

Ohio State Ready For Road Challenge Against Slumping No. 20 Wisconsin



Coming off a thrilling double-overtime victory at home against Maryland on Saturday, Ohio State is hoping to bottle that success on the road against No. 20 Wisconsin on Tuesday night, where it will look to string together consecutive wins for the first time in 41 days.

This will not be an easy for the Buckeyes, however, as not only have the program not won a road game in its last 15 attempts — a losing streak that dates back to Jan. 1, 2023 — but they will also be matching up against a Badgers team that defeated them by double digits in their home arena just over a month ago.

Speaking with the media at Value City Arena on Monday, head coach Chris Holtmann said that while this Badgers team has a different feel than they did in their Jan. 10 matchup — having dropped 14 spots in the AP Top 25 after losing last four conference games, with two of them coming to 13-10 Rutgers and 8-16 Michigan — he still expects head coach Greg Gard's team to come out swinging on their home floor.

(They're going to come out) hungry," Holtmann said. "They're a proud group...and (Wisconsin forward Tyler Wahl) has been one of my favorite players to compete against just because his competitive spirit is phenomenal. He's an absolute warrior. So they're going to come out hungry. I think our group will come out hungry. And we'll go from there."

Despite its recent sluggish play, Wisconsin still boasts a talented and veteran-laden roster that gave the Buckeyes fits when the two teams last matched up in January. In addition to the previously-mentioned Wahl, who is the Badgers' No. 2 scorer at 11.5 points per game and contributed 11 points and five rebounds against Ohio State, the Buckeyes were also burnt by the veteran talents of guards A.J. Storr and Max Klesmit, who scored 18 and 17 points, respectively, with all of Klesmit's points coming in the second half.

These contributions helped the Badgers outscore Ohio State 19-4 in the final 6:14 of game action and

come away with a come-from-behind 71-60 win, a second-half collapse that became a common trend for Holtmann's squad across the next month of play. Despite those conference collapses, Holtmann said he thinks his team is better equipped to execute down the stretch and hold onto leads heading into this matchup, as they are coming off a win over Maryland where they showed the poise and confidence needed to come away with a close victory.

"I hope that we can take some of the things we did (against Maryland), particularly late, in the last 15 minutes of the game, where it was back-and-forth and at times didn't look good," Holtmann said. "I thought our guys played with tremendous offensive poise there. To be down three, to have that possession that was just a terrific possession by our guys, where Roddy (Gayle Jr.) kicked it to Bruce (Thornton for the game-tying three late in the second half) showed great poise, great maturity."

"You're going to need that in bunches on the road when there's the crowd, but you need it at home too. So hopefully we can take those moments where we just played. And we played with an aggressiveness that I think we lacked a little bit against Indiana (on Feb. 6). And hopefully that can help us here moving forward."

Ohio State also struggled to get its top players going against Wisconsin earlier this season, with the sophomore duo of Gayle and Thornton combining for just 21 points on 10-of-29 shooting in the loss. Holtmann said that he thinks his second-year standouts— who are coming off a 24-and-17-point performance against Maryland — can get going this time around against the Badgers by implementing more of a small lineup for longer stretches, which would create more space for both Gayle and Thornton to make plays off the dribble.

"(Wisconsin's) really good defensively," Holtmann said. "And after watching (the Wisconsin film), I thought we got some decent looks. We had some plays where — I think Bruce might have missed a couple front ends of one-and-ones there, which he's going to make more than not. Roddy had an open three on the semi-transition, but it was wide open late that if you just make a couple of those, I'm fine with him taking."

"But I think we have to figure out some ways we can maybe free those guys up. And I think, at times, if we look at a lineup where the floor is a little bit more open, that might help those guys. So potentially playing some lineups where there's just a little more space on the floor."

Ohio State's battle against Wisconsin starts a stretch of three out of four games away from Value City Arena for the Buckeyes, giving the program perhaps their best opportunity this season to break their road losing streak. Holtman said that this two-week stretch of play — which also includes a home game against No. 2 Purdue on Feb. 18 — will go a long way in determining the direction and identity of this year's squad, a litmus test that will begin at Wisconsin's Kohl Center on Tuesday.

"I think we have some really, really challenging road games coming up where we're going to get tested at a high level," Holtmann said. "We'll see what the mentality and the fate of our kids is. I think that's what we're all anxious to see. What is our fight, our poise, our mentality, our togetherness in those environments that we're going to face?"

Ohio State's matchup with the Badgers will tip off at 9 p.m. and will be streamed exclusively on Peacock.