

Ohio State Center Zed Key, Buckeyes See Defense Taking Significant Strides This Season



Throughout the offseason, Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann and his players consistently identified defense as an area of their play that needed to be improved upon the most. In fact, Holtmann said in his 2022-23 performance review — which was obtained by Buckeye Sports Bulletin via a public records request in September — that his team’s defense needed to get “dramatically better” and had the “worst efficiency we have had in my six years.”

Through the first 12 games of the 2023-24 season, Holtmann and his team have used these concerns to their benefit, where they have transformed their defense into a respectable unit that can power them to victory. Through the New Orleans game on Thursday, Ohio State’s retooled roster has given up just 64.1 points per game — fourth in the Big Ten — and limited its opponents to under 70 points in seven of their first 12 games. This pre-Christmas stretch was capped by perhaps their best defensive performance of the season, where they held the Privateers to just 36 points on 25.0 percent shooting.

Prior to the New Orleans game on Tuesday, center Zed Key said he and his team’s successes on defense stem from a rekindled focus and intensity on excelling on that side of the ball, something he said was instilled within the team throughout the offseason.

“I think guys just bought in,” Key said. “It was a big topic this offseason, like ‘Are we going to play defense this year?’ And guys took that to heart. We wanted to be a better defensive team, and we’re on the path to being a great defensive team. And we’ve shown that so far.”

Ohio State’s improved defense was also on full display in the team’s 67-60 win over UCLA, where they held the Bruins to just 23 first half points and 38.7 percent shooting. The Buckeyes’ performance on that end helped patch up the team’s own inefficiencies on offense that night, where they made just one three-point field goal and shot 44.6 percent from the field.

Key said this was one of the few times all season — as well as the season prior — where the team had to rely on their defense to bail out a sluggish offense and power the team to a win. The center said winning with defense is a sign of a great and balanced team, a luxury that has not been granted to Ohio State in prior years.

“It’s crazy because our offense has just been so dominant, we could really score the ball,” Key said. “But in that game, our shot wasn’t falling. So we had to rely on our defense and our principles and the stuff that we practice every day. And we did. We were getting stops down the line, so we did what we needed to do.

“Defense definitely wins games,” Key continued. “Over the years I’ve been here, our defense was okay, we just relied heavily on offense. But this year, I feel like we have both, offense and defense. So we’re just building on that and working on that every day.”

Despite the strong start on the defensive end, Key and his teammates still believe there is still room for improvement. The center said that his team must continue to fine-tune their game on that end of the court and work through the minor details if they want to become a top-25 defense nationally, a lofty goal that the team has established for themselves this season.

“We still have to clean up some stuff,” Key said. “Some ball-screen coverages, different cuts that different teams do, rebounding, there’s always stuff to work on. But once we get those down pat and keep practicing and get into Big Ten play, I think we’ll be really solid.”