

No. 3 Ohio State Set To Host No. 6 North Carolina With Sweet 16 On The Line



No. 3 Ohio State and No. 6 North Carolina have both moved on in the NCAA tournament after picking up wins in the first round at The Schottenstein Center on Saturday, and the teams will meet on Monday with an appearance in the Sweet 16 on the line.

The Buckeyes arrived at the round of 32 after overcoming a 16-point deficit against No. 14 James Madison, while the Tar Heels survived a late surge from No. 11 St. John's to secure another game in the tournament. Ohio State enters as the better seed and boasts a better overall record - 26-7 for the Buckeyes compared to 22-10 for North Carolina - but Ohio State is not taking this challenge lightly, especially after being pushed in the first round.

"They are incredibly talented and well-coached, and we know we'll have a real challenge," Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff said.

The Tar Heels' roster features three players - guards Deja Kelly and Kennedy Todd-Williams and the 6-1 Alyssa Utsby, who can fill in at any position - who are averaging double-digit scoring, with Kelly leading the way at 16.3 points per game, followed by Todd-Williams (13.3 ppg) and Utsby (13.1 ppg). Kelly is also the team's assists leader with 3.2 dishes per contest.

Utsby is North Carolina's strongest presence in the post, shooting 50.7 percent from the field on 10.0 attempts per game from inside the arc, and she also adds a team-high 8.3 rebounds per game.

"She's a great player," McGuff said. "Really difficult matchup because she's got great skill and seems to have a great basketball IQ. She catches it around the basket and is very patient in reading the floor and seeing where she can make her move and get to the rim. She catches a lot at the high post and she squares up and she can shoot it or pass it."

North Carolina's bench is deeper than most faced by Ohio State, with 11 players having notched at least one start and 10 averaging at least 10 minutes played per game. That deep bench allows contributions that come from across the Tar Heels' roster, with seven players averaging at least one steal per game.

In total, North Carolina averages 9.4 steals per game, which ranks 45th in the country, while Ohio State takes the ball away 11.4 times per game, which ranks eighth in the nation. That's just one aspect of the Tar Heels' defensive effort that has limited the opposition to just 68.9 points per game and 36.4 percent shooting from the field this season.

"I think they game plan really well," McGuff said. "They look at your actions and try to figure out ways to take it away...and they have got really fast, quick, athletic players who get their hands on a lot of balls and disrupt you, and so that makes it a little bit harder to run (your) offense"

As for Ohio State's side, the biggest focus beyond any individual matchup will be avoiding the slow starts that have plagued the Buckeyes in some of their biggest games this season. While a 16-point deficit may not be a death sentence against James Madison, that type of early disadvantage will likely spell the end of Ohio State's season against an opponent of North Carolina's caliber.

"Yeah, definitely (working) on trying not to dig ourselves a hole and be in a deficit every single game," guard Taylor Thierry said. "That's not going to work against every single team. That's just something we are working on and try to play our best game and try to execute things as best as possible."

Ohio State and North Carolina will tip off from The Schottenstein Center at 4 p.m. on Monday, with the winner moving on to play either No. 7 Baylor or No. 2 UConn on Saturday.