

# BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

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Vol. 43, No. 17

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

March 2, 2024

## Holtmann Fired After Seven Seasons Leading OSU Men's Hoops

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Coming off perhaps one of the more excruciating losses in his seven-year tenure at Ohio State, men's basketball head coach Chris Holtmann quietly walked into the Value City Arena interview room on Feb. 6 to answer questions from a group of reporters.

Just 25 minutes earlier, Holtmann and his team saw an 18-point second-half lead evaporate on their home floor to Indiana, a sputtering blue blood that entered the game having lost five of its previous seven games. It was a backbreaking 76-73 defeat for Ohio State that continued a spiraling downward trend for the program, giving them their second significant late-game collapse of the season – the first being another 18-point blown lead on Dec. 9 at Penn State – along with its eighth loss in the last nine games.

"I think it's frustrating for everybody," Holtmann, who would ultimately be fired on Feb. 14, said after the game. "It's obviously been a really hard stretch for all of our players and coaches, so we have to find a way out of it."

Ohio State's loss to Indiana was not only another disappointing defeat for Holtmann's team in the 2023-24 campaign – a season that once held high hopes after a 12-2 start – but also a microcosm of all that has gone south for the program across the last few seasons.

The Buckeyes welcomed an uninspired Value City Arena crowd of 11,157 that night, part of a trend for the program that has Ohio State on track to finish the season with record-low attendance for the second year in a row. On the court, Ohio State received inconsistent offensive production from its three transfer portal additions – fifth-years Jamison Battle and Dale Bonner, and sophomore Evan Mahaffey – an area in which Holtmann and his staff have strug-



SONNY BROCKWAY

**OUT OF TIME** — Ohio State fired men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14, parting ways with the head coach after seven years with the program. He finished his Ohio State career with a 137-86 record and failed to reach 20 wins in each of his past two campaigns while missing the NCAA Tournament.

gled to find success since it became a more prominent part of the collegiate game.

Holtmann and his staff also relied upon a quartet of relatively inexperienced sophomores – guards Roddy Gayle Jr., Bruce Thornton and Mahaffey along with center

Felix Okpara – to guide them late in the game, reflecting a concerted push across the last two seasons to go young that has led to a bevy of late-game struggles both this season and last.

"We have the youngest team in the Big Ten, so we have a lot of guys who get inside their heads," Gayle said after the game. "We had a lot of manageable things we did to lose this game. I think we had a lot of mistakes we could have corrected. We need everybody to keep their heads up and stay together moving forward."

For Holtmann, the frustrations surrounding all of these shortcomings seemed to hit a boiling point during a tense six-minute press conference following the Indiana loss, where he seemed uninterest-

ed in giving detailed responses regarding the state of the program and offered only short – sometimes curt – answers.

"We just weren't as detailed as we needed to be or as tough as we needed to be late," Holtmann said.

"We just need to be more aggressive," he added later on.

"We'll see," he said when asked if these late-game collapses were correctable.

The Indiana loss – and the reaction by Holtmann after the game – was viewed by many as the beginning of the end for the Holtmann era at Ohio State, one which may ultimately be remembered more for games and moments like those than his early tri-

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## OPINION

## OSU Hoops Program Needs Rebuilt – Again

I guess no one should have been surprised at Ohio State deciding to part ways with men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann. Conversely, I don't think anyone thought Holtmann's tenure would implode in such spectacularly excruciating fashion.

Holtmann banked a tremendous amount of emotional capital when he took over a program that had begun to meander during the final years under Thad Matta and immediately produced a 25-win season in 2017-18. But that turned out to be the high-water mark during Holtmann's seven years in Columbus.

There was already a sense the program had plateaued the last couple of years, but beginning late last season, the Buckeyes looked disjointed, disinterested or a combination of both on any given night. As if anyone wants to relive the nightmare, Ohio State began last season with a 10-3 record before losing 14 of its next 15 games on the way to the program's first losing season in nearly 20 years.

This year was almost a carbon copy when the Buckeyes started with a 12-2 record before embarking upon a streak that included eight losses over their next nine games, a slide punctuated by blowing an 18-point lead during a 76-73 home loss to Indiana. OSU stopped the bleeding temporarily with a 79-75 win in double overtime against Maryland, but when the Buckeyes followed that with a listless 62-54 loss at Wisconsin – the team's 16th consecutive road defeat – outgoing athletic director Gene Smith pulled the plug on Holtmann.

The team responded a few days later with a 73-69 upset win against second-ranked Purdue in front of a raucous (for once) crowd at Value City Arena inside the normally lifeless Schottenstein Center. But while the Buckeyes showed more spark than they had in a month, the outcome could also have been attributed to the Boilermakers who didn't play anything like the No. 2 team in the nation.

I have no idea who Holtmann's successor will be. Barring some kind of miraculous late-season run, I doubt it will be Jake Diebler with his lack of experience running a program. Likewise, none of the names first banded about following Holtmann's dismissal excited anyone.

Former OSU player and assistant Chris Jent has reportedly expressed his interest, but his experience running his own program is only slightly better than Diebler. Jay Wright, who won 520 games and two NCAA titles at Villanova before retiring two years ago, has not expressed any desire to get back in the game.

Sean Miller has been successful during two separate stints at Xavier, but his tenure at Arizona was racked by scandal and NCAA investigations before Miller was fired in April 2021. And speaking of excess baggage, Bob Huggins was in attendance at the OSU-Purdue game. The 70-year-old Ohio native has 935 victories over more than 40 years as a college head coach – and almost more black marks and red X's on his résumé than humanly possible.

Whoever gets the job will have the unenviable task of somehow trying to resurrect a program that has traditionally played the role of ugly stepchild to its football big brother. While Ryan Day has to continually defend a program that has won nearly 90 percent of its games with five Big Ten titles and one national championship over the last decade, the men's basketball program has no conference titles since 2012, a 10-year-long (and counting) streak of failing to advance past the first weekend of the NCAA Tournament, and a 64-year gap (and counting) since its one and only NCAA championship.

That kind of record wouldn't seem to rise even to the level of mediocrity.

## A History Lesson

During the CBS telecast of Ohio State's victory against Purdue, the network produced a graphic in connection with Black History Month featuring Cleo Vaughn, the first African-American basketball player in OSU program history who played one season – and one season only – during the mid-1950s.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK  
Mark Rea

As something of a history buff where Ohio State football is concerned, I'm ashamed to say I'm severely lacking when it comes to OSU basketball history and had honestly never heard of Vaughn. Therefore, a little digging was in order.

Thanks in part to OSU basketball historian Lee Caryer, I learned that Vaughn, a native of northern Alabama, was a football, baseball and basketball star at Lima (Ohio) Central High School and was highly recruited by several high-level programs before Floyd Stahl offered him a scholarship to come to Ohio State.

After earning a freshman letter with the Buckeyes, Vaughn started the opening game of the 1953-54 season and scored 13 points during a 93-78 win at Butler. Three days later, he totaled 11 points and six rebounds during a 91-86 win at St. Louis.

A lingering ankle injury hampered Vaughn for much of the rest of his sophomore season, and he wound up averaging just 3.6 points over 14 games. The following year, he returned to Ohio State but admitted he really wasn't interested in either academics or athletics.

He left school and joined the U.S. Army after which he played some minor-league baseball in the New York Yankees organization. During the 1957 season, Vaughn played in the outfield at Class-D St. Petersburg and Class-C Modesto, hitting a combined .221 with one home run and 11 runs batted in over 30 games.

By 1960, Vaughn decided to complete his college education at Alabama A&M, where he played basketball and earned black college All-America honors. "I wasn't eligible under the rules after playing professional baseball," he later said, "but nobody checked."

After graduation, Vaughn moved to the Detroit area, where he worked for Ebony magazine and began referring to himself as Chico rather than Cleo. While in the Motor City, he dated such Motown Records stars as Diana Ross and Martha Reeves, and he even sang backup on the 1971 Marvin Gaye hit "What's Going On."

Years later, he moved to the Toledo area, where he became involved in community service, including running an incredibly popular youth basketball camp that attracted such youngsters as Dennis Hopson, Jim Jackson and LeBron James.

Vaughn continued to be an influential member of the Toledo community until his death in 2010 at the age of 77. Last summer, he was elected to the Ohio Basketball Hall of Fame.

Despite his passing, the Cleo Vaughn Sports Group lives on, founded by Vaughn's son, Tommy, to offer free basketball camps, clinics and life skills to youngsters in the Toledo area.

## Key To Success

It's been something of a jackpot off-season for the Ohio State football team.

Stalwarts such as TreVeyon Henderson,

Emeka Egbuka, Jack Sawyer, Denzel Burke, Lathan Ransom, J.T. Tuimoloau, Tylik Williams and Cody Simon decided to return for another season, while the Buckeyes raided the transfer portal for the likes of Kansas State quarterback Will Howard, Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins, Alabama safety Caleb Downs and Michigan linebacker Joey Velazquez.

There seems to be a glut of talent at nearly every position, and that includes quarterback – somewhat strange for a team that lost its starter through the portal when Kyle McCord ran off to the relative obscurity of central New York and Syracuse University.

Howard seems to have the inside track on replacing McCord as the OSU starter, but Day is on record as saying he wants to get "as many (spring) reps as we can" to holdovers Devin Brown and Lincoln Kienholz as well as incoming freshman Air Noland and Alabama transfer Julian Sayin.

Of course, it goes without saying that all the stockpiled talent in the world isn't going to amount to the proverbial tinker's damn (look it up, kiddos) if the offensive line doesn't perform a whole lot better than it did during the 2023 season, and most specifically against Missouri in the Cotton Bowl.

Left tackle Josh Simmons, left guard Donovan Jackson and right tackle Josh Fryar return from last year's line, and one would hope their year of experience together will help them improve for 2024. Joining them will be Alabama transfer Seth McLaughlin at center and former four-star tackle prospect Luke Montgomery, who will presumably take over right guard duties from Matthew Jones.

So, when Bobby or Betty Buckeye try to bend your ear this spring and summer about how many points their favorite team is going to ring up in the fall, remember that the road to beating Michigan and beyond will either be a smooth one or chock full of potholes because of the offensive line.

## Irish Eyes Are Crying

In case you missed it, the College Football Playoff board of managers unanimously approved on Feb. 20 the so-called 5+7 model for the expanded 12-team tournament field beginning this fall.

