

Okpara Settles Into Feature Role With Key Injured



With Ohio State star forward Zed Key sidelined with a shoulder sprain, freshman center Felix Okpara has emerged as the Buckeyes' primary big man option for the time being.

Prior to Key's injury, Okpara flashed his speed and athleticism despite his 6-11, 220-pound frame, emerging as a defensive anchor and a rim-running, roll threat for Ohio State on the offensive end. As Okpara registered his first-career start on Sunday in an 80-73 loss to Maryland in College Park, Md., he noted that he feels that he's assimilated to the increased role well.

"Obviously, I have big shoes to fill in without Zed," Okpara said. "But, I'm coming in as usual and playing hard, I'm doing the things I need to do to help my team win."

Okpara filled in for Key after he sustained his injury with 16:12 to play in the first half during Ohio State's 71-69 loss to then-No. 1 Purdue on Thursday. With Key sidelined, the burden of defending Purdue 7-4 center Zach Edey — who is a contender for the Naismith Men's College Player of the Year award — largely fell on Okpara's shoulders.

The freshman big man delivered against Edey, holding him to 16 points — which was 5.7 points below his average at the time — and 11 rebounds, which was 2.2 less than his 13.2 rebounds per game average. Edey was held to 6-of-11 shooting, but found a rhythm in his playmaking ability, dishing out four assists — including one on Fletcher Loyer's game-winning three-pointer. Okpara registered one of his three blocks on an Edey hook-shot attempt to go along with his five points, five rebounds and two assists.

As Okpara largely handled his own against Edey, he said being thrown in the fire in that game will also help his growth and development moving forward.

"He's a really good player," Okpara said. "He's really strong and plays aggressively. That was a really

good matchup. I felt like I went with more intensity, I wasn't going to let him score on me."

Although Okpara saw success against Edey, the smaller, more versatile frontcourt of Maryland gave him some issues. The freshman big man fell into early foul trouble, registering a pair of fouls in the game's first nine minutes. Okpara entered the half with a trio of fouls and two points as his only tallied statistics and didn't fare much better in his seven minutes played in the second half, as he did not register a stat and missed his only shot attempt.

Okpara finished the afternoon with zero rebounds while the Terrapins raced out to a 40-26 advantage on the glass, including 11 boards from 6-1 guard Jahmir Young — who also dropped 30 points in his first-career double-double.

"There was way less banging in the post," Okpara said. "I feel like I should have stayed out of foul trouble, and we would have won the game."

As Okpara continues to settle into his newfound role with Key sidelined, freshman guard Roddy Gayle Jr. said that the young center has a solid support system in his teammates.

"He's a freshman, he's only 18 years old, so you can't get on him too much," Gayle said. "We try to give him as much love and care as possible. We try to joke with him about it. Personally, I don't try to be like, 'You need to do this, you need to do that.' I try to help him along the way because it's all just a learning process."