

Ohio State Head Coach Chris Holtmann Previews Illinois State, Discusses Wide- Ranging Topics Ahead Of Season Opener



With the start of the season just two days away, Ohio State head men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann spoke to members of the media via Zoom.

Holtmann discussed the Buckeyes' opener with Illinois State, how the COVID-19 pandemic affects their season, a couple former players, his current roster, the strength of the Big Ten, and much more.

What follows is a bullet-point rundown paraphrasing what Holtmann said:

- I'm looking forward to getting started here, and I'm grateful for our medical staff. I hope everyone is healthy and safe out there.
- We've got two games this week, and I think we're going to have a really challenging opener against Illinois State. They have beaten South Carolina, Georgia, and Ole Miss in the past two seasons.
- They have solid shooting on the perimeter and solid depth on the interior. We expect it to be a great challenge and a great battle.

Center position?

- It's something we're still working through and figuring out. Without exhibition games, it's difficult to gauge exactly how many minutes our guys will play at the five-spot.

COVID protocols?

- Both teams need to have clean tests these next couple days. Our training staff is in contact with their training staff to make sure the tests are negative. We will do a test when we arrive on Tuesday and we'll do a test on Wednesday morning. The risk you take in nonconference games is that if there is a negative test, there will not be a game.
- When we scheduled the game with Illinois State, we had conversations about the Big Ten's standards for COVID-19 testing.

Possibility of cancellations?

- They understand that's the expectation that cancellations will happen in a season like ours. We're going to schedule 27 games, and I hope we play 27 games, but I'm not necessarily optimistic that's going to happen.
- Outside of the NBA bubble, every league has had interruptions, and they're aware that that could happen.

Status of fourth-year junior wing Musa Jallow?

- Musa Jallow will be a game-time decision.

Justice Sueing's defensive development after playing at a poor defensive team like Cal?

- His experience helped him from his previous institution. He took his defensive performance personally. He wants to get better and be an all-around, versatile defender. And I think it's important that a player cares about wanting to be better defensively.

Player's mental health amid pandemic?

- Our responsibility as coaches and as a coaching staff is to our players. And it's our responsibility to make sure they are responding to the situation well.
- It's important to have an open dialogue, and we just had an open dialogue about parents not being allowed to come to games.

Guard depth?

- I'm anxious to see. We have a really good opponent, so we're going to get to learn a lot about our group. Outside of Jimmy (Sotos), is that Justin (Ahrens), Gene (Brown), who are we playing at those positions? We've had good practices, but we've only been playing against each other. We have some expanded roles, and we have some new guys that we're integrating into our system, so we're a work in progress.

Evaluating your team without scrimmages against other teams?

- It is a challenge. Those scrimmages tell you so much about your team early in the season. We learned a lot in each half of our scrimmage against Louisville last year, and we learned a lot in our exhibition game.

Difficult preparing for team without any tape?

- They have a couple really good guards returning that were important pieces for them last year. They have a lot of new faces as well, though, so we don't know as much about them and we will have to learn more.

Brian Hartline's message about how difficult it is being an athlete in the modern day and age?

- Good for Brian, I saw that and I completely agree with what he was talking about. He made a great point about the amount of pressure that athletes go through in this day and age. I think that conversation about limiting your consumption is one that we had with our team in the offseason. You have to really make sure your players understand where they are finding their truth. It takes discipline. In today's world, there's a lot of noise.

Protocols for nonconference games?

- As far as I understand right now, because teams are under different testing protocols, that is really a nonconference decision.

Acclimating Meechie Johnson into the program once he enrolls?

- He'll have a specific protocol that we'll have to go through with him with his health in mind before he starts. The biggest thing for Meechie is to think long-term and what is in his best interest long-term. COVID adds to that process, but even outside of COVID, we want to be smart about getting acclimated to being game ready.

Could E.J. Liddell play the center for you guys?

- Could he guard the 5 (position) some? Sure. I think it depends on some of the other guys, and maybe the length we have at other spots on the floor. He's a big guy that's been learning to play more outside, but he's played inside his whole life at a high level.

Concerns about defense genuine or product of no scrimmages?

- It's real. I think we diagnosed that early on as something that we're going to be challenged with this year. I think people forget how much growth Kaleb had in his third year, and how good he was at walling up, talking the game, and making plays defensively. And his brother, Andre, was terrific as well. I think the loss of those two guys presents a challenge for us. Our numbers were terrific last year, but they weren't as good in conference play.

Junior guard Duane Washington's progress as a playmaker?

- He's made progress. We chart assists and turnovers everyday. Offensively for him, that's an area he's really focused on, as well as his two-point shot making

Seth Towns?

- He's making progress. He has done more in practice in the past few weeks, but I do not have a timeline on when he will be back

More anxiety about your own team or opponent?

- I'm excited for our group. I'm excited for a game that's going to challenge us. Their net rating and RPI is always really good. You're anxious to see how your team responds to the environment and playing without fans.

Kaleb Wesson going undrafted?

- There's no question in my mind that Kaleb can and will help an NBA team. Not getting drafted can really benefit a young player because he can find a team that really values what he brings to the table.

Jae'Sean Tate signing with Houston Rockets?

- I don't have to say anything to the people on this call how special Jae'Sean Tate is. He embodies what it means to be a competitor and a teammate. It's usually guys like him that have 'the stuff' that's required to make it on the path he had. I'm 100 percent convinced he's going to have a long NBA career.

Creating energy from bench without fans?

- It's going to be different. That's going to be critical. Players are going to be separated with the distance between chairs, so there's a lack of connectivity that they're going to have to fight.

Is everyone available besides Seth Towns?

- Everybody is available. We're still evaluating Musa's return and what that will look like. As far as the starting lineup, I couldn't give you an exact one right now. Or I could, but I won't.

What do you think about the idea of the NCAA showing flexibility and allowing players like Kaleb to return to college after going undrafted?

- I would entertain that. Those are conversations you have with the player. And when they go down that road, they usually go two feet in down that path.

How tough is the Big Ten slate going to be with seven ranked teams and three inside the top 10, considering Michigan State isn't even one of the top 10 at No. 12?

- The Big Ten is the best league I've ever been a part of. It's the best league in the country and the deepest. Clearly, Michigan State should be in the top 10. I don't think most people look at rankings right now, we're not concerned with it. It's going to be a gauntlet in the Big Ten. But we're focused on Illinois State, and we've got a lot of improvement to before we get to that.

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