The agreement guarantees playoff spots to the five highest-ranking conference champions along with the next seven highest-ranking teams. That means automatic inclusion to the Big Ten, SEC, Big 12 and ACC winners with the fifth spot going to the highest-ranked Group of 5 champion from the American, Conference-USA, MAC, Mountain West and Sun Belt. (Remember, the Pac-12 has ceased to exist.)

First-round byes go to the top four teams during a tournament that will be spread out over four weeks.

You can argue about which entities – universities, coaches, players, broadcast partners, advertisers – are the big winners in this expanded playoff format, but there can be no dispute about the biggest loser.

The arrogance Notre Dame has exhibited over the years by refusing to join a football conference while hoarding all of its TV revenue is finally coming back to bite the Fighting Irish in a big way.

Under the new CFP rules, an undefeated and No. 1-ranked Notre Dame team would fare no better than a No. 5 seed in the playoff tournament because the first four seeds are locked into the Power 4 conference champions. As a result, under the present format, the Irish will never garner a first-round bye and must always run the four-game gauntlet if they are to win their first national championship since 1988.



## COVER STORY

# Holtmann Flamed Out After Exciting Start

Continued From Page 1

umphs. That reality came true one week later – a day after Ohio State suffered a 62-54 loss at Wisconsin on Feb. 13, the team's program record-tying 16th consecutive road defeat – when the school officially announced that it was terminating Holtmann's contract effective immediately, ending his seven-year run as head coach.

"I thought that looking at the last couple of games, few games actually, that this team needed different leadership," Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith said at that same Value City Arena press conference room after making the official announcement. "So I made the change."

It was a rare midseason coaching change for Smith and Ohio State, one that will cost the school \$12.8 million in buyout money to pay Holtmann the remainder of his contract, which just 21 months ago was extended through the 2027-28 season. But for Smith, it was a decision he felt was necessary in order to return the program to national prominence in the future and salvage whatever may have been left of this season.

"It's hard," a teary-eyed Smith said before taking a 12-second pause. "It's really hard. When you have good people and you care about people, it's hard. If you don't have a good person, and you really don't care about the person, it's easier. When you care about someone like I did, it makes it hard."

"My responsibility is to the program.

It's to these young men who compete every single day. I don't care what sport it is. My responsibility is to those young people and to the program. I felt at this particular time, with six regular-season games left and the Big Ten tournament and whatever the postseason brings, a spark of energy was needed. It's about the program in the end. I have to set aside my personal feelings and go with what's best for the program."

Holtmann's run at Ohio State may have endured an abrupt ending, but the overall decline of the program under his guidance was a gradual process. Taking over for former head coach Thad Matta – who led the Buckeyes to two Final Four appearances (2007, 2012), nine NCAA Tournaments and five Big Ten regular-season championships from 2004-17 – Holtmann experienced instant success in Columbus.

Coming off a successful three-year tenure at Butler that included three straight NCAA Tournament berths and a combined 70-31 record, Holtmann continued his winning ways as the Buckeye coach in 2017-18. In a season when Ohio State was projected to finish 11th in the Big Ten, Holtmann led his new team to a 25-9 overall record (15-3 in the Big Ten) and second-round appearance in the NCAA Tournament.

It was an impressive debut that earned him Big Ten Coach of the Year, the second straight conference coaching honor for Holtmann and Ohio State's first since Matta

won in 2010.

"It's been a remarkable (season)," said Holtmann on Feb. 26, 2018, when asked to describe his first season at Ohio State. "It's really been a remarkable experience, for all of us, to go through this Big Ten regular season."

Holtmann's immediate success carried over to the next three seasons. In his first four years, he secured an impressive 87-44 record – the third-most wins by an Ohio State head coach in that span behind Matta (105) and Fred Taylor (89) – and took his team to the NCAA Tournament in all three seasons it was played (2018, 2019, 2021).

But even amid this success, Holtmann and the Buckeyes still showed some cracks in their armor, mostly with their performance in postseason play. Ohio State secured four straight seasons with 20 or more wins but failed to reach the second weekend of the NCAA Tournament in each of the three years it was held during that span.

Those shortcomings were headlined by Holtmann's signature loss at Ohio State, a shocking 75-72 overtime defeat to No. 15 Oral Roberts in the first round of the 2021 NCAA Tournament, a game where the No. 2-seeded Buckeyes held a 74-70 lead with 1:07 left in the second half. It was a crushing loss that sent Holtmann and his team home early once again despite having hopes of making a deep run, a reality he was eager to change in the future.

"We all have to be responsible for not quite getting it done," he said after the loss. "It begins, first and foremost, with me. Obviously, you're a No. 2 seed for a reason. That means you put in great work throughout the season. You had a season, a body of work that was really good. There were some tremendous moments this season, by and large. It was a special year with a conclusion that we have to lean into. It's incredibly disappointing."

While Holtmann saw this loss as a potential learning experience for the team that could motivate them to achieve greater postseason success down the line, it instead served as the turning point of his tenure. The Buckeyes had another strong regular season in 2021-22 behind the dynamic duo of future NBA draft selections E.J. Liddell and Malaki Branham, entering the Big Ten tournament with a 19-10 record and No. 5 seed in the conference.

But, like previous years, Holtmann's team fizzled out in March, dropping their first-round Big Ten tournament game to 12th-seeded Penn State and failing to reach the second weekend of the NCAA Tournament for the fourth time in as many tries, this time with a 71-61 loss to No. 2 seed Villanova in the round of 32.

Then, with the supreme talents of Branham and Liddell leaving for the NBA, the wheels began to fall off for Holtmann's program last season. Led by upstart fresh-

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## COVER STORY

men Thornton and Brice Sensabaugh, the Buckeyes started nonconference play with a 9-3 record but dropped 14 of their first 16 games in Big Ten play and missed the NCAA Tournament for the first time under Holtmann with a 16-19 record, their first losing season since 2003-04 under Jim O'Brien.

This losing stretch only carried over for Ohio State this season, when – despite hopes of the program turning it around behind the improved play of Gayle and Thornton – the team sputtered again in conference play, dropping nine of its last 11 Big Ten games before Holtmann's firing, with four of those coming by double digits. When the dust settled, Holtmann finished with a 30-30 overall record and a 9-25 record in the Big Ten in his final two seasons, a noticeable stain on a tenure that had shown promise early on.

"These two years, personally, have been a challenge," Holtmann said on Feb. 10. "They've been probably the hardest thing I've gone through."

### Roster Mismanagement Blights Holtmann's Run

Holtmann and his program's struggles were thoroughly analyzed by many in the days leading up to and after his firing, but the root of the Buckeyes' downfall may ultimately have come down to a years-long trend of mismanagement with Ohio State's roster.

The program has endured a number of surprising departures the last five seasons that left Holtmann and the program scrambling for replacements. Emerging freshmen such as Branham and Sensabaugh – not viewed as traditional one-and-done candidates, at least as they arrived on campus – left for the NBA draft after excelling in their lone seasons with the program. The unexpected roster overhaul also carried over to the transfer portal, where younger players such as D.J. Carton (Marquette), Alonzo Gaffney (Arizona State), Meechie Johnson (South Carolina), Jaedon LeDee (TCU) and Luther Muhammad (Arizona State) all left the program to find more favorable fits at other schools.

"Generally, players in those situations, they want a situation where maybe they are playing a different position or maybe they want more shot attempts or they want more of something," Holtmann said in April 2020 about the transfer portal. "I think that is where a lot of this is. I don't think in any cases, or very few cases, there is anything else beyond that."

Most of these exits were not anticipated, and Holtmann and his staff struggled to find suitable players to replace them. The Buckeyes did find success with a few transfer portal additions in recent years – those being Justice Sueing and C.J. Walker, who emerged as key contributors on Ohio State's NCAA Tournament teams from 2020-22 – and Battle, who ranks second on the team in scoring this season at 14.2 points per game.

But outside of those three, Ohio State's transfer-portal signings have made minimal contributions. None of the additions of Jimmy Sotos and Seth Towns in 2020-21; Joey Brunk and Jamari Wheeler in 2021-22; Tanner Holden, Isaac Likekele and Sean McNeil in 2022-23; and Bonner and Mahafey in 2023-24 have averaged more than 9.7



SONNY BROCKWAY

**REVOLVING DOOR** — Former head coach Chris Holtmann's roster faced significant turnover during his tenure, with a pair of one-and-dones in Brice Sensabaugh and Malaki Branham as well as players coming and going in the transfer portal.

points per game with the Buckeyes.

Smith declined to comment on whether Holtmann failed to adjust to college basketball's increasing reliance on the transfer portal as an effort to combat roster turnover, saying, "That's a good question for Chris." But he did acknowledge the unique challenges Holtmann and his now-former colleagues are faced with today when it comes to juggling the ever-changing landscape of collegiate athletics, with the transfer portal included.

"I think it's harder on all coaches in every sport now," Smith said. "When you think of the aggregate of all the issues that each coach is faced with now – the transfer portal, the lawsuits, the NIL, the uncertainty about what's coming, relative to our structure and model – it's harder today. The industry is harder. It's harder for basketball coaches and all coaches. But the basketball coaches, they have different windows around the transfer portal. It makes it a little bit more difficult."

Regardless of the changing landscape, Holtmann's transfer portal misses may very well have played a significant role in Ohio State's inability to achieve sustained success during the last two seasons, especially in the competitive Big Ten. With many of the incoming upperclassmen underperforming in recent years, Holtmann and his staff were forced to rely more heavily on younger, inexperienced underclassmen to lead the team, a concerted effort that Smith initially proposed to Holtmann in the middle of last season.

Smith told Buckeye Sports Bulletin last June that he was pleased with Holtmann's ability to get the best out of his younger players – a group that consisted of Gayle, Okpara, Sensabaugh and Thornton – in what was an otherwise disappointing season, something that gave him optimism for the future of Ohio State basketball under Holtmann's watch.

"I knew going into the year it would be challenging, but I really emphasized more and more with Chris about playing those

young puppies and getting them a chance to get minutes on the floor and get them experience," Smith said. "The shift to make sure we got them more playing time was critical. We saw that at the end of the schedule. Once they played more they came together, and I feel so good about the results of the efforts."

### Diebler Taking Reins For Remainder Of Season

The youth movement continued into this season, but as the ill-fated campaign progressed, Smith expressed a different tone and sensed the need for a shift within the program. While still believing in the team's youth, Smith felt Ohio State's younger players needed a new voice in the locker room to best accentuate their talents moving forward.

