

Ohio State Falls To Penn State 71-68



Throughout the 2021-22 season, a lot about Ohio State's hopes in any game could usually be gleaned from a thorough observation of the Buckeye stars donning No. 22 and No. 32. That's been especially true in the back half of the season as the former has gained his footing as a full-on freshman phenom and potential NBA Draft pick come this June. Malaki Branham and E.J. Liddell are not subtle about it when they're feeling good, and more often than not, their comfort has been key in Ohio State earning victories - just as an off-night for the two can signal doom.

But on March 10, in Ohio State's 71-68 loss to the 11th-seeded Penn State Nittany Lions, the conventional wisdom failed. The Buckeyes again succumbed to a second-half drought, and despite superlative efforts from its stars, fell short against PSU and saw its Big Ten run come to an end before it ever began.

Liddell opened the game looking every bit the All-Big Ten first-team selection that he now officially is. Branham looked a little worse for wear after dinging his knee in the first minutes of play, but with what Liddell was doing, Branham could seemingly afford a slower start.

Liddell knocked down a 3-pointer to open the game, a pull-up jumper shortly after, another pull-up a few minutes later, and one more 3-pointer for good measure to send the Buckeyes into the under-12 media timeout with a 15-4 lead. As he bounced to the other end of the court after that second 3-pointer - which gave him 10 points in just over eight minutes of play - he flashed a smirk at his own bench and signaled with a flick of the wrist that he was, in fact, on fire. He finished the first half with 12 points and by the time the buzzer sounded, he had 25 next to his name.

Branham offered a slower, more controlled burn. Seemingly still a little cautious of that knee, he took on more of a distributor's role than usual. The freshman scored just six first-half points but doled out four assists as the Buckeyes leaned on their veteran - and some spot contributions from new fan-favorite Joey Brunk, who had six first-half points of his own - to fill up the scoreboard in the opening frame. They couldn't quite hold that 15-4 start, but the post pairing did guide Ohio State into a 33-24 halftime edge.

The time in the locker room seemed to do Branham some good because he showed no hesitation in opening the second frame. He opened the scoring for the Buckeyes with a tough shot in the lane, added two more points at the free throw line a possession later and tested his range from deep on the third series of the half, though that try went begging.

A few minutes later, as the two sides (mostly Liddell and Penn State's Jalen Pickett) traded baskets, Branham connected again, pushing Ohio State's lead to 49-40 just about two minutes after a Pickett bucket had cut the deficit to just four.

Although the confidence of Ohio State's stars in the opening frame can be helpful for projecting results well ahead of time, there's nothing that has determined more Buckeye games this season than the middle of the second half. Ohio State has seen lead after lead evaporate between the 12- and four-minute marks in the second half on the tail of lengthy shooting droughts. And when Ohio State missed its next four field-goal tries and turned the ball over twice after that Branham make - with Penn State cutting slowly into the deficit - it looked to be nearing the danger zone.

When Branham missed his next 3-point try after a pair of Liddell free throws and Myles Dread knocked down a triple of his own to knot the game at 53, the Buckeyes blasted straight into it. By the time Brunk knocked down a floater to snap the drought, Ohio State had gone nearly seven full minutes without a field goal, falling behind 56-54 before the Brunk conversion tied the game back up. Brunk found the bottom of the net again with four minutes to play, but Penn State's Sam Sessoms seemed to come to the same conclusion at the same time, and he had the benefit of facing Ohio State's perimeter defense. The shifty guard darted into the paint for an and-one basket to put Penn State ahead 59-56 and then answered the Brunk shot with another far-too-easy layup, blowing past Cedric Russell.

In need of one defensive stop within the final minutes of the game, Ohio State found none. Penn State scored on 13 of its last 16 possessions, Justin Ahrens missed his only 3-point try of the game, Liddell fumbled the ball with 10 seconds to play when Penn State did finally miss a free throw, and Seth Lundy wrapped the game up when he hit both tries in the final trip to the line, giving Penn State its final edge, 71-68 - bolstered on the OSU end by a Jamari Wheeler 3-pointer at the buzzer.