

Men's Basketball Year In Review: Bruce Thornton



During a season of program instability and significant ups and downs, sophomore guard Bruce Thornton served as a calming force for the Buckeyes in 2024-25.

After bursting onto the scene as a freshman for Ohio State last season, Thornton took the next step in his development and emerged as not only the most consistent player on the team, but also the unquestioned leader of the program in just his second year with the program.

Thornton made it known before the season began that he was going to have to take on a much larger role with both his play and his voice, and he took that to heart all year. He started all but one game for Ohio State in 2023-24 — the only game he missed was due to a migraine late in the year against Nebraska — and led the team in multiple categories, including minutes played (1,180), assists (169), steals (41) and points per game (15.7).

The Buckeyes underwent some significant changes during the course of the season — with former head coach Chris Holtmann getting fired on Feb. 14 and Jake Diebler taking over as interim for the final month of the season — but that did not deter Thornton from giving it his best every time he hit the hardwood.

With Holtmann in the head chair, Thornton was by far Ohio State's most productive player, averaging 15.8 points, 4.2 assists, 3.3 rebounds and 1.3 steals per contest on 41.4 percent shooting through the first 25 games of the year.

This portion of the season included perhaps Thornton's best performance during the Emerald Coast Classic in November, when he scored 29 points, four assists and three rebounds on 6-of-12 shooting in the team's upset win over future Final Four team Alabama, then tacked on another 13 points, seven assists and five rebounds in the team's tournament-clinching win over Santa Clara. It was a performance that earned him the tournament's most valuable player award, an honor Holtmann said

was certainly well deserved.

“(Bruce gave us) leadership and competitiveness (during the Emerald Coast Classic),” Holtmann said after the Santa Clara win. “He played with a real confidence that good players play with. Bruce just led us with his competitiveness when we needed it.”

While performances like these made Thornton the focal point of opposing team’s defensive gameplans as the year progressed, leading to double teams and traps, the sophomore guard was undeterred and continued to dominate towards the end of the year.

Even amidst a mid-season coaching change — which Thornton repeatedly said created one of the “craziest” situations he’s ever been a part of as a basketball player — the Fairburn, Ga., native averaged 15.4 points, 6.3 assists, 3.9 rebounds and 0.9 blocks per game on 46.4 percent shooting across the final 10 games of the season with Diebler in charge.

Thornton’s performance across the final month of the season — which was highlighted by his 22-point game in the Buckeyes’ upset win over then-No. 2 Purdue — helped spark the Buckeyes’ late season run to the NIT Quarterfinals, but it was the leadership he showed amidst the adversity of the coaching change that played perhaps the most significant impact on that 7-3 finish.

Thornton made it known during media sessions that he needed to take charge in ensuring that the locker room was going to stay focused and motivated throughout the turbulent middle portion of the season, even saying just two days after Holtmann’s firing that he felt it was his duty to do so as team captain.

“I’m just making sure as the captain that everybody is still going to stay the course and still try to finish the season out well,” he said. “I feel like we still have things to accomplish, I feel like we still have some goals in plan, especially trying to win this big game (against Purdue).”

While it is unknown what was said in the locker room during this portion of the season, Thornton’s leadership seemed to steer the players in the right direction, allowing them to come together as a group and close out the year strong.

With several 2023-24 starters leaving the program and the Buckeyes bringing in a number of new talent onto the roster next season, Thornton will likely need to use his voice again and reclaim his role as the team’s unquestioned team leader both on and off the court, an aspect of his game that his head coach has lauded in the past.

“He’s a tone setter,” Diebler said last season. “His consistency is all-time great, as far as consistently bringing his best stuff. It’s kind of like how Aaron Craft was. That’s how David Lighty would’ve been like. So the consistency he brings is really valuable.”