

Nov. 25 Start Date Give Ohio State Women's Basketball A Goal To Strive For



On Sept. 16, the NCAA Division I Council announced that Nov. 25 will be the start date for college basketball heading into the 2020-21 season. With the announcement came excitement for the Ohio State women's basketball team who, after months of unknowns, finally had a date to look forward to on the calendar.

"It's great," Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff told *Buckeye Sports Bulletin*. "There's been so much uncertainty, now we can start to talk about when official practice is going to begin, when we're going to have to start playing games, and so we can really get our mind wrapped around the best plan possible to make sure prepared on Nov. 25 to play."

Ohio State finished the 2019 campaign with a 21-12 record, with impressive regular season wins against Louisville, Indiana and Michigan and then finishing off the year with a Big Ten tournament run to the championship game, taking down Minnesota, Iowa and the Wolverines before falling to Maryland.

It was a season with more highs than many predicted for an Ohio State team utilizing almost strictly underclassmen, but it also ended abruptly, with the Buckeyes not getting a chance to take the hot stretch of play into the NCAA tournament after it was canceled due to COVID-19.

The cancellation led to a longer-than-usual offseason for Ohio State, who was unable to get together and had to stay in contact through Zoom calls and group chats instead of face-to-face.

"It was tough because we couldn't be around each other at all, and so we did some Zooms just to stay on point with some things," McGuff said. "We had guest speakers coming in and talking to them and different stuff throughout the summer to kind of keep engaged and just at least talking to each other.

"Our kids do a really good job talking with each other, texting and whatever. It's just really nice that we all can be together now. Even though we have strict protocols that we're following, it is nice to have everybody here."

It was a specifically difficult offseason for junior forward Dorka Juhasz and sophomore forward Rebeka Mikulasikova, who both were unable to travel to their home in Pecs, Hungary and Nitra, Slovakia for the majority of the summer because of travel restrictions.

“It was so crazy that after the Big Ten tournament everything shut down, and I just had an empty feeling in my heart and my soul that we couldn’t finish it,” Juhasz told BSB. “So that was already stressful, and then obviously they shut the season down and all my teammates were able to go home to their families and me and Rebeka, we couldn’t, so that was pretty hard. I tried to find ways to go home, but it was safer to stay here.”

“I wasn’t trying to risk my scholarship and my academics and everything, so I had to think about that, and then the day I finally heard the news that I’m able to come back with my student visa, I got my tickets and I was very excited to see my family.”

Juhasz said she was finally able to go home at the end of July and was in Hungary for about a month before returning to Columbus for workouts and practice. She also said that, during the offseason, there was an increased emphasis in getting the new players acclimated with the rest of the team, making sure to add them into a group message and to try and grow that team chemistry before even seeing each other in person.

“It’s harder to start a conversation whenever you haven’t really seen each other in person, but these guys are really good, we’re all friends right now and it started really easy,” Juhasz said. “That was a good point for me that this team will have great chemistry together because we were talking, asking how everybody’s doing, so we definitely talked to each other during this whole craziness.”

Another member of the team that dealt with the stresses of this unique offseason was guard Braxtin Miller, the team’s lone returning senior from the 2019-20 team. While Miller did not have to travel overseas to see her family, she did have to worry about all the unknowns regarding if there would be a season at all, and if she would be eligible if the season ultimately got canceled.

Miller told BSB that the Nov. 25 date allowed her to breathe a big sigh of relief and allowed her to focus on making the best out of her final season with the Buckeyes.

“I was asking questions like if we don’t have a season, am I still going to get another year? At the time, I was the only senior in the Zoom, so I mean it’s important for everyone, but I’m like am I done? Is this it for me?” Miller said. “I feel like for so long we never really knew what was going to be happening. So many of us were like we’re practicing, we’re working out, but are we even going to have a season? And if not, what does this mean for eligibility? And there were just so many questions, so now that we know that we have a start date for Nov. 25, it just pushes us even more to try and work as hard as we can in this little amount of time that we have.”

Juhasz said the start date also had an effect on the team in practices, with a more central goal and timeline allowing for some extra motivation in the workouts.

“I think it just makes a big difference because you know now that what you’re working for, and when you actually have a date, it’s just like every day you’re coming to the gym and you know you have to push very hard for that, and the countdown begins, so it’s very exciting, I think we’re all very happy about it.”

Juhasz and Miller are two of four upperclassmen on the team this season, with junior forward Aaliyah Patty and graduate transfer forward Tanaya Beacham coming in from Toledo. With another young roster in 2020-21 for McGuff and Ohio State, the head coach said he is excited about what he has seen from the upperclassmen, both from during the offseason and from what they have done early on in

workouts.

Both Juhasz and Miller said that they feel added pressure to be vocal leaders for the team this season, with Miller saying that it has been something talked about between her and the coaches.

“I’ve had a few, not meetings necessarily but talks with some of the coaches about how I need to be that in this environment, and I think so far I’m doing an OK job, but it’s definitely something that I have to fit into,” Miller said. “But I feel like it’s not too much of an adjustment this year opposed to last year because I was the only upperclassmen on the team last year, so there were a lot of times that it fell on me as well, so it’s definitely a topic of conversation that I have to have that (leadership) this year.”

The team is currently focusing mainly on strength and conditioning, while also having groups of five or six on the court at once to do some skill work and to break down the offense and defense, according to McGuff.

Ohio State lost a chance to make a run in the NCAA tournament back in March but have since had an extended offseason to retool and attempt to get back into the tournament in 2021. Miller knows what the expectations were for the team last season, and she is coming into the season hoping once again to prove how much ability there is on this Ohio State roster.

“I think we have so much talent and we showed that last year with how far we got, and we have a lot of people back and a lot of great talent coming in,” Miller said. “I just think that so many people counted us out last year in a lot of ways, I feel like we proved ourselves at the end, and I just feel like we need to come back just as strong, so that’s definitely some pressure on myself and all of us honestly as an organization, just to make sure that we do that successfully.”

With a date set in stone, Ohio State now has a month and a half to prepare to get back to the same levels they were at a season ago.

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