"I think the young men have played hard," Smith said. "They've given a lot. But the reality is, (with) the body of work over this last year, I felt that they needed something different from a leadership point of view to give them that chance. While they're young, there's a lot of minutes on that floor – a lot. They still have six games and the tournament, so I wanted to give them a shot, and that's what they have."

For Smith, that new voice came from Jake Diebler, who had served on Holtmann's staff for the past five seasons – including the last two as associate head coach – and is the brother of former Ohio State guard Jon Die-

bler (2008-11).

Smith called the 37-year-old Jake Diebler a "warrior" for taking on this elevated role and said he felt the longtime assistant would put the team in the best position to finish the final six games of the regular season on the right note, a final stretch that began with a battle with No. 2 Purdue just four days after the firing.

"I am so appreciative that Jake Diebler has stepped up and accepted the challenge," Smith said. "That's not easy. I hope you guys appreciate that. What he's doing is not easy. My heart is with him to a great degree, but we have a little runway. We have days between (Feb. 14) and (the Feb. 18 game vs. Purdue) where you have time to accept the emotions of this moment and adjust and begin to coach our kids."

"I think he's a very good coach. I think he's going to demonstrate, for the kids, that at the end of the day, we need to keep fighting all the way through. He's going to do that."

Despite the quick turnaround and limited time to instill his head-coaching philosophies upon the team, Diebler accomplished just that in his first game leading the Buckeyes. Implementing a more fast-paced style of play, Diebler orchestrated one of the more stunning upsets of the college basketball season in front of a national audience, securing a 73-69 win over Purdue behind a stifling defense that forced 14 turnovers – five of them by way of Zed Key stealing it from Purdue center Zach Edey – that led to 22 Ohio State points.

It was a significant win that led to a sea of scarlet and gray flooding the Value City Arena floor at the buzzer, capping off a monumental week that was filled with a wide-ranging mix of emotions for those within the program.

"This was one of my hardest, weirdest, most dramatic times being a college basketball player this last week," Thornton said after the game. "It's not normal when your head coach gets fired in the middle of the season and then you play probably the No. 1 seed in March Madness. But I told our guys, 'We are all we have right now.' Things happen. College basketball is a business. We took every day one day at a time. We saw our teammates with a confidence and swagger about them that it doesn't matter who we play, we're going to show how to play Ohio State basketball. We showed it tonight."

"What a resilient group," Diebler added. "We have some great young men in there who came together at a high level these last few days in a way that I don't know any of us fully anticipated, of that level we could get to in a short amount of time. They deserve so much credit. I am so very happy for them, and I'm proud of them."

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## OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

# Several Coaches Emerging To Replace Holtmann

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Interim head coach Jake Diebler made a strong first impression on the Buckeye faithful by knocking off then-No. 2 Purdue on Feb. 18, but Ohio State is expected to look outside of Columbus and conduct a nationwide search to replace Chris Holtmann.

Athletic director Gene Smith emphasized on Feb. 14 that while he will have significant input in the decision-making process, the coaching search will be led by incoming athletic director Ross Bjork, who will join the program as an advisor to Smith on March 1 before taking the reins from the longtime athletic director on July 1.

"When Ross gets here, as he shares with me his plan for the search, I'll be there to assist him and be very much a part of it with conversations and background information, things of that nature," he said. "I'm going to be all in. I'm going to be all in with Ross. I'm going to be honest, forthright, authentic and genuine. I'm going to tell him that we need to find someone that has the X's and O's and those talents and skills, but they have to fit our values, they have to fit our culture. So I'll be involved. It will be heavy."

Factoring in Ohio State's hefty athletics department budget and strong alumni and booster presence, there is sure to be a rich pool of candidates for Bjork and Smith to choose from in the upcoming months – a decision that will likely be heavily influenced by each candidate's approach toward NIL, the transfer portal and other changing aspects of collegiate sports.

Aside from those things, Smith acknowledged that the program's 16th head coach must ultimately understand and live up to the lofty expectations the school has set for the men's basketball team on the court, a high standard that Holtmann was ultimately unable to reach.

"There's nothing changed for any of our sports (regarding expectations)," Smith said. "I think we have 13 or 14 (teams at Ohio State) ranked in the top 25 right now. I mean, nothing's changed. All of our programs have the same standard."

"The blessing that we have at The Ohio State University is to recruit to this platform, to recruit to Columbus, the resources that Buckeye Nation provides us. The standard for men's basketball is the same. Be in the hunt, periodically win the championship, and then go deep into the postseason. That hasn't changed, and that hasn't been accomplished. We need to do better."

Smith indicated that Ohio State's coaching search will not begin until the end of the season – as the focus is currently on putting Diebler in the best situation to succeed – but that has not stopped several notable names from emerging as potential candidates to become the Buckeyes' next men's basketball coach.

While Smith, Bjork or the university have yet to publicly identify people who have piqued their interest since Holtmann's firing, BSB has compiled a list of seven coaches – most of whom are currently

employed at other universities – who have reportedly surfaced as names to watch as Ohio State begins just its third coaching search in two decades.

**Jeff Boals – head coach, Ohio University:** Boals may be the biggest wild card on this list, as he has never led a Power Five school in his eight-year head coaching career. But his assistant coaching history at



Jeff Boals

Ohio State as well as his success leading Ohio University over his first five seasons may warrant some interest from Bjork, or at least an interview.

Boals served as an assistant on Matta's staff at Ohio State from 2009-16, helping the Buckeyes gain a berth to the NCAA Tournament in six of those seven seasons along with a Final Four appearance in 2012. But the longtime Ohioan was perhaps most valuable to the program with his recruiting, where he reportedly played a large role in the signings of some of the premier players of that era of Ohio State basketball such as Aaron Craft, D'Angelo Russell and Jared Sullinger.

Boals' coaching career extends beyond Ohio State, too. He earned a 55-42 record while serving as head coach for Stony Brook from 2016-19 before taking over at Ohio University in 2019-20 and boasting a 93-59 so far in his first five seasons. That stretch included an NCAA Tournament appearance in 2020-21, the Bobcats' first since 2012.

**Chris Jent – assistant coach, Los Angeles Lakers:** While many of the names listed have few or no ties to Ohio State, Jent's basketball resume oozes scarlet and gray. The longtime NBA assistant and Sparta, N.J., product played for the Buckeyes from 1988-92, averaging 8.2 points, 3.9 rebounds and 1.4 assists per game.

Jent's time at Ohio State also extended past his playing career. He had two separate stints with the program. He first joined Matta's staff as an assistant coach from 2011-13. After spending two years in the NBA as an assistant for the Sacramento Kings (2013-14) and head coach of the Phoenix Suns' developmental league team Bakersfield Jam (2015-16), Jent then returned to Ohio State in 2016-17.

In addition to his playing and coaching career at Ohio State, Jent also has an extensive history coaching in the NBA, having spent 15 seasons as an assistant for six different franchises, including two separate stints with Akron native and current Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James with the Cleveland Cavaliers (2006-10) and Lakers (2022-present). While with the Cavaliers, he was James' personal shooting coach. Jent also served as the interim head coach for the Orlando Magic for the final 18 games of the season in 2004-2005.

Jent has reportedly already expressed interest in becoming the Buckeyes' next head coach, making him an intriguing candidate for Bjork if he chooses to go the unconventional route and add a veteran leader who has ties to both the NBA and

Ohio State.

**Dusty May – head coach, Florida Atlantic:** May is one of the hottest names in college basketball today. Despite being head coach at FAU for only six seasons, the 47-year-old has already cemented himself as the winningest head coach in program history, boasting a 122-67 record as BSB went to press.

May's impact on the Owls' program has been substantial. After failing to secure a 20-win season in his first four years as head coach, May placed Florida Atlantic in the national spotlight during the 2022-23 season, taking the program to their second NCAA Tournament appearance in history and making a run all the way to the Final Four as a No. 9 seed with a 35-4 overall record.

May's historic season had many experts believing that he was in line to accept a more lucrative head coaching position at a Power Five school last offseason, similar to the path former Florida Gulf Coast and current USC head coach Andy Enfield took after leading his "Dunk City" Eagles to the Sweet 16 as a No. 15 seed in 2012.

Instead, May signed a 10-year extension to stay with the program one week after their Final Four loss to San Diego State, a lengthy deal Bjork would have to match with his wallet.

**Greg McDermott – head coach, Creighton:** McDermott is arguably the most decorated and experienced candidate on this list, having been a head coach since the 1994-95 season, including the last 14 years as the head man at Creighton.

McDermott has helped turn the Blue Jays into one of the more highly respected and competitive non-Power Five teams in the country during his tenure, leading the program to an impressive 320-158 record and eight NCAA Tournament appearances, with another one expected this season. His best coaching performance may have come a year ago, when he led the Blue Jays to their first Elite Eight appearance in program history and finished 24-13.

McDermott, a Cascade, Iowa, native, has no ties to Ohio State or the Big Ten. His other coaching stints include head coaching tenures at Wayne State (1994-2000), North Dakota State (2000-01), Northern Iowa (2001-06) and Iowa State (2006-10). He also agreed to a multiyear contract extension with Creighton in March 2022, providing another hurdle for Bjork and Ohio State to clear if they are interested.

**Sean Miller – head coach, Xavier:** Miller



Sean Miller

returned to Xavier – where he earned his first head coaching job in 2004 – in 2022 and instantly elevated the program, taking his team to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2017-18 and finishing with a 27-10 record.

This fast start helped Miller earn a two-year contract extension in October that runs through the 2028-29 season, but his Musketeers haven't been able to replicate that same success this season, holding a

13-14 record as BSB went to press.

This season's struggles do not discredit his ability to build a program into a juggernaut, though. Prior to his time at Xavier, Miller led Arizona to a combined 302-109 record, five Pac-12 regular-season championships and seven NCAA Tournament appearances, though he was fired following the 2020-21 season after the Wildcats were caught up in a wide-ranging corruption scandal that included bribery and money laundering.

Aside from his success at Arizona, Miller also has ties to former OSU head coach Thad Matta, having served as associate head coach under him at Xavier from 2001-04.



Lamont Paris

**Lamont Paris – head coach, South Carolina:** Paris, a Findlay, Ohio, native, may not possess the reputation that Miller holds in the collegiate head coaching ranks, having spent just two seasons leading a Power Five program, but he has quickly emerged as a rising star in the industry due to his performance at South Carolina this season.

Paris' first year with the Gamecocks was a disappointment, going 11-21 and finishing 12th in the SEC. That has been erased this year, as he has lifted the team – featuring former Ohio State and Holtmann recruit Meechie Johnson – to a 22-5 record and 10-4 in conference play.

