

Ohio State's NCAA Tournament Hopes Fade In 77-74 Loss To No. 13 Illinois In B1G Tournament Quarterfinals



Ohio State (20-13, 9-11) saw its NCAA Tournament hopes fade away in crushing fashion in the Big Ten Quarterfinal round held at the Target Center on Friday night, suffering a 77-74 defeat to No. 13 Illinois (24-8, 14-6) in a game that the Buckeyes led or tied for all but 1:32 of the second half.

The Buckeyes, who led by as many as 10 points with 11:00 remaining and, led Illinois 67-62 with 5:12 left but missed eight of its final 11 shots and were held without a point and outscored 6-0 the final 1:44 of game action. Ohio State, which shot an efficient 45.5 percent from the floor (30 of 66), were also called for 27 personal fouls compared to just 13 called for Illinois, leading the favored Illini to hold a 32-13 advantage in free-throw attempts.

Ohio State continued its hot shooting from the night before in the early going, making five of its first six shots to take a 13-8 lead with 14:55 left. Illinois, the Big Ten's top scoring offense at 83.9 points per game, then found its rhythm with an 8-2 run to lead 16-15 after a driving layup by Illini forward Dainja Dainja, giving the Buckeyes their first deficit of the entire Big Ten Tournament.

After a Gayle pull up jumper ended the run, the Illini took off again, this time going on an extended 9-1 run — a stretch aided by a poor offensive stretch for the Buckeyes that included four turnovers and four straight misses — to lead 25-18 after two Dainja free throws with 7:14 left.

Ohio State rebounded after a floater by freshman forward Devin Royal — who picked up his third foul and was subbed out with 5:43 left, one of four Buckeyes with at least two fouls before halftime. His basket started a 9-0 run that allowed the underdogs to take a 27-25 lead following a Felix Okpara alley-oop dunk with 4:21 remaining. Illinois swung back with five straight to lead 30-27, and they later took a 31-29 lead into the locker room.

The Buckeyes trailed by just two points at the half despite three of their starters — fifth-year forward Jamison Battle and sophomore guards Evan Mahaffey and Bruce Thornton — having at least two fouls, with Battle's three fouls forcing him to play just eight minutes in the first half.

Despite the early foul trouble, Ohio State started the half with a bang, scoring the period's first eight points and going on a 9-2 run to lead 38-33 with 16:49 left. Illinois answered with five straight to tie the game at 38, but the Buckeyes found a groove again with an extended 16-6 run — nine of those points coming from the freshmen Royal and Scotty Middleton — to lead 52-44 after a Thornton layup with 12:01 remaining.

Ohio State's lead grew to 10, 56-46, after a Thornton layup with 11:00 remaining, but that was the largest lead it held all game. Thanks to a shooting lull from the Buckeyes, Illinois exploded on a 13-3 run to tie the game at 59 after three-point play from Dainja with 7:41 left.

Ohio State reclaimed momentum out of the media timeout with consecutive baskets from Dale Bonner and Battle, a sequence that allowed the Buckeyes to hold a lead that was as low as one and high as five across the ensuing minutes. Illinois broke through in large part due to back-to-back fouls called on Okpara and Mahaffey, which fouled the two sophomores out of the game and led to four Dainja points that tied the game at 71 with 2:22 left.

Ohio State retook the lead thanks to Battle, who hit a step back three to put it up 74-71 with 1:44 left, but Illinois responded with four straight to go up 75-74 after two Coleman Hawkins free throws, their first lead since the first 14 seconds of the first half.

After a Key offensive foul on the other possession, Illinois had an extended possession that included two offensive rebounds and ended with two Shannon free throws that put it up 77-74 with 11 seconds left. Ohio State found Battle — the Big Ten's leading three-point shooter — on the ensuing possession with just four seconds left, but the forward missed a contested fadeaway three that sent the Buckeyes home.

Ohio State was led in the loss by Battle, who scored 21 points on a combined 8-of-16 shooting despite having four fouls. Thornton added 20 on 8-of-14 shooting along with a career-high 10 assists, while Okpara grabbed a team-high 10 rebounds and four blocks before fouling out.

Illinois was powered by Shannon, who scored 28 points on 8-of-20 shooting, including 10-of-11 shooting from the free throw line, while Ty Rodgers had a double-double with 12 points and 10 rebounds.

With the loss, Ohio State will likely play its next game in the National Invitation Tournament, or NIT, which will be held from March 19-April 4. Selections for the 2024 NIT will be announced at 9:30 p.m. on March 17 on ESPN2.