

Holtmann, Returning Buckeyes Using Last Season's Struggles As Motivation



For many Ohio State fans across the nation, the 2022-23 men's basketball season was one they wish they could forget.

Led by then-sixth-year head coach Chris Holtmann, the Buckeyes started the year looking as if they would return to the NCAA Tournament for the fifth-consecutive season (excluding the the COVID-19-shortened 2019-2020 campaign), rattling off wins in 10 of their first 13 games and propelling themselves back into the AP top-25 (No. 24) after New Year's. That early-season success would soon fizzle, as an extended period of poor play forced the team to drop 14 of their 15 contests from Jan. 5-Feb.23, a grim midseason stretch that would all but derail any hope they had of earning postseason play.

While the Buckeyes, led by freshmen upstarts Bruce Thornton and current Utah Jazz forward Brice Sensabaugh, would bounce back towards the end of 2022-23 season, winning five of their last seven games and reaching the Big Ten Tournament semifinal round, many who follow the team still categorize last year's campaign as a failure. For those inside the locker room this season, however, they see some positives out of the disappointing result.

"How can you not (be motivated) after what we all went through last year?" Ohio State men's basketball head coach Chris Holtmann said at his team's media day on Monday. "And that's the benefit of having guys that have scars on them from last year. I think there can be real power in the pain we went through last year. And I think if it's used in a way that provides fuel, I think that's a really positive thing. And I don't think you can go through what we went through last year, and not feel that way, unless you're not a competitive guy."

Speaking in front of the media for the first time this offseason yesterday, Holtmann mentioned that each of his eight returning players can use the experience — and struggles — they gained last season to better prepare themselves for the obstacles they may encounter this winter. While Ohio State lost veteran contributors Justice Sueing, Sean McNeil and Isaac Likekele along with the aforementioned Sensabaugh, they are reclaiming the services of several players who were key to their end-of-season success, including sophomores Roddy Gayle Jr, Bruce Thornton and Felix Okpara. Ohio State is also returning senior center Zed Key, who was cleared to resume all basketball activities on Aug. 29 after

undergoing season-ending surgery in late February to repair his sprained left shoulder.

"I think we certainly played lighter (towards the end of the year)," Holtmann said. "We really had a week-and-a-half to two weeks of playing pretty well, and I think that created a little bit of momentum for us. I think our guys did play really loose and that'll be important for us. Some of that comes with experience, too. Guys have been through moments. And they're going to know a little bit more what to expect this year than maybe what they did last year."

This, according to the coach, holds especially true for the three returning sophomores who each earned significant playing time as freshmen. Last season, Gayle, Thornton and Okpara combined to log 20.8 minutes per game, with their playing time increasing as the team began to hit their stride in March.

"I think the experience that those three sophomores got last year will really prove beneficial," Holtmann said. "And I'm not sure if I even look at them as sophomores because of the experience they got last year. Hopefully that provides great benefit."

"Those three guys that went through the battles last year, the struggles, and then finishing well," Holtmann added. "They need to take a big role. We'll decide on captains for the season in about a month, but I would assume all three of those guys are going to play an important role."

With a strong returning core of young and hungry players along with an intriguing group of new faces, headlined by 2023 four-star freshmen Scotty Middleton, Taison Chatman and Devin Royal and transfers Jamison Battle (Minnesota), Dale Bonner (Baylor) and Evan Mahaffey (Penn State), Holtmann sees some early signs that his team is capable of flipping the script in 2023-24.

"I'm really excited about the potential of this group," Holtmann said. "Maybe ask me again here once we have some time to spend on a day-to-day basis with our guys. But I'm really excited about what this group can grow into and be. And I think health is always an important part of that. But there are a lot of guys that I think have the ability to take steps as players. And I think if our team takes steps in terms of those areas we've identified we have to improve in, (then I will be) excited about what this group can be."