The open vacancy at Ohio State may also entice Paris to return to not only his home state, where he previously served as an assistant coach at Akron from 2005-10, but also the Big Ten. Paris worked under Bo Ryan and later Greg Gard at Wisconsin from 2010-17 being elevated to associate head coach under Gard in 2016-17.

Before taking the South Carolina job, Paris posted an 87-72 record as head coach at Chattanooga.

**Buzz Williams – head coach, Texas A&M:** Aside from his successful 17-year career in head coaching, the obvious draw of Williams for Ohio State is his connection to Bjork. The two men spent the last five seasons together at Texas A&M, with Williams being named head coach in April 2019 and Bjork taking over as athletic director that next month.

Williams amassed a combined 91-59 record dating back to 2019-20 and took his team to the NCAA Tournament in 2022-23, a year in which he also won SEC Coach of the Year. The team currently holds a 15-12 record, with one of those wins coming against Holtmann and Ohio State, a 73-66 victory in Columbus on Nov. 10.

Williams, who had previous stints at Marquette (2008-14) and Virginia Tech (2014-19), also has no real connections to Ohio State. But he did speak glowingly of the Buckeyes after their matchup earlier this season, specifically praising the talents of Bruce Thornton and calling him the catalyst of the Ohio State's offense as well as a "hard guard."

## OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

# Players Preaching Unity After Holtmann Firing

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Fresh off a 62-54 loss to Wisconsin at the Kohl Center on Feb. 13, Ohio State sophomore guard Bruce Thornton woke up the next morning with a feeling that something had gone wrong. He then checked his phone and saw some alarming news that validated those suspicions.

"I woke up (on Feb. 14), I just had a bad feeling," Thornton said on Feb. 16. "I don't know what it was. Then you see the news, you see things on Twitter, you look on social media like anybody else, asking, 'Is this really real?'"

What Thornton saw on Twitter were multiple rumors and reports that suggested Ohio State was planning on firing head men's basketball coach Chris Holtmann that day with just six games remaining in the regular season, one which began with high hopes after a 12-2 start but ultimately sputtered when the Buckeyes lost nine of their last 11 games.

A few hours later, Thornton received a text that legitimized the information they were seeing on social media. The text read that Ohio State athletic director Gene Smith had called for a team meeting later that day, where he would soon deliver the news of his decision to fire Holtmann after seven years leading the program and elevate associate head coach Jake Diebler to fill his position for the rest of the season.

It was a decision that Thornton said came as a surprise to both him and his teammates, most of whom Holtmann had personally recruited and coached throughout their entire college careers, but one which he also knew was ultimately out of his control.

"We get a text that we have to go meet with Gene Smith, so we're just all trying to figure out what's going on until you get the real news and read what it is. We had a meeting with the whole coaching staff. Gene Smith just (said) 'This is the move that I'm going to make.'"

"It's a business decision that is higher than us players and us coaches, because that's the athletic director."

While those within the program attempted to digest the news that sent shockwaves through the college basketball world, Thornton said he and his team were forced to quickly move forward and adjust to life without their head coach who had led them on the sidelines all season.

With just four days between the news and Ohio State's next game against then-No. 2 Purdue, Thornton said his team was able to accomplish exactly that by ensuring that each player was in the right mental state to close out the remainder of the season on a positive note.

"It was hard to really process it, especially because we have a good game (vs. Purdue on Feb. 18)," Thornton said. "My main focus was making sure I was straight myself, making sure I'm mentally there to talk to my teammates and evaluate what we need to do. I've never experienced this, nobody on my team has experienced this, no coaches have been in this experience."

"I'm trying to let my teammates know that things happen, life happens. It's really how you move on from it and continue to get bet-

ter each and every day. I feel like I (had) to instill that confidence back in my teammates that we still have things to finish. We still have hardware to go get, even though we don't have the best record right now. But I feel like these next couple of games in our regular season, we can go get those. And then in the Big Ten tournament, anything can happen, especially with what happened last year."

The Buckeyes won three games at the conference tourney before being eliminated by Purdue.

Senior center Zed Key, who joined Holtmann's program in the 2020 recruiting class, said the news was unexpected, but like Thornton, Key is looking to move forward.

"From a leadership standpoint, I can't let guys see me down," he said. "I need to continue to work hard every day in practice, don't feed into any of the news and stuff that you see online, and just continue to get your work done."

Thornton said that he and his teammates felt they had an obligation to make these efforts because of the bond they had built both throughout the offseason and regular season. To him, the hard work they put in together all year served as a reminder that they could emerge from these adverse times as a better – and more cohesive – unit.

"We know we are playing for the guy next to us at the end of the day," he said. "We went through the offseason workouts in the summer, in the preseason, we just kept fighting together. We built that camaraderie and that bond with your teammates that's unbreakable. These are relationships that you're going to have outside of basketball. So when we saw (Holtmann get fired), we just knew we had to get closer, even closer than before, because it's a crazy time."

"Having guys on the team that stayed in the same dorm as me, or with Jamison (Battle) and Dale (Bonner), the new guys – we need each other more than ever now. We just have the same motto, still trying to prove people wrong, trying to get better every day, and I feel like everything will take care of itself."

The Buckeyes' commitment to staying focused translated to the practice floor in the days following Holtmann's firing. According to both Thornton and Battle, the team – now led by the 37-year-old Diebler – put together a strong few days of preparation leading up to the Purdue game, ones consisting of a renewed urgency and intensity both on the floor and in the film room.

"I think the biggest thing was just us, collectively, coming together as a team and, within that adversity, growing closer and staying present in the moment," Battle said. "I think that's something I've talked about this whole year, not letting the past affect us and not letting what's in the future affect us, just staying present in the moment, focusing on each day. We had three really good days of prep this week."

This new mentality paid off in a significant way for the Buckeyes in their first game in the post-Holtmann era on Feb. 18. Ohio State excelled in front of the national audience, pulling off a huge 73-69 upset victory over the Boilermakers behind an ignited defense that forced Purdue into 14 turnovers.

Key, who played a significant role in the win with a career-high five steals, all on Pur-



SONNY BROCKWAY

**COME TOGETHER** — Ohio State's players have shown unity since the firing of head coach Chris Holtmann, with those such as Felix Okpara (34) and Evan Mahaffey (12) helping lead the team through a difficult time.

due star center Zach Edey, said that his team's performance that day – which was capped by a postgame celebration with fans who rushed the floor after the final buzzer sounded – was one to remember for those in the locker room who endured a difficult week.

"With everything that's been going on, it was a tough week for us," he said. "I just put my head down and let all the frustrations out there on the court. I just wanted to get the 'W'. We had momentum, the crowd was on our side, and we were making the right plays, so we got the 'W'. As an individual, I just told myself, 'Go out there, play free, and don't let any distractions get to you.'"

"There were definitely a lot of emotions in that locker room, just from the week that we had. We pulled out the 'W' and played so hard. We came together as a team and knew, from that day on, that we are still a contender in this and that we're a really good team. We're going to try and keep that momentum going."

Thornton echoed Key's sentiment, with the win serving as a cathartic few hours for his team when they could lay out all the frustrations on the court from the difficult week that was – one which, for Thornton, began with a mindless scroll through Twitter.

"It feels great, man," Thornton said. "Especially seeing your teammates, coaching staff, Buckeye Nation, all coming together. Seeing the smile on everybody's faces, that's what college basketball is about."

"I'm just really excited for my teammates. I'm so proud of them. What I ask of them, they always come forward and bring their best every day, and they bring me confidence. I'm really proud of those guys. I'm glad that we got the result that we wanted, that we've been working on for a long time. Another one is coming up next."

"As a man, you have to keep moving forward when things are not going your way. We

kept putting in work. We had trust in (each other). We're having fun playing the game that we also absolutely love since we've been at a young age. I feel like with this game, all that frustration, all that attitude, all that swag that we had about ourselves, we showed it, and we got the win."

Ohio State is looking forward to what may lie ahead the rest of the season, a stretch that is guaranteed to include three more regular-season games (Nebraska, Feb. 29; Michigan, March 3; and at Rutgers, March 10) and at least one game in the Big Ten tournament in Minneapolis. Those within the locker room also haven't forgotten to reflect on the times they had with their now-former head coach.

Thornton acknowledged that he would not be in his current position of team captain and leading scorer at Ohio State without the efforts of Holtmann, who he said met with him – along with every other player – to fill them in on the details of his firing. Thornton said the coach helped mold him into a better player and person with his teachings on and off the floor, something he will appreciate for the remainder of his basketball career.

"Holtmann is a great guy," Thornton said. "He gave me an opportunity, a scholarship, to play at a Power Five school, and I'm forever thankful for that. (I appreciate) what he's done for me and the other guys he's ever recruited at Ohio State. His family is great. His wife (Lori), his kids – he always treated us like we were his sons. He was a big family guy. I was always over at his house. Everybody just had fun, laughed, kicked it with each other."

"At the end of the day, he's grown us into more than basketball players, so I always respect what he has done. But as a man, he just had to tell me, 'This is what happened, and I have to move on. I got fired.' Just being straight up with me. He said, 'I still want you all to finish this season out strong. I love you all and I have care for you all.'"



## OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

# Holtmann Blindsided By In-Season Dismissal

Former Ohio State head coach Chris Holtmann, who was fired by athletic director Gene Smith on Feb. 14, reportedly was caught off guard by the news of his dismissal.

## COURT REPORT

### Patrick Engels

A source told The Athletic's Dana O'Neil and Tobias Bass that the seventh-year head coach was "blindsided" by the school's decision to fire him before the season ended and that he did not get a chance to meet with his team prior to the announcement.

Holtmann reportedly met with Smith the week before his firing, where Smith made it clear to the now-former coach that while making the NCAA Tournament was "critical" – something the program has not done since the 2021-22 season – the plan was to wait until the season ended to make a decision on Holtmann's job status.

Instead, Holtmann was relieved of his duties on Valentine's Day with six games remaining in the regular season – a move that will cost Ohio State \$12.8 million in buyout money to pay the coach his remaining salary – and Jake Diebler was elevated from associate to interim head coach for the remainder of the campaign.

The week of play leading up to the firing was an up-and-down one for the coach and



SONNY BROCKWAY

**BIG MEN —** Ohio State forward Zed Key (23) was a pivotal part of the Buckeyes' upset of Purdue on Feb. 18, notching five steals of Purdue center Zach Edey.

