

Men's Basketball Year In Review: Zed Key



With the departure of E.J. Liddell to the NBA prior to the 2022-23 season, Ohio State's post efforts largely fell on junior forward Zed Key last campaign.

During non-conference play, Key largely delivered, producing 13.4 points and 8.4 rebounds per game across Ohio State's first 13 contests. But after sustaining a shoulder injury in a home loss to then-No. 1 Purdue on Jan. 5, Key's production dipped significantly, as he tallied just 8.8 points and 7.2 rebounds per game while shooting 44.7 percent from the field during his final 11 games of the campaign. With Ohio State near the bottom of the Big Ten standings, the Buckeyes and Key decided to shut him down on Feb. 22, forcing him to miss the rest of the season.

"(The injury impacted me) a lot. Obviously, I'm down there in the post so I use my shoulders a lot to get the defender off my body," Key said. "There's a lot of jumping, grabbing rebounds and people going into your arms, and I use my left hand a lot for the jump hook. So it definitely — even with the brace on — affected it a lot because I knew my shoulder wasn't 100 percent and the shots that I was taking earlier in the year, that I knew I could make, just weren't falling.

"It goes back to the frustrations at that point too, because you know you can do something but you also know you're not 100 percent."

Key entered the season with high expectations after spending the offseason working on his conditioning and adding a three-pointer to his game. In fact, Ohio State's first bucket of the season came off of a three-pointer from Key, and he added another one for good measure to go 2-of-3 from distance in the Buckeyes' season-opening 91-53 win over Robert Morris on Nov. 7, 2022.

"I worked on it a lot this year," Key said of his three-point shooting after the win over the Colonials. "During the summer, that was one of my main goals was to be able to add a three-point shot to my game. Every day, Coach Diebler, Coach Holtmann, and the rest of the staff, they believed in me and wanted me to shoot."

Key registered a double-double in each of Ohio State's first three games, posting 13.3 points and 12.3 rebounds per game during the span. He was also incredibly efficient, shooting 76.2 percent from the field — including a 50.0 percent mark from deep.

However, against stiffer competition in the Maui Invitational, Key hit a bit of a wall. During the three-game stretch, Key saw his rebounding numbers plummet, averaging just 4.7 boards per game. His scoring efficiency also dwindled, as he shot to 54.2 percent during the tournament.

Key got his rhythm back on the road against Duke, where he tallied 21 points, eight rebounds and three blocks while shooting 77.8 percent, but he couldn't get the Buckeyes over the hump in an 81-72 loss on Nov. 30, 2022. Just two games later, Key produced his best performance of the season, scoring 22 points and corraling 14 rebounds in Ohio State's buzzer-beating win over Rutgers on Dec. 8.

Ohio State's next contest served as a homecoming for Key, who returned to his home state of New York for the CBS Sports Classic against North Carolina at Madison Square Garden on Dec. 17. Against the Tar Heels, Key could only muster 11 points and four rebounds in an overtime 89-84 loss.

"I'm really excited actually," he said before the game. "All of my family is going to be there, I get to go play in New York in front of my family and friends."

Entering January, Key was living up to the lofty expectations placed upon him prior to the season, but another true test was awaiting him on Jan. 5 when Purdue 7-4 center Zach Edey and the Boilermakers rolled into town. Just four minutes into the game, however, Key got tied up with Edey when battling for a rebound and immediately grabbed for his shoulder. Key was ultimately held out for the rest of the game, and missed Ohio State's subsequent game against Maryland before returning on Jan. 12 for a bout against Minnesota.

From that point forward, Key appeared noticeably hampered by the injury and a restrictive shoulder brace that largely limited the range of motion in his arms. On several occasions, Key's arm would come up limp after taking hits to the shoulder, but prior to Ohio State's Feb. 12 matchup with Michigan State, he noted that he felt fine enough to play going forward.

"It hurts, but I just can't let that stop me," Key said. "It's going to hurt, but at the end of the day, I have to just continue to make it through the season."

Key only made it one more game after taking a pair of shots to the shoulder against Iowa, with both sending him to the ground in pain. After taking the second hit, this time from Iowa's Philip Rebraca, Key went to the locker room and ultimately did not return for the rest of the season.

"After I got hurt during the Purdue game, I was kind of monitoring it by wearing the brace and tape underneath the brace to keep it stabilized," Key said. "It just kept hit every game, it wasn't like the teams were going for my shoulders, it happened on basketball plays. But, in the Iowa game, when I tried to play defense and he went baseline, I tried to put my arm out and it did what it did."

"I thought, 'OK, my shoulder is not getting any better.' So I was like, 'Yeah, might as well get (surgery) now and get my shoulder back to 100 percent.'"

Although it was a difficult decision for Key to shut his season down, he recognized the value of being able to get on the court sooner in the summer and prepare to help the Buckeyes bounce back from an

adverse 16-19 campaign.

“I want to obviously continue to expand my game, just shoot more threes,” Key said. “Just keep expanding from that and add faster footwork, better conditioning. The same things I said last year, I just need to keep improving.”