

Ohio State Stunned By Nebraska, 78-70



Even at its best, Ohio State has been defined by streaks all season. The Buckeyes have rallied for major victories by stringing together scoring runs. On Feb. 24, a 20-2 run against Illinois helped to lift Ohio State on the road. The signature win of the season for the Buckeyes, a 71-66 victory over Duke on Nov. 30, only came about because of a 12-0 Buckeye run to close the game.

That's cut in both directions for the Buckeyes, though. Nearly six minutes without a basket doomed them against Rutgers on Feb. 9, as did a sparse final four minutes against Maryland on Feb. 27. Though OSU managed to hold on against Indiana on Feb. 21, it knocked down just one field goal in 14 second-half minutes and needed an E.J. Liddell dunk with only seconds remaining to send the game to an extra period.

The Buckeyes showed no interest in turning away from that on March 1, even as they hosted the Big Ten's worst team, Nebraska — losers in 16 of their first 18 league games. Limited by a stop-and-start offense and a defense that couldn't stop a whole lot of anything, Ohio State absorbed one of the worst losses of the Big Ten season, falling 78-70 to the bottom-dwelling Cornhuskers and throwing open the door for another Big Ten team to claim the No. 4 seed in the Big Ten tournament (and the pair of byes that come with it).

It was all erratic, all game for OSU. The Buckeyes hit only four of their first 12 shots before rattling off seven of their next eight, leaping out to a 26-19 lead with 9:28 left in the first. Seemingly unaffected by their sudden hot streak, they scored only four points in the next five minutes, dropping from seven points ahead to three behind, 33-30.

Jimmy Sotos, playing rare first half minutes, generated a few trips to the free throw line both directly and with his passing, but a Malaki Branham jumper served as the only made shot for the Buckeyes between the cap of that 26-19 edge and a Branham 3-pointer with 10 seconds remaining in the half. That's one field goal in more than nine minutes of game time.

Nebraska could only generate a seven-point lead of its own during the drought, meaning that the

Branham 3-pointer to end the half sent the Buckeyes into the break trailing by only four points.

Liddell opened the second half with two free throws, followed promptly by a 10-2 Nebraska flurry that provided the Cornhuskers with the largest lead of the night for either side, 53-43. The two stuck closely to the first half script across the next ten minutes, but Ohio State made up essentially zero ground in the process.

Unable to find any answers defensively for the brothers McGowens — Bryce and Trey — and relying almost entirely on Liddell on the other end, the Buckeyes made no real gains on their guests. They drew as close as five points and never fell further than nine points behind, but entered the final media timeout with 3:46 to play trailing 71-62.

In desperate need of another one of those game-saving runs, Ohio State nearly found its spark, rattling off a 7-0 run to pull within four points at 73-69 with 55 seconds left. But it was the Cornhuskers that pulled through in the end, converting on all but one of six free throw tries in the final 51 seconds while the Buckeyes came up with only one more point, falling 78-70.

Ohio State shot just 38.6 percent from the field and 29.2 percent from 3-point range. Liddell scored 27 points with 14 rebounds and Branham added 16 points, but the two were only 12-of-28 shooting. No other Buckeye hit double digits for points. The younger McGowens, Bryce, scored 26 points to seven from his brother, with 15 points from C.J. Wilcher and 13 points from Alonzo Verge Jr., who also had 11 assists.