## 2023-24 Ohio State Men's Basketball Statistics

### 16-12 Overall (6-11 Big Ten) Statistics through games of Feb. 25

Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	O-D	Reb-Avg.	PF-FO	A	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
THORNTON, Bruce	28-28	943-33.7	152-358	.425	46-148	.311	104-123	.846	11-84	95-3.4	48-1	117	32	1	33	454-16.2
BATTLE, Jamison	27-27	835-30.9	132-286	.462	73-166	.440	46-49	.939	31-107	138-5.1	52-1	30	43	5	10	383-14.2
GAYLE JR., Roddy	28-28	890-31.8	131-295	.444	23-83	.277	98-113	.867	28-94	122-4.4	59-0	89	72	3	23	383-13.7
KEY, Zed	28-1	450-16.1	68-128	.531	3-9	.333	60-84	.714	53-63	116-4.1	56-0	16	18	17	10	199-7.1
OKPARA, Felix	27-27	633-23.4	69-115	.600	0-2	.000	26-41	.634	62-106	168-6.2	77-3	13	27	63	11	164-6.1
MAHAFFEY, Evan	28-28	657-23.5	58-125	.464	2-16	.125	22-36	.611	39-84	123-4.4	71-2	47	28	20	33	140-5.0
BONNER, Dale	28-0	521-18.6	43-137	.314	20-69	.290	19-31	.613	5-55	60-2.1	29-0	32	14	3	18	125-4.5
MIDDLETON, Scotty	25-1	378-15.1	34-96	.354	18-49	.367	8-18	.444	10-24	34-1.4	25-0	18	12	7	5	94-3.8
ROYAL, Devin	25-0	231-9.3	36-68	.529	2-12	.167	19-31	.613	21-27	48-1.9	40-1	9	15	7	8	93-3.7
HARDMAN, Bowen	14-0	68-4.9	10-23	.435	8-19	.421	1-2	.500	0-8	8-0.6	1-0	0	0	0	0	29-2.1
BAUMANN, Colby	2-0	04-1.8	0-0	.000	0-0	.000	4-4	1.000	0-0	0-0.0	0-0	0	0	0	0	4-2.0
PARKS, Austin	8-0	17-2.2	1-1	1.000	0-0	.000	1-2	.500	0-4	4-0.5	3-0	1	1	0	1	3-0.4
CHATMAN, Taison	11-0	43-3.9	1-11	.091	0-9	.000	0-0	.000	1-4	5-0.5	7-0	5	5	0	0	2-0.2
ETZLER, Kalen	5-0	10-2.0	0-4	.000	0-3	.000	0-0	.000	1-3	4-0.8	4-0	2	1	0	1	0-0.0
Team									48-39	87		14				
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>5680</b>	<b>735-1647</b>	<b>.446</b>	<b>195-585</b>	<b>.333</b>	<b>408-534</b>	<b>.764</b>	<b>310-702</b>	<b>1012-36.1</b>	<b>472-8</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>2073-74.0</b>
<b>Opponents</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>5675</b>	<b>709-1634</b>	<b>.434</b>	<b>191-534</b>	<b>.358</b>	<b>348-485</b>	<b>.718</b>	<b>291-662</b>	<b>953-34.0</b>	<b>502-10</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>1957-69.9</b>

his program. The Buckeyes, riding a four-game losing streak, had arguably their worst defeat of the season on Feb. 6, squandering an 18-point second-half lead at home in a 76-73 loss to Indiana.

Four days later – with Smith in attendance – Ohio State had one of its best victories of the year, a dramatic 79-75 double-overtime home win against Maryland where sophomore guard Bruce Thornton provided the game-tying scores in regulation and overtime before hitting the game-winning layup in the second extra period. But the Buckeyes could not replicate that late-game success on the road at Wisconsin on Feb. 13 in a 62-54 loss in what wound up as Holtmann's final game at Ohio State.

It was a defeat that gave Holtmann and his team their 16th straight road loss – a streak that dated back to Jan. 1, 2023 – and their ninth loss in the last 11 games, an extended losing stretch that likely played a role in Smith's decision to fire him before the season ended.

While The Athletic reported that Holtmann was unable to speak with the team before news of his firing broke, Thornton told the media on Feb. 16 that the former coach spoke to each player individually on an undisclosed date to offer clarity on the situation.

"He met with everybody individually," Thornton said. "He just wanted to be straight up about it. He wanted to tell us before the news got out. Just being a man, telling everybody one-on-one what happened, what he was experiencing ... He just said, 'This is what happened, I have to move on. I got fired.'"

### Diebler's Buckeyes Ramp Up Intensity Against Purdue

In the days following Holtmann's firing and leading up to Ohio State's matchup against No. 2 Purdue on Feb. 18, Diebler and his staff committed to instilling a higher level of energy and pace in practice to inject focus into an emotionally charged locker room.

"I operate with passion and urgency and a pace to things, so we tried to tailor our practice around that," Diebler said. "I was very open with what I wanted it to look like,

and they embraced that."

That mentality translated onto the floor in front of a packed Value City Arena with 18,353 fans on hand, where the Buckeyes turned up the heat and upset the heavily favored Boilermakers, 73-69, behind a number of fastbreak baskets and 14 forced turnovers. Speaking with the media after the win, Diebler said his and his team's emphasis on operating with increased urgency played a significant role in what was their biggest victory of the season, giving them the added confidence and belief they needed to close out the game on a winning note.

"We prepared to win this game," Diebler said. "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.' Our staff, we kept echoing that. 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 adversity moving forward and in games and beyond. But we want to keep that mentality."

Ohio State's heightened intensity was most evident on defense, where the Buckeyes came up with nine steals – tied for their second most all season – and scored 22 points off turnovers. Five of those steals came from the active hands of senior center Zed Key, who stripped the ball away from Purdue center Zach Edey on numerous occasions inside the paint.

It was a career defensive performance from the veteran that not only frustrated his 7-4 opponent but allowed the offense to find success offensively in transition.

"Key did a good job of stripping (Edey)," 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."

"We can't let them get in transition," Edey added. "We have to play a halfcourt game. They were able to get those steals and play in transition. It's tough to win the game when a team scores 22 points off turnovers."

Diebler also pointed to the overall aggres-

siveness of his team on defense as something that tilted the game in the Buckeyes' favor, a mentality that he hopes to see his players continue to embrace on both ends of the floor moving forward this season.

"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. I felt like we were able to do that on both sides. We tried to mix in some pressure, full-court (pressure) today. 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."

### Transferring Not In Thornton's DNA

Speaking to the media just two days after Holtmann's firing, Thornton acknowledged on several occasions that college basketball is a "business" and that the school's decision to fire the man who offered him a scholarship was out of both his and his teammates' control.

He acknowledged that he has no say over who will be next in charge for the Buckeyes – the decision-making process that will be led by incoming athletic director Ross Bjork after the season – but one thing he can control in this business-oriented sport is whether he will enter the transfer portal this off-season, an avenue that players have utilized more frequently in an era of increasing roster overhaul in college basketball.

While some players may be compelled to leave the program for another opportunity amid this change of leadership at Ohio State – an avenue they can even take during the season under the current NCAA transfer portal rules, which allow players to enter the portal for 30 days after a coaching change – Thornton instead voiced his commitment to the team for the foreseeable future, something he felt he had the obligation to do given his status as team captain.

"It's about my morals and my values as a player," Thornton said. "I never felt it was OK to go separate ways, especially being a captain. You have a responsibility. Especially as a man, you don't quit. You at least finish it out and see what's happening after (the

## OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL



SONNY BROCKWAY

**IN FOR THE LONG HAUL — Despite changes in the program following the firing of head coach Chris Holtmann, sophomore guard Bruce Thornton said he intends to stay at Ohio State.**

season).

"But during the process, you don't quit. That's the thing my mom always taught me, just to finish things out. Even if you don't like it, even if it kills me. But at least finish it out, then after that, if you really don't like it, you don't have to go through it anymore. But now, how I explain it to my teammates, is that I'm not going to go anywhere. I'm going to finish the season out strong. ... I'm not going to quit on my teammates, not on the coaches, and especially not on Buckeye Nation. And all of my teammates are of the same accord. We're going to finish it out the right way and see what happens."

Regardless of his commitment to the team, Thornton — who is in the midst of his second season at Ohio State with two more seasons of eligibility remaining — is likely to receive interest from other schools in need of a point guard. After bursting onto the scene and starting every game as a freshman, he has quickly emerged as Ohio State's most productive player, leading the team in points (16.2) and assists (4.2) as of Feb. 25.

According to former Ohio State guard Aaron Craft — who visited the team during their practice on Feb. 15 — teams have already begun to inquire about Thornton's possible availability next season, with many programs reportedly contacting Thornton's mother, Tiaunna Briggins, rather than the sophomore guard himself to avoid any NCAA infractions.

"Talking to Bruce yesterday after practice, I completely underestimated this kind of fallout with the way college basketball is now," Craft said on the "Carmen's Crew" podcast. "Other coaches, other programs can't talk to him specifically, but he said from the moment rumors went out that Holtmann was going to get fired until practice (on Feb. 14) — so like a 40-hour window — his mom was on the phone nonstop talking to 'X' program or 'X' coach and trying to figure out what Bruce was trying to think about doing."

Despite the extra attention Thornton is receiving from opposing schools, the guard said he has remained focused on leading

his team through the final two weeks of the regular season and finishing his sophomore campaign at Ohio State on a strong note.

"I'm just making sure as the captain that everybody is still going to stay the course and still try to finish the season out well," he said. "I feel like we still have things to accomplish. I feel like we still have some goals in plan. We just need to keep putting in work, keep trusting the next guy in front of us, keep making the right play and having offensive efficiency, and it will take care of itself."

### Mobley, White Voice Commitment To Program

Holtmann's firing will likely impact Ohio State in the world of recruiting, where the coach has secured top-40 classes in five of his seven years leading the Buckeyes. But for the lone two players signed by Ohio State in 2024, the change in leadership has had no impact — at least, for now — on their commitment to the program.

In the wake of the head coach's dismissal, incoming freshman guards Juni Mobley and Colin White — whom Holtmann officially signed to the program on Nov. 8 — both announced that they have no intention of reopening their recruitments anytime soon but will closely monitor how the program operates during the offseason.

Mobley (6-0, 150), a four-star prospect out of Mount Pleasant (Utah) Wasatch Academy and the No. 48 overall player in the class, was the first of the two to pledge, committing to the program in October 2022. He also paid an official visit to Columbus on Sept. 9, attending the Buckeye football team's home opener against Youngstown State.

