

Buckeyes Banking On Confidence, Experience To Guide Them Towards Lengthy B1G Tournament Run



Ohio State interim head coach Jake Diebler kicked off conference tournament week with a bang, proclaiming during Monday's press conference that his team — who has experienced a rapid surge in the Big Ten standings since he took over for Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14 with five wins in six games — “absolutely” deserves to be in consideration for the NCAA Tournament.

Despite Diebler's unwavering confidence in his team and their overall strength of resume, the Buckeyes — who enter postseason play with a 19-12 overall record and 9-11 mark in conference play — will still likely need to do some damage, most likely two or three wins in the Big Ten Tournament, to receive some consideration for a bid to the Big Dance.

That first opportunity to improve their NCAA Tournament resume comes on Thursday night when Diebler's 10th-seeded Buckeyes match up against No. 7 seed Iowa in the second round of the conference tournament held at the Target Center in Minneapolis, a game in which Ohio State is a slight favorite as tip off quickly approaches.

The matchup between the Buckeyes and Hawkeyes is the second between the two programs this season, the first coming on Feb. 2 when the then-Holtmann-led Buckeyes fell 79-77 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, a last-second defeat where Ohio State scored zero fast break points to Iowa's 17 en route to its 15th consecutive road loss.

Diebler, who was in the associate head coaching chair during the Feb. 2 meeting, said that while both teams have an entirely different and more positive feel to them entering postseason play, with Ohio State winning five of six and Iowa taking four of its last six, his team can still build some confidence — and perhaps more importantly, some motivation — from the way their last matchup with the Hawkeyes ended.

"The idea that we had the ball in our hands with a chance to win it in their gym is something we'll absolutely reflect on," Diebler said. "But they have some momentum, so they're not the exact same team. But we also do too. We've tweaked some things to be a little different. So it won't be the same game, but we'll certainly take elements of that game."

"I believe there's a confidence factor knowing that 'Hey, we were in their gym with a chance to win the game. We've talked openly about this. They beat us game one, so an element of this game is this is a payback game. There are certainly other big things at stake, but we haven't shied away from talking about the different storylines of these games."

While the Buckeyes' surge and change in mentality under Diebler has been well-documented, Iowa's late-season success has been powered mostly by its offense, which has averaged 85.8 points per game on a combined 52.4 percent shooting.

Diebler said that Iowa's high-powered offense, which ended the regular season ranked third in scoring at 83.1 points per game, is a product of the team having multiple players both on the inside and outside that can score in waves on any given night. He added these efforts are led by Hawkeyes junior forward Payton Sandfort, who earned consensus third-team All-Big Ten honors by both media and coaches after finishing the regular season with 16.2 points and 6.5 rebounds per contest, both of which lead the team.

"They didn't win the last one (against Illinois), but they've been playing well," Diebler said. "Sanford, he's been really, really good. They have depth on the perimeter and on the interior, which gives them some versatility. So they're a really good team with a really good coach."

Storylines and NCAA Tournament scenarios aside, Diebler said that he feels his team has a great amount of confidence heading into Thursday night's matchup given both the way the end of this regular season has transpired and how many of his core players fought in last year's Big Ten Tournament, a year in which the Buckeyes advanced to the semifinal round against Purdue as a No. 13 seed.

To Diebler, this combination of experience and confidence has Ohio State poised for another exciting Big Ten Tournament run, one that — unlike last year — can result in the Buckeyes sneaking their way into the NCAA Tournament.

"We have a core group of guys who know what to expect with the Big Ten Tournament, who have confidence in what they're able to accomplish," Diebler said. So all that's valuable, certainly. Each season, each team is different. But our guys know what it feels like and what we're capable of, and hopefully we can build even more on that.

"I told our guys last night, I was really proud — I don't think anybody anticipated us positioning ourselves with a bye (in the Big Ten Tournament, and they deserve the credit for that. I thought that was really something that they needed to hear and be proud of. But it's March Madness. Anything can happen. This is the beauty of this tournament. As a program, we've had a couple of nice runs here in the last few years...So we're excited, and our guys are confident right now. I think that confidence is the most important piece."

The Buckeyes and Hawkeyes are set to tip off at 6:30 p.m. on Big Ten Network. The winner of this second-round matchup will face off against No. 2 seed and 13th-ranked Illinois, with that game slated to tip off at 6:30 on Friday and air on Big Ten Network.