

Ohio State Head Coach Jake Diebler Proud Of End-Of-Season Run, Hoping To Take Lessons Learned Into Next Year And Beyond



Ohio State's 2023-24 season ended in disappointing fashion Tuesday night at Value City Arena with a 79-77 upset loss to No. 4 seed Georgia in the NIT Quarterfinals, but for newly hired head coach Jake Diebler, the sour end does not discredit what his program was able to accomplish down the stretch.

Speaking with the media at the Value City Arena press conference for the first time after a loss as an interim or full-time head coach, Diebler was quick to point out his team's triumphs through the final five weeks of the season, where — under his leadership — the Buckeyes turned what was a lost 14-10 campaign into a year in which they were competing for a postseason championship, emerging as winners in eight of their final 11 contests.

Diebler made it clear after the game that his players' ability to overcome the adversity of a mid-season coaching change and turn the season around in just over one month of play is worth being celebrated, as it is a strong showing of commitment and togetherness from his group that he will remember for a long time.

"I told our guys (after the game), 'This is a team I will never forget,' " Diebler said. "What we were able to accomplish — and I've said this, I just want to make sure people hear me — I thought the character of our guys, both individually and the collective character, of this team was revealed in such a big way from mid-February on.

"What we were able to do as a program during a time with just a great deal of adversity and different emotions — I hope our guys are remembered for that. How they handle the adversity, how they finish the season. The leadership of his team was so impressive — the staff, the way they finished and served these guys. That's what I'm going to eventually be able to reflect on even more. I hope people remember this group for the toughness they showed during adversity and the togetherness they showed."

Diebler, who will now be tasked with being the face of a Buckeyes' program who is desperate for a return to national relevance after two consecutive seasons of missing out on the NCAA Tournament,

added that there were many different emotions inside of him when the buzzer sounded on the Buckeyes' season.

While he admitted that the result of the game is a disappointing finish to the year, he was still proud of the way his team fought in the second half — where they used a 17-0 run to turn a 13-point deficit into a six-point lead — a display of perseverance and toughness that he thinks could serve as two pillars of this program for years to come.

"I thought we fought in a manner that represented what this program needs to be about," Diebler said. "But we were certainly disappointed in the result at the same time. Then also, there's the emotion of, this is the end of this team. And we've talked about extending the finality of this group as long as we possibly can and fighting for each other and playing as much as we can.

"And it hit in that moment, to some degree, that we did a good job doing that and extending (the season). So I guess you could say I'm proud of our team, but it's a lot of emotions, a lot of different emotions in that moment when you're walking off the court."

Despite the instant success in his first 11 games as head coach, Diebler will now be faced with keeping the players who led this end-of-season surge on the roster both next season and beyond. With standout sophomore starters such as Roddy Gayle Jr., Bruce Thornton and Felix Okpara, among others, likely to garner interest from other teams in the transfer portal, the coach said he is stressing the importance of player retention this offseason, which will ultimately help him build upon the strong foundation and culture he has begun to establish.

"I don't know that I can get into specifics on that, but retention is critical," he said. "An overview of that, it's really important. Roster management, it's a completely different landscape right now. For us, retention's going to be important."

"(Gayle, Thornton and Okpara) have poured their heart and soul into this program," he added. "I think they've really — all of them — have really embraced the way we've wanted to play, the changes we've made. They've played well in their own way, and they're growing. I'm proud of them for that.

"They are a critical part — we talked about Jamison (Battle) and Dale (Bonner) — those three are a big part of the leadership, too, of us finishing the way that we have. Retention, I think you know how I feel about that. But right now, it's about, man, those guys gave it their all to the end of this season. And I'm proud of them for that, certainly."

Regardless of who Diebler can retain and who might depart, Diebler said that his player's ability to fight through adversity and emerge from a difficult stretch a better, more together team can serve as a lesson learned for all who were a part of this program this season, something that he thinks can even transcend beyond the hardwood.

"I told our guys in the locker room, 'I hope you remember what it took to be successful during this time,' " Diebler said. "Because I think that will extend far beyond their basketball careers, whenever those end — some guys hopefully have really long professional careers. But as they go into life, there are some lessons to be learned during the stretch that'll serve them well for the rest of their lives."