

Ohio State Staves Off Late Hokies Comeback, Defeats Virginia Tech 81-73 To Advance To NIT Quarterfinals



Ohio State used strong defense and some crisp free-throw shooting down the stretch to stave off a late Virginia Tech rally Saturday night at Value City Arena, defeating the Hokies 81-73 to advance to the quarterfinals of the NIT.

The Buckeyes, who will now either visit No. 1 seed Wake Forest or host No. 4 seed Georgia on March 26 or 27, saw their 10-point halftime lead shrink to as low as three late in the second half but managed to hold on in large part due to its defense, which held the Hokies to 3-of-8 shooting and forced six turnovers in the game's final 6:46.

Ohio State also was strong from the free throw line in a game that featured 32 second-half fouls. It made 29 of its 32 attempts from the charity strike, including 26 of 28 in the second half — 17 more than their field-goal total — to secure the win.

Much like the previous game, Ohio State struggled to get things going early, missing two of its first 11 shots and committing four turnovers as Virginia Tech raced out to a 12-6 lead. Sophomore guard Bruce Thornton got things going with consecutive baskets, igniting a 10-0 run for the Buckeyes that put them up 16-12 after a Roddy Gayle alley-oop layup Thornton with 9:08 left.

After Virginia Tech answered with a 5-1 run to tie it 17 with 8:00 remaining, Ohio State began to assert its will. It held the Hokies to just two makes in its next nine attempts and used several interior baskets to stretch its lead to 34-21 with 3:00 left in the half.

The Hokies broke their 3:14 scoring drought with a Hunter Cattoor triple and later added a Mylyjeal Poteat basket to cut the deficit to 34-26, but Gayle added two free throws with 23 seconds left to take a 36-26 lead into the half.

Ohio State held the Hokies to just 36.7 percent shooting (11 of 30) and 16.7 percent from three (2 of 11) and had a 22-16 edge in paint points in the first half, all of which allowed the Buckeyes to close the first period on a 19-9 run.

The Buckeyes built upon their comfortable lead during the early portion of the first half, going up by as many as 13 points after an old-fashioned three by Thornton with 16:25 left. But the Hokies managed to cut into that deficit as the period progressed, trailing by just eight points, 54-46, with 10:34 left following an and-one by Sean Pedulla.

Virginia Tech continued to crawl back into the game due to the efforts of Pedulla, who tacked on four more points to put them down just four points, 59-55, with 8:16 left. The Buckeyes' lead then stayed within five to seven points across the next three minutes.

The Buckeyes tried to create some momentum with a Dale Bonner steal, but a missed layup from the fifth-year guard and a foul on Battle led to one made free throw from Pedulla and later an and-one from center Lynn Kidd shrunk Ohio State's lead to just three, 67-64, entering the game's final media timeout.

Ohio State retook momentum out of the break with two Battle free throws, an Okpara dunk and free throws and two forced turnovers to go up 72-64 with 1:44 left. It was a sequence that also saw Thornton exit the game due to injury for the second consecutive game, this time due to an apparent knee injury.

Virginia Tech cut the deficit to six on three separate occasions in the game's final 1:31, but the Buckeyes went 8-of-8 from the free-throw line down the stretch to close out the win.

Ohio State was led in the win by Battle, who netted 17 of his 21 points from the free-throw line and added three assists and a game-high 10 rebounds. Bonner tied a season high in points with 12 on 3-of-8 shooting and added five rebounds and two steals, while Okpara (13), Thornton (12) and Gayle (11) each scored in double figures. Virginia Tech was powered by Cattoor and Pedulla, who each notched 18 points on a combined 12-of-27 shooting.