

Ohio State Looking To Snap 14-Game Road Losing Streak At Iowa



Coming off a three-game losing streak and a stretch of six losses in seven games, Ohio State is in danger of having its season spiral out of control with 10 games still left on the schedule, a similar scenario to what the team endured during last year's 16-19 campaign.

With the recent stretch of sluggish play — along with an active 14-game road losing streak that dates back to Jan. 1, 2023 — weighing over them as the calendar flips to February, the Buckeyes are desperate to string together some wins and get their season back on track this month, something those within the program are confident they can still accomplish.

"There's great optimism still ahead," assistant coach Mike Netti said on Thursday. "10 games is a lot of games to play, and you have some teams that are in the middle of the pack, just like us. The reality is we're two games away from fifth place in the league. It's the reality that you have to look at. You can't worry about yesterday, you can't worry about maybe one you dropped on the road, you have to move forward."

"That's definitely our mentality," freshman forward Devin Royal said when asked about Netti's comments. "We just want to make sure that we keep working. We don't want to go into the rest of the season thinking, 'Oh, we already lost this, we don't want to keep working.' But in our heads and our coach's heads, we still have a lot of games to approve who we are and how good we are."

Before the Buckeyes think about climbing up the Big Ten standings, though, they will need to break both their active losing streaks, an opportunity they can seize on Friday night when the team travels to Carver-Hawkeye Arena to take on the 12-9 Iowa Hawkeyes. Iowa, led by longtime coach Fran McCaffrey, has experienced a similar set of midseason struggles as Ohio State, dropping three of its last four contests, including a 14-point home loss to then-No. 2 Purdue on Jan. 20.

But the Hawkeyes, who enter Friday's contest with an 8-3 home record, still pose a formidable threat

for Ohio State, specifically with their high-flying offense. Iowa heads into February with the No. 2 scoring offense in the Big Ten at 84.4 points per game, while they also rank sixth and seventh in the conference in team field-goal (47.4 percent) and three-point (34.4 percent) percentage.

While the Hawkeyes boast strong numbers offensively, they present the biggest challenge with their pace of play. Iowa boasts the nation's 14th-best adjusted tempo rating in KenPom at 72.6, a metric that tracks the number of possessions per 40 minutes. The Hawkeyes' pace — as well as their overall offensive efficiency — has caught the eye of Netti, who sees Friday night's matchup as a stiff test for his group.

"Their tempo is really high," Netti said. "They've always played fast, they've played loose. Fran (McCaffrey) does a great job giving them freedom. Right now, they're getting a lot of production from Perkins, who's always hurt us. But they have good skill. They can shoot it well. They can play early in the clock. And Freeman inside has really given them another weapon at the basket.

"So another huge test for us with a team that's playing fast and playing in transition, as Illinois did. So we're going to have to build our defense. We're going to have to be tough on the ball. And we're going to have to contest shooters. So it's a big challenge for us on the road."

Iowa's fast-paced offense is led by the scoring trio of Tony Perkins, Payton Sandfort and Ben Krikke, who average 15.5, 15.0 and 15.0 points per game on a combined 49.2 percent shooting. The Hawkeyes boast a fourth double-digit scorer in forward Owen Freeman, who scores 10.9 points per game along with 6.0 rebounds and 35 total blocks, making for a balanced Hawkeyes offense that Netti said will test an Ohio State defense that is still searching for an identity this season. The Buckeyes enter the Iowa game with No. 7 scoring defense in the Big Ten, allowing 69.1 points per game, while they rank 11th in opponent three-point field goal percentage at 35.9 percent.

"The ability to guard the ball is an emphasis that we're spending a lot of time on," Netti said. "Moving forward, we're going to have to be tougher, more physical. As coach (Chris Holtmann) mentioned after the game, (we need to be) just nastier. We talked about it after the (Illinois) game, being tougher, being nastier on the ball...We believe in our defense, and they'll be better moving forward."

While Netti is confident that his defense and team can still turn it around this season, he also acknowledged that none of this will happen if they cannot put forth their best efforts and defeat Iowa in its home arena, giving them their first true road victory in 397 days.

"For us to take care of Iowa, that's our main focus. And then after that,, we'll approach the next one. But, you know, you have to win one game at a time. You have to approach it one game at a time. But again, we're still in position to have a great run to finish and out here, and that's where our head is."