

Men's Basketball Year In Review: Bruce Thornton



Playing point guard at a high-major program like Ohio State is never easy, and the onus of facilitating the offense can be especially difficult for a freshman.

However, freshman point guard Bruce Thornton took on the role with confidence and produced an encouraging first season at the helm of the Ohio State offense. Thornton got out to a fast start to the campaign, before admittedly hitting the proverbial freshman wall, before ultimately closing the season strong in the Big Ten Tournament. Thornton produced 10.6 points, 2.7 rebounds and 2.6 assists per game, and was the only Buckeye to start in all 35 contests last season.

Off the court, Thornton also took on a leadership role, being named a captain mid-season after a team-wide revote. According to Ohio State head coach Chris Holtman, Thornton arrived on campus already well-versed as a leader both on and off of the court.

"Bruce is great and I really believe he's going to be one of the best point guards in the country here before his time's done," Holtmann said. "I have no question about that in my mind, he's going to be one of the best point guards in the country before his time here is done. But he's just got to continue to work through some things and obviously get physically better."

It took some time for Thornton to get adjusted to the bright lights of college basketball, as the Marietta, Ga., native posted 5.3 points per game while shooting just 38.5 percent from the field and 28.6 percent from beyond the arc across his first three games. Thornton's first three games in the scarlet and gray came against the likes of Robert Morris, Charleston Southern and Eastern Illinois, but he elevated his production against stiffer competition in the Maui Invitational.

Thornton aided Ohio State to a 2-1 record during the early-season tournament behind 13.0 points and 2.3 assists on 56.5 percent shooting — including a 58.3 percent mark from deep. His improved production in Maui came as a result of growing confidence within the young guard.

"It was just confidence," Thornton said. "My first three games, I had to get used to the feel and get used to the team. But I feel like when the competition rises, that's when the pressure is on. I just feel like the challenge was right in front of me and I stepped up to it."

Upon returning from Hawaii, Thornton began a stretch of six-straight games with double-digit scoring outputs. He also dished out five assists in each of the final four games of the stretch, while shooting 50.9 percent from the field and 47.1 percent from three.

But, Thornton's fast start to the season quickly fizzled out. At the turn of the calendar to 2023, Thornton's productivity fell off a cliff, coinciding with a sharp decline for Ohio State as a whole. In the 10 games spanning from Jan. 1 through Feb. 2, Thornton could only muster 5.4 points and 1.9 assists per game while his shooting numbers plummeted to a 27.1 percent mark from the field and 25.9 percent from three, as the Buckeyes went 2-8 during the stretch.

Thornton attributed his sharp drop-off in production to him hitting the freshman wall, while recognizing that he needed to find his confidence again after the difficult stretch. At the same time, Thornton was battling through a wrist injury that limited his shooting ability, but he ultimately placed the blame for his struggles on himself rather than the injury.

"I just wasn't feeling myself," Thornton said. "I thought I was going to get out of it, but I really had to take some time out for myself to figure out what's going on, have some conversations with the coaches."

Although Thornton's on-the-court production had fallen off quite a bit during January, Holtmann was still confident in his point guard's ability to lead. On Feb. 6, Holtmann revealed that Thornton was named a team captain during a team-wide revote.

"(Holtmann) told me, being a point guard, you have to be that leader, you have to be that vocal person on the team," Thornton said before being named a captain. "So I just took advantage of it and used my voice."

One day before Thornton's captaincy was revealed, he produced his best game in the scarlet and gray, producing a career-high 22 points on 10-of-13 shooting in a 77-69 loss to rival Michigan in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Thornton's strong outing against the Wolverines set the tone for a stellar stretch run for the first-year Buckeye. Across the final eight games of the regular season, Thornton refound his rhythm by producing 13.0 points and 1.9 assists per game while shooting 50.6 percent from the field. Thornton helped the Buckeyes snap a nine-game losing streak by scoring 20 points and pulling down five rebounds in a 72-60 win over Illinois on Feb. 26.

While Thornton was a key piece in Ohio State's late-season emergence, in which the Buckeyes won two of their final three games, it was his performance in the Big Ten Tournament that sent shockwaves throughout the conference.

Although the Buckeyes entered the conference with a 5-15 mark in Big Ten play, securing the No. 13 seed, Thornton powered Ohio State all the way to the semifinal while garnering All-Tournament honors. During the run, Thornton produced 15.5 points and 4.3 assists per game while adding 1.3 steals. While Thornton's scoring was impressive, his playmaking was even more key for the Buckeyes, as he tallied 17 assists to just four turnovers — while not registering a single turnover across the final four games of the

tournament.

Ohio State's run in the Big Ten Tournament came to an unceremonious close in the semifinal, with the Buckeyes falling 80-66 against Purdue on March 11. But, the resolve shown by Thornton and his teammates has already set the tone for next season.

With momentum from the late-season surge propelling Thornton into the offseason, he pointed to the lessons he picked up from his first season in the program as building blocks for his future at Ohio State.

"(My plan is) just getting better. Playing this year with these guys is just like showing an example how to lead, how to be that top player and lead and get wins," Thornton said after the loss to Purdue. "It's just so hard in this league trying to fight back when you're in the hole so deep. So that's one thing I'm going to take away, we've got to do our work early and try to get the most wins as much as we can, try to get double byes, at least a single bye, instead of playing four games, get like at least three. It showed a real difference (against Purdue).

"Next year I have to show the example to the new guys coming up how to play Ohio State basketball."