

Ohio State Women's Basketball Ready To Open Season Within A Pandemic



Last season, it was hard to know what to expect from Ohio State. The Buckeyes were coming off a down 2018-19 campaign, faced a handful of departures from graduate transfers, but brought in seven freshmen in one of the top recruiting class in the country.

In the early parts of the season, despite a monumental upset of second-ranked Louisville, it looked like Ohio State might still be a year out from making the NCAA tournament, sitting at 11-9 through the first 20 games. But then, starting with a comeback overtime win against Nebraska, the Buckeyes won seven of their last nine regular season games, and rode that momentum into the Big Ten Tournament.

There, Ohio State won three straight games against Minnesota, Iowa and Michigan, made the tournament finals and ultimately fell to top-ranked Maryland to end the surprise run. But the Buckeyes proved ready to make a jump as a team ready for the NCAA tournament a season ago and are looking to improve even further in this upcoming campaign, even after an incredibly strange and difficult time off.

"It's been quite the offseason," Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff said in a Zoom call Monday. "I think our kids have done a great job, they've really handled this as well as you could ever expect young people to, and they've been as responsible as you can be, we've worked really hard. I think they've really committed a lot to this point.

Even without losing a core member to graduation, Ohio State did lose some players through the transfer portal, with guard Kaelynn Satterfield departing to Xavier mid-season and guards Kierstan Bell (Florida Gulf Coast), Janai Crooms (Michigan State) and forward Aixa Wone (Georgia Tech) also leaving through the portal.

But the Buckeyes still return their entire starting five - Madison Greene, Dorka Juhasz, Braxtin Miller, Aaliyah Patty and Jacy Sheldon - and a large piece of their production from a year ago. But this season, along with the typical hurdles that come with a new season, Ohio State will have to deal with something entirely new: the COVID-19 pandemic, which has cost the Buckeyes their usual preseason preparation.

"I like where we are, but it's also kind of a scary feeling because you know, usually at this point, we

would have scrimmaged somebody, we would have had an exhibition game,” McGuff said. “There’s just still a lot of unknowns and we won’t really get those answers until we tip it up on Wednesday versus Akron.”

COVID-19 has also brought in a new threat of cancellations if anybody on either Ohio State or the opponent tests positive prior to the game, something that could come on any one of the six weekly tests the Buckeyes take during the season.

But McGuff said that having watched how other sports, both professionally and with football at Ohio State, have handled the pandemic, he said that the important thing is to continue to adapt and show flexibility throughout the season.

“We do have some examples, how this thing has worked and how everyone’s had to be flexible,” McGuff said. “We’ve learned a lot and I think our administration and our medical personnel have done as good a job as you could possibly do. They’ve done a just a fantastic job and given us a chance. And I said, we’re just going to have to adjust on the fly and make it make it work.”

Ohio State draws the Zips to open its 24-game season at 6 p.m. Wednesday, a team that went 15-15 overall and 8-10 in conference play. But the Buckeyes won’t be taking Akron lightly after last season, when Ohio State was given its first loss of the season at home to a different MAC team, Ohio, by a score of 74-68.

“We did the best we could in terms of watching film from last year and they’ve got a lot of different personnel, so that part’s been a little bit trickier,” McGuff said. “They ran a really good offense last year, so I would assume they’re going to stick with that. They did a really nice job, and they had a really good season last year, so I know we’ll have our hands full on Wednesday.”

An added year of experience and development for most of this roster brings some new expectations: A No. 20 ranking in the AP poll and a projected top-five finish in the Big Ten.

McGuff said that he thinks those placements are fair before the season starts, and that he is expecting a highly competitive conference slate this year.

“Based on where we ended last year, and who we return, that’s probably a fair place to start for us. And with the Big Ten, it’s going to be a really interesting season,” McGuff said. “I think just in general, there are a lot of really, really, really good teams. I don’t think there’s one team that can run away with it. I don’t think there’s one team that’s going to dominate the league. But there are a lot of great teams, and it’s going to be a dogfight every night.”

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