

No. 19 Ohio State Knocks Off No. 23 Illinois 71-63 On Senior Night For 4th Straight Win



The No. 19 Ohio State men's basketball team defeated No. 23 Illinois 71-63 at Value City Arena on March 5 for its fourth straight victory.

"Good resolve, we were really tough-minded," Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann said. "We've been a very tough-minded group these last five weeks."

The trio of junior big man Kaleb Wesson, junior guard C.J. Walker and freshman forward E.J. Liddell led the Buckeyes (21-9, 11-8) to victory against the Fighting Illini (20-10, 12-7).

Wesson finished with 19 points on 7-of-10 shooting, while Walker contributed 15 points, six rebounds and five assists, and Liddell added 17 points and 11 rebounds on 7-of-9 shooting in 26 minutes off the bench.

Liddell, a Belleville, Ill., native, put the game away with a putback slam off a Walker miss with 58 seconds left, extending Ohio State's lead to 67-60.

"It was a big momentum swing when I got the dunk," Liddell said, "but we just stayed together the whole game and played our butts off the whole entire game, so I feel like that helped us win the game."

Senior wing Andre Wesson came away from his final home game very impressed by his first-year teammate Liddell.

"He was huge for us," Andre Wesson said of Liddell. "Knowing that we're out down a few guys, E.J. has definitely been stepping up. You can definitely see it in practice how he's been playing better and better. And his energy and his physicality today was real big for us."

The Illini cut the Buckeyes' late lead to 65-60 with 1:26 to play, but it was not enough as Liddell's strong finish essentially ended Illinois's chances. Following Liddell's game-sealing bucket, Ohio State hit 4 of 6 free throws to clinch the victory.

Illinois junior guard Trent Frazier made it 63-57 with a jumper, and Ohio State senior wing Andre

Wesson hit a pair of free throws after getting fouled in the bonus with 1:54 left.

Illinois cut Ohio State's lead to 58-55 with 4:45 remaining, but Kaleb Wesson responded with a 5-0 personal run off an and-1 and a rebound putback to extend the edge to eight with 3:39 on the clock.

After a layup by Illinois sophomore guard Ayo Dosunmu, who scored a game-high 21 points, extended his team's lead to 51-47 with 11:10 left to play, Ohio State rallied on a 9-0 run.

Walker knocked down two free throws to start the streak, followed by a smooth turnaround fadeaway jumper by Kaleb Wesson and highlighted by a thunderous putback dunk by Liddell, and capped by three free throws.

Illinois scored first to open the second half, pushing its lead to 39-30. After Ohio State went scoreless for more than two minutes to open the final frame, Dosunmu took an ill-advised midrange jumper in transition. Walker grabbed the rebound and went coast to coast for an and-1 finish with 17:48 left, sparking a struggling Buckeye squad.

Walker's old-fashioned three-point play incited a 10-0 Ohio State run, capped by a Kaleb Wesson three-pointer to put the home team up 40-39 with 15:38 to play. Illinois answered with an 8-0 stretch, capped by five points from Dosunmu to make it 47-40 with 13:19 on the clock.

Walker and Illinois sophomore forward Giorgi Bezhanishvili exchanged baskets before Kaleb Wesson knocked down a triple to cut the visitor's lead to 49-45 with 12:18 to play. Kaleb Wesson followed up the triple with a layup to cut the lead to two.

Overall, Ohio State shot 38.6 percent (22 of 57) from the floor, 20.0 percent (3 of 15) from three and 85.7 percent (24 of 28) from the foul line. Illinois shot 43.6 percent (24 of 55) on field goals, 27.3 percent (6 of 22) on triples and 90.0 percent (9 of 10) on free throws.

The Scarlet and Gray out-rebounded Illinois, 38-31, including a 16-9 edge on the offensive boards.

Ohio State senior walk-on Danny Hummer made his final game at Value City Arena a memorable one, scoring the game's first basket.

After Liddell connected on a midrange jumper to even the game at 6-6, Illinois ripped off an 8-0 run capped by back-to-back triples. Liddell ended the streak by converting an and-1, but Illinois freshman center Kofi Cockburn answered with a 6-0 stretch by himself to give Illinois its biggest lead of the game at 20-9.

Ohio State roared back, using an extended 15-4 run to tie the game at 24 with 6:02 until the break. Andre Wesson hit a running floater for the equalizing bucket, inciting a raucous ovation from the senior-night crowd.

The Fighting Illini responded with a 5-0 stretch and carried that momentum to a 37-30 halftime lead.

In the first half, Ohio State shot 37.0 percent (10 of 27) from the field, 12.5 percent (1 of 8) from beyond the arc and 90.0 percent (9 of 10) from the free-throw line. Illinois shot 51.9 percent (14 of 27) from the floor, 36.4 percent (4 of 11) from deep and 100 percent (5 of 5) on foul shots across the game's first 20 minutes.

"Illinois is a good basketball team, but I didn't want to have my guys go out on a bad note in their last home game," Liddell said. "So, I was more motivated, and I feel like everybody was more motivated to get a win for these guys on senior night.

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