

Ohio State Makes NCAA Tournament, Faces Iowa State



Ohio State is the NCAA Tournament for a second year in a row since Chris Holtmann replaced Thad Matta as head coach.

The Buckeyes (19-14) enter as the 11th seed in the Midwest Regional and will play sixth seed and Big 12 tournament champion Iowa State (23-11) at BOK Center in Tulsa, Okla., on Friday at approximately 9:45 p.m. on TBS.

The winner plays either No. 3 Houston (31-3) or No. 14 Georgia State (23-9) on March 24 with the right to advance to the Sweet 16 in Kansas City.

Ohio State is in the same bracket as No. 2 Kentucky (27-6).

For a team that started hot, tailed off considerably in the heart of the Big Ten schedule and ended the regular season without its best player, Ohio State knows a repeat bid to the NCAAs wasn't a given.

"When you do this, you certainly understand it's not an entitlement getting to the NCAA tournament, it's something that's gotta be earned," Holtmann said. "And it's hard. It's hard to consistently earn those."

The Buckeyes and Iowa State met in the NCAA Tournament in 2013 in Dayton. OSU advanced to the Sweet 16 when Aaron Craft made a three-pointer with 0.5 seconds left for a 78-75 win.

The Cyclones lost five of six to end the regular season before beating Baylor (83-66), Kansas State (63-59) and Kansas (78-66) to win their conference tourney.

OSU will be the underdog but that doesn't bother senior guard C.J. Jackson.

"We are here to actually win some games and make a run," he said. "Not winning anymore games up to this point is not our approach and not what we are thinking."

The Buckeyes limped into the tournament this season with four losses in the past five games, due partly due to sophomore center Kaleb Wesson's three-game suspension which was lifted for the first Big Ten tournament game against Indiana on Thursday.

OSU lost to ranked opponents Purdue and Wisconsin and were upset by Northwestern but had built their credentials earlier in the season when they surprised many by winning 12 of their first 13 games.

Included were victories at Cincinnati and Creighton, teams ranked ahead of them in the new NET rating system that replaces the RPI for help in determining the 68-team tournament field. Cincinnati (28-6) is the seventh seed in the South Regional and will play Iowa in at Nationwide Arena in Columbus on Friday. Creighton (18-14) will play in the NIT.

There were likely two keys to the Buckeyes earning a bid. First was the 90-70 home victory against No. 22 Iowa on Feb. 26, the last game before Wesson's suspension.

The other was the first game Wesson returned when the Buckeyes defeated Indiana 79-75 in the Big Ten tournament in a game many thought the winner would go to the NCAA with the loser headed to the NIT. That's what happened.

The Big Ten has eight teams in the tournament - its most ever - with Michigan and Michigan State No. 2 seeds. The others are Purdue (3), Wisconsin (5), Maryland (6), Minnesota (7) and Iowa (10).

Holtmann has coached a team to the NCAA Tournament for a fifth straight season. The first three were at Butler. He is 4-0 in the first round.

He's ready for his battle-tested team to continue the streak after the Buckeyes finally appeared on the selection board following the announcement of the first two regions. The wait was worth it.

"It's been a challenging year in some ways," he said. "It's pretty special to see your name called."