"As a family, we have no intentions of opening his recruitment anytime soon," Ronnie Steward, a family friend and athlete management representative for Mobley, told The Columbus Dispatch on Feb. 16. "Juni's still really excited about being a Buckeye."

"We're aware a coaching decision is going to be made. Right now the focus is on finishing this high school season strong, and at the end of the year we'll evaluate once

a decision is made and with the new staff, what their plans are and how they view Juni."

White (6-6, 180), a three-star prospect out of Ottawa (Ohio) Ottawa-Glandorf and the No. 180 overall player, committed to Ohio State over Butler, Cincinnati, Northwestern and TCU in August. A Division-III Northwest Ohio Player of The Year award winner in 2022-23, White has been seen attending many home basketball games this season and even joined the Buckeyes and their fans to celebrate on the court after the team's win over Purdue.

"The Block O means a lot to me, but who knows what the future holds?" White told "Views From The Schott" podcast host Tim Miller. "I am definitely going to stay committed, but I will wait for the next hire to make the best decision for me."

While Mobley did not directly comment on what the program has said to him in the wake of Holtmann's firing, White said he has stayed in constant communication with Diebler, who has assured him that greener pastures are to come for the program in the future.

"Me and Diebler talk every day," White said. "Diebler is a great coach and a great guy, and he always tells me to trust him and we'll figure it out. I do trust him."

Although it is unclear what route Ohio State will take in recruiting moving forward with a nationwide coaching search set to be under way this offseason, Diebler said on Feb. 16 that while recruiting is not a top priority as interim head coach, he still needs to show support toward both Mobley and White and assure the incoming duo that the program still values them.

"From a recruiting standpoint, the focus is on the guys that are signed," Diebler said. "In my opinion, spending a lot of time on (recruiting) is not in the best interest of this program or for the players right now. But in the next couple of days, maybe we'll have a chance to sit down and process what that needs to look like. Ohio State, players from Ohio, that stuff matters to me, personally. I think it's really important, and it will always be important."

### Former Coaches, Players Weigh In On Holtmann Firing

Ohio State's decision to fire Holtmann garnered national attention in the college basketball world, and it even caused some of the more recognizable names in the sport to offer their take on the matter.

Appearing together on Sirius XM's "Basketball & Beyond" radio show on Feb. 15, legendary former college basketball head coaches Mike Krzyzewski and Jay Wright both expressed disapproval toward Smith's decision to dismiss Holtmann after seven seasons leading the program, saying the school acted too quickly and did not allow the coach an opportunity to rebound from the last two disappointing seasons.

"After three years at Duke, I'd be fired," said Krzyzewski, men's college basketball's all-time wins leader at 1,202 who amassed five national championships at Duke from 1980 to 2022. "Part of building a culture is going through adversity. (Wright and I) were fortunate to be allowed to do that. Our schools were fortunate because we were allowed to build a culture. Our culture is still there at Duke. That's what you want to keep going."

"It's almost like everybody is a junior col-

lege coach now," added Wright, who earned two NCAA championships along with a 520-197 record at Villanova (2001-22). "We have to put a team together and we have to win right away because we might not get a chance late in the year."

"They might not be patient with us. That's why I brought up Holtmann. Seventy percent of Ohio State's points come from freshmen and sophomores. If those guys stay, whoever gets that job next year is going to have a hell of a team. No one is waiting on those young teams anymore. It's so different."

The former coaches were not the only college basketball legends to offer their comments on Holtmann's dismissal. Longtime Michigan State coach Tom Izzo — who told the media after the Spartans' win over Ohio State in Columbus last year that Buckeye fans should be patient with Holtmann — said that the in-season firing depicted a disturbing trend in college basketball where head coaches are dismissed before they can adjust to the changing landscape of the sport.

"I don't get into other people's business, but I feel for Chris Holtmann and what's gone on there," Izzo said. "Again, I don't know all the circumstances. I just know it was five years he was in the NCAA Tournament."

"Right now, we're all going through a tough time as far as figuring out whether you want to take freshmen or whether you want to take transfers, and it's really hard to navigate for all of us. That's another thing that saddens me, because with all this stuff, coaches are going to lose their jobs. I've always stuck up for coaches. I obviously am good friends with (Smith), but I just don't like what's going on for coaches in general and that's all I have to say about that."

While several retired and current coaches — Dayton's Anthony Grant and Purdue's Painter being other examples — have come to Holtmann's defense, those who have donned the Scarlet and Gray have offered different opinions on the decision.

Speaking on the "Carmen's Crew" podcast alongside The Columbus Dispatch's Adam Jardy, former Buckeyes David Lighty (2007-11), Jared Sullinger (2010-12) and Craft (2011-14) — who each played only under Thad Matta during their respective Ohio State careers — had mixed opinions on the matter, with Craft and Lighty both saying that they were shocked by the timing of the firing, and Sullinger saying that he felt the program needed a change in leadership to give them a spark to finish the season.

"It was a shock for me," Lighty said. "I thought if any changes would happen from the Ohio State Buckeyes in a coach position, I thought it would be at the end of the season. But Gene hit us with one and said we're going to get that started now for some reason."

"I think it was needed, though," Sullinger added. "That's no shot to Chris Holtmann, but just sometimes, you need a fresh face. To be honest with you, whoever took that job after Thad Matta, that was a hell of a job, because Coach Matta had set a standard for Ohio State basketball. If you couldn't produce to that standard, then it was on to the next one. It was very unfair for Coach Holtmann to come into that situation (the way he did) in June (of 2017). He didn't really get to create his team, his culture, right away the way he wanted to."



## OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

## Diebler's Buckeyes Upset Purdue, Stun Spartans

By PATRICK ENGELS

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State basketball team went through a litany of change since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, with the school firing head coach Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14 just one day after the team's 62-54 loss at Wisconsin and subsequently promoting Jake Diebler from associate to interim head coach.

This change in leadership began an action-packed stretch of play for the Buckeyes that included two thrilling wins and an historic defeat.

Under Diebler's guidance, the Buckeyes secured a significant 73-69 upset victory over No. 2 Purdue at home on Feb. 18, dropped a program-record 17th straight road game at Minnesota on Feb. 22, then snapped the streak just three days later with a 60-57 win at Michigan State that ended on a buzzer-beating three from fifth-year guard Dale Bonner.

The win over Michigan State gave Ohio State its first road win since Jan. 1, 2023, along with its first win at the Breslin Center since 2011-12.

### Holtmann Era Ends With Loss To Wisconsin

The Holtmann era at Ohio State ended in familiar fashion Feb. 13 in Madison, Wis., with the Buckeyes (14-11, 4-10 Big Ten) succumbing to poor shooting and sluggish play down the stretch in a 62-54 loss to No. 20 Wisconsin (17-8, 9-5), tying a program record with their 16th consecutive road defeat before

14,931 at the Kohl Center.

Ohio State trailed 34-21 at the half but managed to cut the deficit down to just five points with 9:49 left. But Holtmann's team – like many times on the road this season – struggled offensively when it mattered most, making just four of its final 15 shots and allowing the Badgers to hold onto the win.

"(Wisconsin) made it difficult for us to score and finish around the rim and hit some timely baskets," Holtmann said. "I thought if we could make two or three of those and cut it to a four-point game, we would be right there. We just weren't able to do it."

Wisconsin raced out to an early lead, making four of its first five shots to go up 10-4 before the first media timeout. The Buckeyes answered out of the break with a 7-1 run that included a three-pointer from sophomore guard Roddy Gayle Jr. to tie the game at 11.

The Badgers broke a 6:36 field-goal drought with makes from forward Steven Crowl and guard AJ. Storr to go back up 18-13, but the Buckeyes responded with five straight points from Gayle to tie the contest with 7:08 on the first-half clock.

Later, after Wisconsin went up by six, Bruce Thornton connected on his first basket with 3:23 left to make it 25-21 in favor of the Badgers. Wisconsin closed on a 9-0 run to lead 34-21 at the break.

Ohio State came out firing in the second half with eight makes in its first 11 tries – four of those baskets from Thornton – but it didn't do much to scrape into Wisconsin's lead, as the Badgers started the half shooting 7 of 11 from the floor to still lead 50-40 with 11:21 left.

Thornton's fourth basket in the OSU shooting spree started an 8-0 run to trail 50-45 with 9:49 left. But that was the closest the Buckeyes got to the Badgers the rest of the game. Wisconsin gradually increased its lead back up to 57-47 with 3:56 left on a basket from Tyler Wahl.

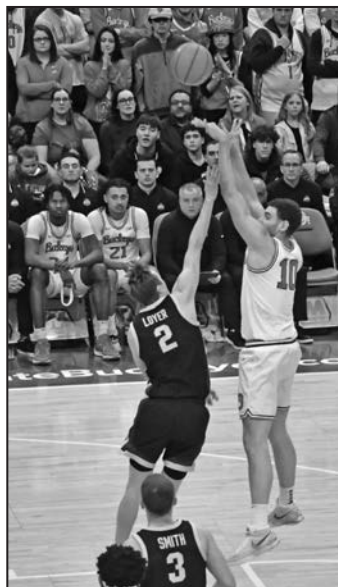
Despite Wisconsin not making a shot in the next 3:05, Ohio State never got closer than eight with three misses before a driving layup by Thornton with 1:36 left made it 57-49. Wisconsin extended its lead back up to 60-49 off a second-chance triple from guard Chuckie Hepburn with only 51 seconds to play to dash any Buckeye hopes.

"The disappointing thing was not being able to get the necessary scores," Holtmann said. "We got enough stops. We just weren't able to get the scores we needed to during that stretch."

Ohio State was led by Thornton, who scored 16 of his 18 points in the second half while adding a team-high five assists. Gayle and Evan Mahaffey both finished with 10 points while Wisconsin was powered by Crowl (16 points, 10 rebounds) and Storr (14 points, 12 rebounds), with the Badgers holding a 39-26 edge on the glass.

### Buckeyes Hang On To Upset No. 2 Purdue

Ohio State (15-11, 5-10) used strong performances from Jamison Battle and Thornton and tenacious team defense to secure a huge 73-69 upset victory over No. 2 Purdue (23-3, 12-3) on Feb. 18, defeating the heavily-favored Boilermakers in front of 18,353 fans at Value City Arena in its first game with Diebler at the



SONNY BROCKWAY

**BATTLING ON — Ohio State forward Jamison Battle finished with 19 points on three made three-pointers in the win over Purdue on Feb. 18.**

helfm.

