

No. 7 Ohio State Suffers 83-74 Loss To No. 21 USC In Season Opener



No. 7 Ohio State did not start the season of as it had hoped, as the Buckeyes suffered a 83-74 loss in a neutral-site matchup against No. 21 USC on Tuesday.

Ohio State was down 46-28 at the half after a poor start but responded to take a 58-56 lead heading into the fourth, where the Trojans were able to close things out due to true freshman guard JuJu Watkins, who finished with 32 points.

Starting out with a lineup featuring guards Jacy Sheldon, Celeste Taylor and Taylor Thierry, as well as forwards Rebeka Mikulášiková and Cotie McMahan, Ohio State worked to a an 11-6 lead with 5:47 left in the first after a pair of triples from Sheldon and another three-pointer from McMahan.

The first points of Taylor's Ohio State career - a pair of free throws followed by a triple - later boosted the Buckeyes to a 16-9 lead, but Ohio State missed three of its last four shots of the opening frame and led just 18-15 after the first.

USC shot poorly in the first quarter, connecting on just 35.3 percent from the floor and 20.0 percent from deep, but the script quickly flipped in the second. Behind baskets from guard Taylor Bigby and a transition score by forward Rayah Marshall following a turnover by Thierry, the Trojans opened the second quarter on a 7-2 run to take a 22-20 lead with 8:07 left in the half, leading to a quick timeout from Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff.

But the break did little to help the Buckeyes, as they committed five turnovers and were able to get off just two shots - both misses - as the Trojans increased their lead to 30-20 with 5:02 left in the quarter behind 17-2 run dating back to the first frame. Ohio State fifth-year guard Rikki Harris stopped the bleeding with a three-pointer, but USC piled on with a 16-5 run to close the half for a 46-28 lead going into the locker room.

Ohio State shot just 20.0 percent from the field (2 of 10) in the second quarter compared to 66.7 percent (12 of 18) for USC, and had just six points in the paint, while the Buckeyes also had seven

turnovers that led to 10 points for the Trojans. Watkins led the way in the first half for USC, totaling 16 points on 5-of-8 shooting, while Marshall had a first-half double-double with 12 points and 10 rebounds.

The Trojans increased the lead to 53-34 with 7:07 left in the third but Ohio State began to build momentum by getting into the paint, drawing a series fouls that all resulted in successful trips to the free-throw line to cut the deficit to 53-42 with 4:18 remaining.

Those continued trips to the paint then gave way to several baskets, as the Buckeyes scored layups on three consecutive possessions to make it 55-48, and Ohio State's vaunted defense then made an appearance, as the Buckeyes forced turnovers on USC's next five possessions to take a 56-55 lead, the team's first since early in the second quarter. The Trojans added a free throw to tie it back up before Sheldon hit a layup to give the Buckeyes a 58-56 lead heading into the fourth.

During the explosive third quarter, Ohio State outscored USC 30-10 while forcing 10 turnovers by the Trojans that resulted in 15 points. Both Sheldon (12 points) and Thierry (10 points) hit double figures in the frame while Sheldon had three steals.

But the big comeback perhaps resulted in the steam starting to run out for Ohio State to begin the fourth, as the Trojans made five of their first six shots in the frame to take a 69-62 lead with 6:35 left in the game, a 13-4 run that resulted in a timeout by McGuff. Ohio State committed a turnover coming out of the break but was able to cut the deficit down to 71-66 following a second-chance score by freshman guard Diana Collins, who finished with 16 minutes and 2 points on six shots.

After drawing within six points, 76-70, a foul by McMahon sent guard Kayla Padilla to the line, where she knocked down both shots to give the Trojans a 78-70 lead with just 1:36 remaining, and they were able to hang on for the win after Ohio State was forced to foul at the end of the game.

The Buckeyes were led by Sheldon, who had 28 points on 10-of-19 shooting with four rebounds and five steals, while Thierry added 16 points and a team-high eight rebounds. Watkins led the charge for the Trojans with 32 points on 11-of-18 shooting in her first collegiate game with six rebounds and five assists.

Ohio State will take the floor next for the team's home opener on Sunday against IUPUI, set to tip off at 1 p.m.