, Sueing has produced averages of 11.9 points and 3.9 rebounds, while his 1.9 assists have lagged behind his 2.3 turnovers per contest. Sueing has also been moved to a bench role in each of the last two games, with Holtmann opting to start Isaac Likekele over him.

Key has battled a variety of injuries during the stretch, injuring his shoulder against Purdue and his knee in the win over Iowa, and did not appear to be at full strength against Illinois. Entering the Purdue game, Key posted averages of 13.4 points and 8.4 rebounds while shooting at a 63.5 percent clip — including a 70.6 percent mark inside the arc. Since returning from his shoulder injury on Jan. 12 against Minnesota, however, Key has registered 10.2 points and 7.8 rebounds per game, while his shooting efficiency has plummeted to 42.2 percent in five games during the losing stretch.

Against Illinois, Key finished with eight points — all of which came in the second half — and three rebounds while shooting just 2 for 8 from the field.

“Zed had some good looks, but it’s not just about his finishes around the basket,” Holtmann said. “He’s got to do more in terms of effort plays, and so does Justice.”

While Holtmann looks for answers to jump-start his veteran returners, he noted that the onus falls on him and his staff, as well as Key and Sueing, to get the duo back to the level they showed that were capable of playing at during the first two months of the season.

“We’ve got to get them performing at a higher level,” Holtmann said. “So that’s on us as coaches, and then they’ve got to bring more than what they’re bringing.”