The Buckeyes, who defeated a top-five opponent for the first time since dethroning No. 1 Duke on Nov 30, 2021, received more than half of their scoring on a combined 41 points from Thornton and Battle, who made 14 of the team's 28 baskets. Ohio State also forced Purdue into 14 turnovers – five of those being Zed Key steals – that led to 22 points.

"We have some great young men in there who came together at a high level these last few days in a way that I don't know any of us fully anticipated, of that level we could get to in a short amount of time," Diebler said. "They deserve so much credit. I am so very happy for them, and (I'm) proud of them."

"(Diebler) did a great job, especially preparing us," Thornton added. "He was excited. His hands were shaking. I saw them after the first media (timeout). But he was just excited. His dream was one day to be a head coach, and he had (an opportunity) coaching players that he recruited and that he absolutely loves."

Purdue was dominant to start, scoring the game's first eight points behind three makes in four tries, capped by an old-fashioned three-point play from Trey Kaufman-Renn. But the Buckeyes – led by eight early points from Thornton – battled back as the half progressed, tying the game at 16 after an emphatic dunk from Gayle with 10:24 left.

Purdue then quieted the crowd with a dunk from center Zach Edey, starting a 12-5 run for the Boilermakers to go back up 28-21 with 5:51 remaining before intermission. The Buckeyes answered with an 8-0 run to take the lead off a basket from freshman center Austin Parks – his first career field goal – as part of an extended 14-2 run to lead 35-30 at the break. Thornton had 14 points in the first 20 minutes.

Ohio State's lead grew in the early portion of the second half thanks to Battle, who was

### Ohio State 73, Purdue 69

Feb. 18, 2024  
Value City Arena • Columbus

	1	2	F
Purdue (23-3, 12-3)	30	39	69
Ohio State (15-11, 5-10)	35	38	73

Purdue	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Edey	33	7-11	8-8	6-7	3	2	22
Jones	30	3-11	4-4	1-3	0	2	13
Smith	39	5-11	2-2	1-4	7	0	12
Kaufman-Renn	21	5-6	2-2	2-1	2	1	12
Loyer	25	1-7	4-4	0-1	0	4	6
Gillis	16	1-3	0-0	0-2	0	2	2
Heide	4	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	2
Morton	19	0-0	0-0	0-3	1	1	0
Furst	9	0-3	0-0	4-1	0	2	0
Calvin	4	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>23-53</b>	<b>20-20</b>	<b>14-22</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>69</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 43.4%. FT: 100.0%. **Three-point field goals:** 3-9 (Jones 3-5, Smith 0-2, Loyer 0-1, Gillis 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 0. **Blocked shots:** 5 (Edey 3, Smith, Morton). **Turnovers:** 14 (Edey 6, Smith 3, Jones, Kaufman-Renn, Loyer, Gillis, Morton). **Steals:** 3 (Loyer 2, Furst).

Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.
Thornton	35	8-17	5-5	2-2	3	1	22
Battle	25	6-8	4-4	0-4	0	4	19
Gayle Jr.	28	2-6	0-0	1-2	4	1	4
Mahaffey	23	1-4	0-0	2-1	1	2	2
Okpara	16	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	5	0
Key	21	4-7	0-0	1-0	1	4	9
Bonner	18	3-4	0-0	0-2	1	1	7
Royal	14	2-4	1-2	1-2	2	1	5
Middleton	15	1-5	0-0	0-2	1	0	3
Parks	2	1-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	2
Chatman	3	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>28-58</b>	<b>10-11</b>	<b>7-16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>73</b>

**Percentages:** FG: 48.3%. FT: 90.9%. **Three-point field goals:** 7-21 (Battle 3-5, Thornton 1-4, Middleton 1-3, Key 1-2, Bonner 1-2, Gayle 0-2, Royal 0-2, Mahaffey 0-1). **Team rebounds:** 1. **Blocked shots:** 3 (Mahaffey 2, Okpara). **Turnovers:** 6 (Thornton 2, Battle, Gayle, Mahaffey, Bonner). **Steals:** 9 (Key 5, Bonner 2, Gayle, Mahaffey). **Officials:** Carstensen, Szelc, Walton. **Attendance:** 18,353.

scoreless in the first half. He exploded for 11 points in 3:21 – a sequence that included three triples – to put his team up 50-38 with 14:20 left. Battle's personal 9-0 run was broken by a three from guard Lance Jones and an Edey dunk, and another dunk by Edey later pulled the Boilermakers within five, 54-49, with 9:51 left.

Ohio State broke the run with a Thornton basket with 7:48 left, and it maintained at least a two-possession lead until Purdue broke through with two free throws from Jones to trail 65-62 with 3:07 left. After two consecutive misses from the Buckeyes, Jones then connected on a three to tie the game at 65 with 1:39 left.

"We've talked for three days about putting ourselves in the position where we have a lead down the stretch, and the motto all week has been stay aggressive and keep swinging," Diebler said. "I think that mentality, our guys embrace that. Listen, Jamison Battle was clutch down the stretch, Bruce Thornton hitting free throws."

"I wish I could say it's just some miraculous coaching at that point, but good players stepped up. And I think the biggest thing was just the collective mentality of our family out there was that we were going to stay aggressive the whole game no matter what."

Ohio State once again had an answer, getting a jumper from Battle to take a 67-65 lead with 1:19 left. Key then stripped Edey,

Wisconsin 62, Ohio State 54									
Feb. 13, 2024 Kohl Center • Madison, Wis.									
	1	2	F						
Ohio State (14-11, 4-10)	21	33	54						
Wisconsin (17-8, 9-5)	34	28	62						
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.		
Thornton	35	8-19	0-0	1-3	5	3	18		
Gayle Jr.	31	4-11	0-0	0-1	4	0	10		
Mahaffey	18	5-6	0-0	1-5	0	3	10		
Battle	27	1-6	0-0	1-4	0	1	3		
Okpara	27	1-1	0-0	2-2	0	2	2		
Hardman	21	2-3	1-2	0-3	0	1	7		
Royal	16	2-4	0-0	1-0	0	5	4		
Key	13	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Bonner	11	0-4	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Middleton	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>23-56</b>	<b>1-2</b>	<b>7-19</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>54</b>		
<b>Percentages:</b> FG: 41.1%. FT: 50.0%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 7-18 (Thornton 2-6, Gayle 2-3, Hardman 2-3, Battle 1-3, Bonner 0-2, Royal 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 2. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 3 (Okpara 3). <b>Turnovers:</b> 8 (Thornton 3, Battle 2, Gayle, Okpara, Royal). <b>Steals:</b> 7 (Gayle 4, Royal 2, Thornton).									
Wisconsin	Total	FG	FT	Reb.	A	PF	Pts.		
Crowl	31	7-14	0-1	2-8	2	2	16		
Storr	36	4-9	6-8	6-6	0	0	14		
Wahl	34	5-9	0-0	0-7	3	1	10		
Hepburn	39	3-5	1-2	1-4	7	3	9		
Klesmit	32	2-10	2-3	0-1	1	3	8		
Winter	9	1-1	2-2	0-1	0	0	5		
Essegian	11	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Gilmore	6	0-0	0-0	1-0	0	2	0		
Lindsey	2	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>22-50</b>	<b>11-16</b>	<b>12-27</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>62</b>		
<b>Percentages:</b> FG: 44.0%. FT: 68.8%. <b>Three-point field goals:</b> 7-21 (Klesmit 2-7, Crowl 2-6, Hepburn 2-4, Winter 1-1, Storr 0-1, Wahl 0-1, Lindsey 0-1). <b>Team rebounds:</b> 2. <b>Blocked shots:</b> 0. <b>Turnovers:</b> 12 (Crowl 4, Wahl 2, Winter 2, Gilmore, Klesmit, Storr, Team). <b>Steals:</b> 4 (Hepburn 2, Storr, Winter). <b>Officials:</b> Brill, Curry, Pfeifer. <b>Attendance:</b> 14,931.									

## OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

and Battle added two more from the charity stripe to put his team up four with 34 seconds left. Ohio State made each of its final four free throws to close out the game, leading the Buckeye faithful to rush the floor and celebrate the upset victory.

"This was one of my hardest, weirdest, most dramatic times being a college basketball player this last week," Thornton said. "It's not normal when your head coach gets fired in the middle of the season and then you play probably the No. 1 seed in March Madness. But I just told our guys, 'We are all we have right now.' Things happen. College basketball is a business. We just took every day one day at a time."

"We kept doing that, and leading into the game you saw your teammates with a confidence and swagger about them that it doesn't matter who we play, we're going to show how to play Ohio State basketball. We showed it tonight."

Ohio State was led in the win by Thornton and Battle, who scored 22 points and 19 points, respectively, on a combined 14-of-25 shooting with Battle hitting 6 of 8 including 3 of 5 from distance. Key, who scored nine points, also had his career-high five steals, all coming at the expense of Edey, who was charged with six turnovers. Purdue was powered by Edey, who earned a double-double with 22 points and 13 rebounds. Edey helped the Boilermakers to a 36-23 margin on the boards.

## Buckeyes Make History With Loss At Minnesota

Ohio State (15-12, 5-11) suffered its program-record 17th straight road loss on Feb. 22 at Williams Arena, suffering an 88-79 loss to Minnesota (17-9, 8-7) due to a dominant

frontcourt performance from the Gophers.

Ohio State – which broke the previous record of consecutive road losses set from 1996-98 – shot a respectable 50.9 percent from the floor but was bullied in the paint, with the Gophers holding a 32-26 rebounding advantage and a 19-9 edge in second-chance points.

"We needed to rebound better," Diebler said. "That was a big key going into this game. We just didn't execute that well enough."

Ohio State struggled to start, missing three of its first five shots as Minnesota – which made each of its first five attempts – jumped out to an early 14-4 lead. The Buckeyes cut the deficit to seven with a triple from Battle – who received boos from the Gophers faithful in his first game back since transferring from the program – but Minnesota took off again, going back up 22-9 with 13:47 left after an 8-2 run.

The Buckeyes answered with an 8-0 run that included back-to-back threes by Scotty Middleton to trail 22-17 with 12:29 left. This kept Ohio State in reach of Minnesota in the ensuing minutes, and the away team trailed just 26-23 with 8:07 left after another three from Battle.

Minnesota made two straight baskets to increase its lead to 30-23, but Ohio State followed with a 7-0 run – a stretch that included freshman guard and Minneapolis native Taison Chatman's first career basket and Battle's third three of the half – to tie it at 30 with 5:24 remaining. After the two teams traded baskets, Minnesota assumed control of the game, closing the half on a 10-2 run – aided by a 3:37 scoring drought by Ohio State – to lead 42-34 at the break.

