

Holtmann 'Well Aware' Of Loyola Chicago's Tournament History Ahead Of First-Round Matchup



Ohio State's first-round matchup at the NCAA Tournament might be a familiar school for those who follow college basketball — particularly those that like a "Cinderella Story" in March Madness.

The Buckeyes earned a No. 7 seed in the South Region, where they will face Loyola Chicago in Pittsburgh on Friday. The Ramblers have been a perennial tournament team since 2018, when the program and fan-favorite Sister Jean Dolores-Schmidt made a run to the Final Four. They made their most recent trip to the Big Dance in 2021, including wins over No. 9 seed Georgia Tech and No. 1 seed Illinois.

Loyola finished second in the Missouri Valley Conference with a 25-7 overall record and 13-5 mark in conference competitions. The team closed its season, winning seven of its final 10 games, including three consecutive wins to earn an MVC Tournament championship.

"We've got tremendous respect for them and their play," Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann said. "Their league is a really good league."

First-year head coach Drew Valentine, who took over for Porter Moser after he left for Oklahoma, has the Rambler back to the tournament again. Holtmann acknowledged Valentine's work to ensure his team had a chance at success.

"I don't know him really well, but obviously, he's done a great job," Holtmann said.

While Loyola's season trended upward in its final weeks, Ohio State's trajectory went the opposite direction. The Buckeyes lost four of their last five games and suffered a quick exit in the Big Ten Tournament, falling 71-68 to 11th-seed Penn State in the second round.

Holtmann said Ohio State's non-conference schedule was among the most challenging he'd faced in his head coaching career. The Buckeyes defeated Akron (No. 13 seed in East Region), Seton Hall (No. 8 seed in South Region) and Duke (No. 2 seed in West Region) before it entered a grueling Big Ten schedule — a conference that qualified nine teams for the NCAA Tournament. With those challenges

and tests behind them, the fifth-year head coach believes his team is well-prepared for the task ahead.

"That guarantees you that I think you're weathered a little bit as a group, but it doesn't guarantee you anything because we know we're playing a really good team on Friday," Holtmann said. "I think it helps that you've been tested. I think it does weather you some, but you got to play well on opening night."

Following Ohio State's loss to the Nittany Lions, Holtmann said it was crucial that the Buckeyes rest and recover. Forwards Zed Key and Kyle Young missed game action with injuries, while guards sophomore Eugene Brown III and freshman Meechie Johnson Jr. battled through ailments. Holtmann will need all four players to contribute if his team makes a run in the tournament.

"I think everybody is well aware of Loyola and Sister Jean from the Final Four run," Holtmann said. "We'll dive more into them and the specifics, but they have a lot of players returning from teams that have had a tremendous amount of success."