

Ohio State Prepared For Big Ten-Style Matchup With Loyola Chicago



Ohio State has seen teams like Loyola Chicago before. The seventh-seeded Buckeyes, set to open NCAA Tournament play at 12:15 p.m., on Friday against the 10th-seeded Ramblers, winners of the Missouri Valley Conference, have prepared across the last four days for a physical matchup – just like the kind they faced all season in the hard-scrabble Big Ten.

“They are very similar to Big Ten teams – strong, physical,” Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann said. “I think they are older than most Big Ten games, but they are strong, physical, really, really good defensively. Their style of play, they are as physical a team as we have played all year.”

“There’s a lot of Big Ten tendencies with them on film,” assistant coach Ryan Pedon added.

For the Buckeyes, that familiarity can be a blessing or a curse. Ohio State escaped the Big Ten with a winning record and claimed the No. 6 spot in the conference tournament, but didn’t exactly leave conference play unscathed. After an 11-4 start in league play, Ohio State fell in four of its final five games and dropped its first Big Ten Tournament game to Penn State, struggling with much of the same physicality, ball-screen offense and defensive acumen that the Ramblers hope to present. Avoiding the same fate that fell the Buckeyes more often than not down the stretch will start with that physicality, from which everything else may develop.

“They are a tough team that competes on every possession. They guard, they are active on defense, they get steals, they make you guard for a while, so very much a Big Ten-like game,” senior Justin Ahrens said. “That plays into our hands because we have been playing Big Ten teams all year. The biggest thing for us is we have to be the tougher team, the more competitive team when the ball tips Friday at 12:15. If we do that, we will be just fine.”

Loyola Chicago presents a familiar challenge to the Buckeyes in stature, too. Even with a year of space between this squad and its untimely end a season ago, last year’s first-round loss to Oral Roberts still

looms around the program. The Ramblers are not Oral Roberts, but a mid-major catching fire late and pulling a first-round upset is a tune that Ohio State recognizes all too well.

"It's been on our mind since the day it happened," Ahrens said. "That was history, so it was something we had in mind when we were working all last summer, throughout the whole season. So we're excited to get out there Friday, cut loose and just leave it all out there and compete."

The Ramblers do offer plenty of new issues for the Buckeyes to deal with, though. And none appear more critical on paper than guard Lucas Williamson.

Twice the MVC Defensive Player of the Year, the 6-4 super senior from Chicago may be the toughest matchup of the season for Ohio State freshman guard Malaki Branham, who has blossomed down the stretch into Ohio State's No. 2 scoring option. Therein lies the concern for Ohio State - Branham is the No. 2 scoring threat, but for much of the last two months, he's been the only reliable scoring threat outside of junior forward E.J. Liddell. If Williamson is able to impede Branham, Ohio State runs the risk of flatlining offensively.

"He's terrific on both ends. He's a terrific player, I think there's no question he's an NBA player," Holtmann said of Williamson. "He's got great versatility, has been really productive for a really long time. I think he played on their Final Four team and played an important role on their Final Four team. So he's a terrific talent. Older kid. They're all older, to be honest with you. They're a very old, strong, physical team, and that's why I think they've had so much success.

"(Malaki is) an 18-year-old, so he's learning. He's an 18-year-old going against a - I don't know how old Williamson is (he's 23) - so I do think there's a strength and physicality factor that's gonna be a challenge for Malaki. He's a kid that just wants to continue to improve. And he's done that throughout the year. Defensively, he needs to. He needs to continue to get better with that. Some of that's a strength issue, some of the times he gets offensively in trouble is a strength issue as well. Not a lot you can do about that. But I know he's got great respect for Williamson."

For the first time since March 1, Branham and Liddell will have a little extra help in the lineup in the form of super senior forward Kyle Young and sophomore center Zed Key. Both players missed the home stretch of the season with injuries, and both were listed as available for the Buckeyes ahead of their matchup. In those players, specifically Young, Ohio State is hopeful it can pick up a boost in energy all over, be it with his off-ball movement offensively, his defensive versatility and his rebounding acumen. In Key, Ohio State returns a critical bigger body down low, which could be especially helpful against the Ramblers who have just one contributor taller than 6-7.

"I think it's activity for one. He's really active. And it is versatility. It's activity and versatility, and then he helps our rebounding a lot, too," Holtmann said of Young's value. "I think those two things. He's also gotten smarter as he's gotten older in how to defend and play. You know, just the versatility that he provides. I feel like I've banged that drum for months now. I feel like that's really important. But his activity is pretty good, too, when he's playing like Kyle."

Young's defensive chops could prove as important here as anything else. Loyola Chicago likes ball-screen sets as much as any team in the nation and has found much of its scoring success from forcing teams into unfriendly matchups off of switches. Young is one of the few players in the scarlet and gray comfortable guarding multiple positions and makes defensive switches much easier on the Buckeyes.

If he can help to keep Loyola Chicago off the offensive boards (not traditionally a strength of theirs), he can limit the damage done by a top 10 offense in effective shooting percentage, too. Elite shooting becomes much more dangerous with increased volume, and though it can't be fully eliminated, reducing shots will always be a positive for the struggling Buckeye defense.

With that, and with a more consistent version of the offense than that which arrived for the opening stanza of March, Ohio State would have the advantage on paper. But as these Buckeyes have shown in recent weeks, paper projection and on-court production do not necessarily correlate. The advanced statistics have yet to catch up with the month Ohio State has had, but if they did, the numbers would not be kind to Holtmann squad. However, Liddell thinks that with the week the Buckeyes have had to recover and move forward, they're ready to show the nation a team that many thought wouldn't return this season. To beat the Ramblers, they'll need to do just that.

"It's been a rough couple of weeks, but we had to all buy-in. We made it to March Madness, and now we have to prove ourselves, honestly," Liddell said Thursday. "We have to have that underdog mentality because I feel like a lot of people have been counting us out recently. I feel like people forgot about how we play when we're fully healthy and we're all locked into everything. Come tomorrow, y'all will see a different team."