

# Ohio State Dabbles In Art Of Survival Against Wisconsin



For the first 25 minutes of Ohio State's Big Ten Tournament opener Wednesday, the Buckeyes dominated nearly all facets of the game while producing a blistering offensive display to lead by as many as 27 points early in the second half. But from there, things went south fast for the Buckeyes.

Across the final 15:31 of Wednesday's contest, Wisconsin outscored Ohio State 37-18, cutting the deficit to as little as four points in the process, while the majority Badgers crowd at the United Center became louder and louder with each bucket. The Buckeyes suffered from poor free-throw shooting and turned the ball over nine times during the stretch, but ultimately survived the massive comeback attempt staged by Wisconsin.

It wasn't an unfamiliar situation for the Buckeyes, as they have faced plenty of adversity this season — including several heartbreaking losses due to poor late-game execution. While Ohio State was able to stem the tide against the Badgers, head coach Chris Holtmann recognized the challenges of coaching while a large lead slips away.

"Your mind can go to bad places. You've got to have real discipline with your thoughts in that moment. You've got to discipline your mind to stay focused on the possession in front of you," Holtmann said. "Coaches have watched enough college basketball and coached enough games where they know there is a reason why it says survive and advance come tournament time. We've seen crazy things in our league.

"So you just understand how quickly leads can diminish," he continued. "Obviously, there were some things as coaches and players we could have done better, but I give our guys credit for trying to finish it."

Wisconsin surged on runs of 8-0, 9-0 and 11-0 during the final 15 minutes of the contest, largely feeding off of the energy provided by the crowd while Ohio State unraveled. While the Badgers gained

momentum, guard Sean McNeil admitted the Buckeyes felt the heat of the moment, but ultimately regrouped.

"I think we kind of did panic a little bit, that's something we've got to continue to get better at," McNeil said. "Teams are going to make a run, basketball in itself is a game of runs. So just learning how to respond when teams make runs and stay together."

The primary factors leading to the Buckeyes' late-game struggles stemmed from poor offensive execution against Wisconsin's press and half-court defense, while also failing to take advantage of opportunities at the free throw line.

Ohio State's nine second-half turnovers allowed the Badgers to attempt 16 more shots than the Buckeyes, while OSU's field goal percentage dipped from 68.2 percent in the first half to 36.4 percent in the second frame. As the Buckeyes saw doubt creep in from the field, the offensive woes were furthered by an 8 of 14 mark from the charity stripe during the final four minutes. Despite the icy showing from the free throw line down the stretch, Holtmann wasn't too concerned that it would be an issue moving forward in the tournament.

"Their physicality really bothered us there in the second half. Obviously, we had trouble scoring and missed some free throws," Holtmann said. "Their defense was outstanding in the second half, and I think that was the biggest reason for some of our struggles. The missed free throws, they're just that. We'll get better with that."

Although the game appeared to be slipping away from Ohio State's grasp, the Buckeyes made several key plays late to remain in front. Center Felix Okpara registered a pair of blocks and a steal across the game's final seven minutes, but his biggest play came after he forced a missed layup by Wisconsin forward Tyler Wahl and pulled down a rebound through traffic before getting fouled with 27 seconds remaining. Okpara went on to go 1 of 2 from the foul line on the trip and increased Ohio State's lead to 63-57, pushing the game out of reach.

As Ohio State did just enough to survive against the Badgers, forward Justice Sueing pointed to the growth that the team has shown over the past few weeks as the primary factor in its ability to pull out the win.

"Obviously we need to work on maintaining (the lead) as we continue on in the tournament, but a couple of months ago, you couldn't have said that we'd have been able to stay as poised as we were today," Sueing said. "I'm proud of my guys to pull it through, but props to Wisconsin. They played really hard and give us a run for our money. But just proud of our guys for being able to get this thing through."