

Ohio State Opens Big Ten Tournament Play Against Wisconsin



It's win or go home for Ohio State at the Big Ten Tournament.

The Buckeyes (13-18, 5-15 Big Ten) will need a five-day run to the conference tournament title in order to pick up an NCAA Tournament berth, starting with a contest against 12th-seeded Wisconsin (17-13, 9-11) in the opening round on Wednesday at 6:30 p.m., with the opportunity to play fifth-seeded Iowa looming.

As one loss will end Ohio State's season, head coach Chris Holtmann recognized the challenge awaiting his team in Chicago.

"There's always urgency in these settings, but there's obviously great urgency (for us)," Holtmann said. "As much as anything, you're trying to focus on those things you've done well and not come off that messaging in terms of what have we done well and what do we need to continue to grow in. That's as important as anything as we head into it."

Wisconsin enters Wednesday's contest on the NCAA Tournament bubble and desperately needs a prolonged run at the Big Ten Tournament to secure its spot in March Madness. The Badgers have been one of the more inconsistent teams in the conference this season, scoring wins over then-No. 13 Maryland while sweeping Iowa, but only won back-to-back Big Ten games once this season.

In their lone meeting this season, the Badgers held off a late run from Ohio State after Holtmann was ejected late in the first half. Wisconsin carried a 43-27 lead into the half, but a 13-0 run allowed Ohio State to trail by just two with 30 seconds to play. While the Badgers missed their final nine field goal attempts, standout guard Chucky Hepburn hit a trio of free throws to put the game out of reach for the Buckeyes, as Wisconsin escaped with a 65-60 win.

"Last time we played them, we didn't play up to par. We weren't playing correctly," guard Isaac

Likekele said. "There's just a lot of things we were doing then that I feel like we're doing differently now."

Among the new things Likekele alluded to was a newfound reliance on small-ball lineups with forward Zed Key sidelined after getting season-ending shoulder surgery. Holtmann has turned to freshman center Felix Okpara to handle the more demanding post presences but also has played 6-7 guard Eugene Brown III and 6-5 wing Isaac Likekele at the five to give Ohio State some positional versatility.

However, Ohio State's small-ball lineups may run into issues against the sizable Wisconsin frontcourt — containing 6-9 forward Tyler Wahl and 7-0 center Steven Crawl. Wahl produces 11.6 points and a team-high 7.1 rebounds per game while Crawl adds 11.3 points and 6.3 rebounds per game.

"Right now, (playing small) gives us the best chance to win. It's playing with a little bit more mobility and speed," Holtmann said. "Now, that'll be tested against Wisconsin because they play two post guys. Wahl is a forward who can guard one through five and has the ability to really hurt you in the post."

While Wahl and Crawl could throw a wrench in Ohio State's small-ball plans, the Badgers also get solid offensive contributions from a pair of backcourt players. Hepburn and Connor Essegian lead the Badgers in scoring with 12.2 and 11.9 points per game, respectively. Hepburn and Essegian do their damage from deep, as Hepburn connects on 43.1 percent of his three-point attempts while Essegian registers 38.8 percent shooting from three.

As the Badgers provide challenges from the interior and perimeter, Ohio State will have its hands full at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday at the United Center. The game will be televised on Big Ten Network.