

Ohio State Takes Significant Hit In Updated ESPN Preseason Rankings



Ohio State men's basketball had been listed among the top teams in the country in most sets of preseason rankings up until recently, but the departure of 2020-21 leading scorer Duane Washington has changed that.

In the latest update to ESPN's way-too-early college basketball rankings, Jeff Borzello slid the Buckeyes down 13 spots following Washington's decision to remain in the NBA Draft rather than return to Columbus for a senior season.

Borzello ranked Ohio State No. 18 in the country in his latest top-25 countdown last week, down significantly from its No. 5 standing in the previous edition. Of all the teams on the list, Ohio State's slide was by far the most drastic.

Washington went undrafted this past week, but quickly signed a two-way contract with the Indiana Pacers thereafter. The Grand Rapids, Michigan, native declared for the draft shortly after the end of this past season and earned a spot in the NBA Draft Combine after impressing scouts at the G League Elite Camp.

"It was clear he was more likely than E.J. Liddell to keep his name in the NBA draft, and the Buckeyes exploring guard options in the transfer portal in late June and early July cemented that idea," Borzello wrote. "Washington leaving really hurts the Buckeyes on the offensive end, though. He was capable of huge scoring games, including his 32-point effort in the Big Ten tournament title game against Illinois."

Aside from Washington, four starters remained the same from ESPN's previous projections for the Buckeyes, with Penn State transfer guard Jamari Wheeler at the one, and redshirt senior Justice Sueing, Liddell and super-senior Kyle Young rounding out the frontcourt.

Replacing Washington in the backcourt is senior three-point sharpshooter Justin Ahrens, according to the updated projections, but Ahrens is not the only option for the Buckeyes at that spot.

"Without Washington, Chris Holtmann could look at part-time starter Justin Ahrens, who is the best shooter on the team, or incoming top-50 freshman Malaki Branham," Borzello wrote. "Ohio State did give itself another option when it landed Louisiana transfer Cedric Russell, a first-team all-Sun Belt

guard who averaged 17.2 points and shot 40% from 3-point range last season. Russell had 26 points in the season opener against Baylor and also had 25 points against Louisiana Tech in December."

Holtmann discussed Branham and Russell last week in his first press conference in a couple months. On Branham in particular, Holtmann said the Akron, Ohio, native still has a "young frame," but has already shown promise.

"Really excited for what he can be. I think he'll look like a freshman at times, and then he'll look like a guy that has a tremendous future at times," Holtmann said. "That's the natural development for young players."

Russell is not yet with the program, as he is still in the process of graduating from Louisiana, but Holtmann said he'll provide instant offense to the Buckeye lineup.

"Cedric's gonna have to figure out this level and the challenges at this level, all of those things. But I do think he's got a real ability to make shots," Holtmann said. "He's proven that throughout his career."

Washington won't be easy to replace, but if some of Ohio State's new additions can fill some of his scoring void, the Buckeyes will likely have a chance at climbing quickly in the rankings once the 2021-22 season begins.