

Ohio State Leans On Several Players With Likekele Away From Team



During its first eight games of the season, No. 23 Ohio State benefitted greatly from the play of veteran wing Isaac Likekele, who joined the Buckeyes as a transfer out of Oklahoma State in the offseason.

Serving in a variety of roles, Likekele has showcased the versatility that jumped out to head coach Chris Holtmann during his recruitment in the offseason. The Arlington, Texas, native kept the Buckeyes steady offensively with his ability to facilitate the ball while showing his positional versatility on defense by typically guarding the opponent's best perimeter player and seamlessly transitioning between defending guards and forwards.

Prior to Ohio State's thrilling 67-66 win over Rutgers on Dec. 8, the Buckeyes announced that Likekele was away from the team while dealing with a personal, family situation in his home state of Texas. Holtmann said there was "no real change" in terms of Likekele's status on Dec. 13, while noting that his thoughts continue to be with Likekele as he goes through a difficult time.

"He's had some tragic things that he was working through there with people close to him," Holtmann said.

With Likekele sidelined indefinitely, Holtmann emphasized that Ohio State will need to see improvements from several players in a variety of areas in order to fill the void left by Likekele, especially on the defensive end.

"(We miss) his impact defensively, I think that and some of his playmaking, his rebounding," Holtmann said. "It's hard to replicate his physicality defensively, his ability to guard five positions. He's got good attention to detail, he's a smart defender. He also does create some easy scores for us in transition with his ability to push the ball. I think all those things we've missed."

Offensively, freshman guard Bruce Thornton — who has already served as Ohio State's primary

ballhandler and facilitator — will need to remain steady as a playmaker for the Buckeyes. Thornton's 2.8 assists per game rank second on the team behind Likekele, who dishes 3.1 assists per game while turning the ball over just 1.3 times per game — compared to Thornton's 1.8. Not only will Thornton be counted on to limit turnovers and facilitate the offense at a high level, but he'll need to continue to play with the level of poise that has drawn praise from Holtmann.

"(Bruce) is really tough," Holtmann said. "He really does have great poise. He's used to winning, and as much as anybody I've ever coached at a young age, he plays to win. And not every kid plays to win, or understands what playing to win looks like. He was extremely well coached in high school, he understands what playing to win is."

Defensively, freshmen guard Roddy Gayle Jr. and forward Brice Sensabaugh will be tasked with picking up Likekele's versatility and intensity on that end of the floor. Gayle has already shown flashes of strong play on the defensive end, collecting three blocks and four steals on the season, while Holtmann has noted that he's been encouraged by Gayle's defensive approach this season.

"(Roddy) will be even more important without Isaac," Holtmann said. "He's a two-way player, his defense is ahead of his offense. He's got a chance to grow offensively, I think we could see a different player come February, offensively, than what we do now. He's got to keep working."

"He's 6-4, long, with good defensive instincts. He can really move and we need that."

Sensabaugh has been defensively challenged at times this season, showing lapses in attention to detail on that end in moments this year. However, he registered his most productive defensive outing against Rutgers, tallying a block and two steals. With his 6-6 frame and ability to move laterally, he'll also be a key piece to help fill the void left by Likekele.

Likekele's rebounding will also be sorely missed, as his 6.3 boards per game sit second on the team behind only Zed Key — who tallies 8.7 rebounds per contest. Redshirt forward Justice Sueing — who Holtmann has called one of the best rebounding wings in the country on numerous occasions — and Sensabaugh will need to pick up the slack, as they've combined to produce 8.0 rebounds together.

After a nine-day break, Ohio State returns to action on Saturday against North Carolina at 3 p.m. in Madison Square Garden in New York City as part of the CBS Sports Classic.