

Ohio State Turns Up Intensity Against Purdue In Jake Diebler's Head Coaching Debut



Just two days before his head coaching debut, interim head coach Jake Diebler pointed to his team's heightened intensity and urgency in practice as two things he would like to see translate onto the floor against No. 2 Purdue.

That mentality came to light in front of a packed Value City Arena of 18,363 fans on Sunday afternoon, where the Buckeyes turned up the heat and upset the heavily-favored Boilermakers behind a number of fast-break baskets and 14 forced turnovers. Speaking with the media after the win, Diebler said his team placed a strong emphasis on playing with increased urgency and confidence against Purdue, which he thinks ultimately propelled them to their biggest win of the season.

"We prepared to win this game," Diebler said. "And I told our guys last night, 'We're going in this to win. We're not going in this to be close.' They had earned the right to play well. And so I think that aggressive mentality — I told them in a couple of timeouts, 'Stay aggressive. Keep swinging.' And our staff, we kept echoing that. And I think just as the game went on, they believed. It's going to be important moving forward that we keep that same mentality. There's going to be certainly adversity moving forward and in games and beyond. But we want to keep that mentality."

Ohio State and Diebler's heightened aggressiveness was on full display on the defensive side of the ball, where the Buckeyes forced nine steals — their second-most all season — and scored 22 points off turnovers. Five of those steals came by way of senior center Zed Key continuously stripping the ball away from superstar Purdue center Zach Edey, a career defensive performance from the Buckeyes veteran that not only frustrated the 7-foot-4 big man, but allowed the Buckeyes to play in transition on offense.

"We didn't tell Zed every time Zach Edey goes up for a shot to swipe down, that was a feel thing," Diebler said. "And he's done that throughout his career. You probably remember some plays where he is able to do that. They were just some huge, huge plays. It was great for us to be able to get out and

help us get out and to transition more. So it was a great job by Zed.”

“(Key) did a good job of stripping him,” Purdue head coach Matt Painter said after the game. “I don’t know whether he was just exposing it or Zed just picked up on something, like a pitcher (in baseball) tipping something...It was a big part of the game, Zed’s ability to defend.”

Outside of Key’s efforts on Edey, Diebler also said his team received a number of significant contributions on defense from his players, who he thought made a concerted effort to guard their man with a purpose and be aggressive on the ball, while also stepping up on the offensive end and playing with confidence.

“That aggressiveness that I talked about is for both sides of the ball,” Diebler said. “And the pace element that we’ve been talking about is just, there’s an urgency we want to operate with. And I felt like we were able to do that on both sides. We tried to mix in some pressure, full-court (pressure) today. And listen, we had some guys just individually step up and guard really hard, and I thought that was important. But we want to be aggressive on both sides, certainly.”

Sophomore guard Bruce Thornton, who expressed his interest in playing with more pace on offense during Thursday’s press conference, said that his team’s collective efforts and aggressiveness may have ultimately stemmed from the rollercoaster of emotions his team went through in the days leading up to the Purdue game. For him, Sunday’s game allowed both he and his team to let out some frustration and emotion that had been bottled up in the days after Chris Holtmann’s firing, allowing Diebler and Ohio State to shock the country and come away with the upset victory.

“This week, it was a crazy week,” Thornton said. “So, mentally, that was the biggest focus for us. In college basketball, it’s a business, especially with NIL. So I’m trying to tell my teammates and myself that things happen, it’s life. We experienced it first-hand, that each and every day, you’re just going to have to get better. You almost have to put it to the side. And it’s hard to do. It’s just a weird time, but we found a way.

“And I feel like that’s just how life is. And as a man, you have to keep moving forward when things are not going your way. And each and every day we kept putting in work. We had trust in our teammates, we were having fun, playing the game that we also absolutely love since we’ve been young. So (with) this game, I feel like all our frustration, all that attitude, all that swagger that we have about ourselves, we showed today. And we got the win today.”