Despite Battle hitting his fourth three in as many attempts just 1:21 into the second period, Minnesota increased its lead coming out of the break, holding a 53-41 advantage with 16:06 left after consecutive threes from guard Elijah Hawkins. But thanks to a sluggish offensive sequence from the Gophers that included two makes in eight attempts, Ohio State went on a 9-4 run – eight of those points coming from Thornton – to trail 57-50 with 9:48 left.

But that was the closest Ohio State would get the rest of the contest, though the Buckeyes did close to seven again with 18 seconds remaining on a Battle three. The Gophers broke through with back-to-back threes from Hawkins and guard Cam Christie, starting a 10-1 run that put Minnesota up 67-51 with 7:44 left.

The Gophers led by as many as 17 before Ohio State cut the deficit to 72-59 with 4:41 remaining following baskets from Gayle and Mahaffey, later using an 11-4 run to trim the deficit to 79-70 with 1:31 left following a layup by Thornton. But the Buckeyes ultimately ran out of time. Minnesota made seven of its final eight free throws to go along with a layup by Dawson Garcia to close out the win.

"I was proud of the way our guys fought back," Diebler said. "The game very easily could have ended differently. But our guys kept fighting. That's what we have in this locker room. We just have to continue to do that and do it longer."

Ohio State was led in the loss by Thornton, who scored 25 points on 10-of-14 shooting while adding a team-high six assists. Battle scored 21 points and shot 5 of 10 from three in his return to Williams Arena. Minnesota was led by Hawkins' 24 points on 6-of-10 shooting, including 4 of 5 from beyond the arc. Garcia added 22 points and a game-high nine

off the boards.

## Bonner's Three Breaks Road Losing Streak

Ohio State (16-12, 6-11) snapped its 17-game road losing streak in dramatic fashion on Feb. 25 at Michigan State, with the Buckeyes coming back from 12 points down to secure a 60-57 win over the Spartans (17-11, 9-8) behind a game-winning three-pointer from Bonner.

"(The win) is great for our program," Diebler said. "Not to run from the numbers (regarding the road losing streak), we certainly knew what those were. But our players, they have had good moments on the road. Sometimes it doesn't always go your way, and things happen. But for them to push through the way they did today says a lot about them."

Ohio State, which played shorthanded with Battle sidelined with an ankle injury, shot just 24.1 percent (7 of 29) from the field in the first half and trailed the Spartans 50-38 with 11:05 left in the game, but OSU stormed back in the game's final minutes. The Buckeyes outscored Michigan State 22-7 the rest of the way capped by Bonner's buzzer-beating three in a game played before 14,797 in the Breslin Events Center.

"I was just trying to get the shot up, honestly," Bonner said. "We practice these types of situations, and I just so happened to be in that situation. I was open, and I just shot it and it went in. I knew (the shot) was good."

The undermanned Buckeyes struggled in the early going, making just three of their first 14 shots as Michigan State jumped out to a 13-8 lead. After two free throws from Royal, Gayle intercepted a pass and sprinted the other way for a dunk to trail 13-12, but it was the closest Ohio State got the rest of the half. Michigan State then scored eight of the game's next 11 points to take a 21-15 lead with 5:59 remaining, with Malik Hall scoring four of the eight points.

The Buckeyes managed to keep the score within two possessions in the ensuing minutes, trailing 23-18 heading into the final media timeout. But the Spartans closed the half on a 9-4 run – capped by a Tyson Walker second-chance layup at the buzzer – to take a 32-22 lead into half.

The Buckeyes missed their first four shots out of the break, helping the Spartans to go up 36-24 on a Xavier Booker dunk. Ohio State cut it to eight on a Gayle layup at 15:37 to make it 38-30, but the Spartans answered with a 10-6 run over the next 3:41 to lead 48-36 with 11:56 left.

After the two teams traded scores, the Buckeyes responded again, this time going on a 13-2 run to trail 52-51 with 6:02 left after a hook-shot jumper from Okpara. Okpara had two other buckets in the run, and Royal added consecutive baskets. Michigan State responded with a basket from Hall, and the score stayed at 54-51 for the next 3:32 until Gayle hit two free throws to put the Buckeyes behind just 54-53 with 2:08 left.

Walker and Royal traded baskets on back-to-back possessions before Bonner stripped Spartan forward Mady Sissoko, allowing Ohio State to take its first lead of the day, 57-56, on two Gayle free throws with 11 seconds left.

Walker was fouled by Thornton on the next possession and hit one of two free throws on the other end to tie the game at 57, but the Buckeyes had six seconds left to win the game. Facing a full-court press, Thornton

## Ohio State 60, Michigan State 57

Feb. 25, 2024 Breslin Center • East Lansing, Mich.										
		1	2	F						
Ohio State (16-12, 6-11)		22	38	60						
MSU (17-11, 9-8)		32	25	57						
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.						
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts			
Gayle Jr.	27	3-10	6-6	3-5	2	1	12			
Thornton	37	4-13	2-2	0-4	3	3	11			
Okpara	32	5-8	0-0	4-2	1	1	10			
Middleton	21	1-3	1-3	0-1	1	1	3			
Mahaffey	22	0-4	0-2	0-1	1	3	0			
Royal	18	6-8	2-2	0-2	0	3	14			
Bonner	20	2-8	0-0	0-1	0	0	6			
Key	11	1-2	2-3	4-3	0	2	4			
Chatman	6	0-0	0-0	0-2	0	0	0			
Hardman	6	0-2	0-0	0-2	0	0	0			
Totals		200	22-58	13-18	13-26	8	14	60		
Percentages: FG: 37.9%. FT: 72.2%. Three-point field goals: 3-17 (Thornton 1-6, Bonner 2-5, Gayle 0-2, Hardman 0-2, Middleton 0-1, Mahaffey 0-1). Team rebounds: 5. Blocked shots: 5 (Okpara 2, Gayle, Mahaffey, Key). Turnovers: 9 (Gayle 3, Thornton 3, Okpara 2, Bonner). Steals: 7 (Gayle 2, Royal 2, Okpara, Middleton, Bonner).										
MSU	Total	FG	FT	Reb.						
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts			
Hall	28	5-9	4-4	2-5	1	3	15			
Walker	33	5-15	1-2	1-2	0	2	12			
Hoggard	30	4-8	0-0	2-0	4	1	9			
Booker	17	3-6	0-1	0-3	0	1	7			
Akins	34	1-9	2-2	0-3	2	2	4			
Sissoko	15	1-1	2-2	1-5	0	3	4			
Holloman	16	1-3	0-0	0-1	2	0	2			
Kohler	12	1-2	0-0	0-3	0	0	2			
Carr	7	1-2	0-0	1-0	0	0	2			
Cooper	8	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	2	0			
Totals		200	22-55	9-11	8-25	9	14	57		
Percentages: FG: 40.0%. FT: 81.8%. Three-point field goals: 4-16 (Walker 1-6, Hall 1-3, Booker 1-3, Akins 0-3, Hoggard 1-1). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 6 (Booker 3, Hoggard, Akins, Holloman). Turnovers: 10 (Hall 2, Holloman 2, Carr, Cooper, Hoggard, Sissoko, Team, Walker). Steals: 7 (Akins 3, Walker, Hoggard, Holloman, Carr). Officials: Anderson, Ogelsby, Pfeifer. Attendance: 14,797.										

raced down the sidelines and found Bonner near the Ohio State bench. Bonner dribbled, gathered himself and hit a contested fade-away three as time expired.

"That was me drawing up a play, Coach (Tom) Izzo taking that play away, and players making plays," Diebler said. "Dale's shot, obviously, was incredible. But when you think of the poise Devin Royal showed, taking the ball out of bounds with no timeouts when our first option was taken away. Bruce, double-cutting, finding a way to get open, having the awareness to get the ball down the floor. Then Dale having the awareness to get a shot up. That was players making plays. That was special."

Bonner's three was just his second make of the game on eight attempts. He finished with six points, while Royal led the victors with a career-high 14 points on 6-of-8 shooting, and Gayle (12), Thornton (11) and Okpara (10) each scored in double figures. Michigan State was led by Hall and Walker, who scored 15 and 12 points, respectively, on a combined 10-of-24 shooting.

After the slow start shooting in the first half, Ohio State hit on 51.7 percent of its shots (15 of 29) in the final frame, while holding MSU to 39.3 (11 for 28) in the second half. The Spartans, who shot just 40.0 percent for the game (22 of 55), were 0-7 from distance in the final 20 minutes.

Ohio State will finish off its regular-season schedule before Buckeye Sports Bulletin goes to press again, hosting Nebraska on Feb. 29 (6:30 p.m., FS1) and Michigan on March 3 (4 p.m., CBS) before traveling to Rutgers on March 10 (2 p.m., BTN).

Minnesota 88, Ohio State 79									
Feb. 22, 2024									
Williams Arena • Minneapolis									
		1	2	F					
Ohio State (15-12, 5-11)		34	45	79					
Minnesota (17-9, 8-7)		42	46	88					
Ohio State	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Thornton	35	10-14	5-5	1-3	6	0	25		
Battle	33	6-12	4-5	2-1	2	4	21		
Gayle Jr.	24	5-7	3-4	1-2	2	2	13		
Mahaffey	16	1-4	0-0	2-5	1	3	2		
Okpara	20	0-2	0-0	0-2	0	4	0		
Key	17	3-5	1-2	0-1	0	1	7		
Middleton	16	2-6	0-0	0-1	0	2	6		
Royal	12	1-3	1-2	1-0	0	3	3		
Chatman	9	1-3	0-0	0-1	1	2	2		
Bonner	17	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	2	0		
Hardman	1	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0		
Totals	200	29-57	14-18	9-17	12	23	79		
Percentages: FG: 50.9%. FT: 77.8%. Three-point field goals: 7-23 (Battle 5-10, Middleton 2-3, Thornton 0-3, Gayle 0-2, Chatman 0-2, Mahaffey 0-1, Royal 0-1, Bonner 0-1). Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: 4 (Mahaffey 2, Okpara, Key). Turnovers: 11 (Gayle 3, Mahaffey 2, Team 2, Battle, Okpara, Middleton, Royal). Steals: 5 (Mahaffey 2, Thornton, Gayle, Okpara).									
Minnesota	Total	FG	FT	Reb.					
	Min	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.		
Hawkins	39	6-10	8-11	0-2	7	3	24		
Garcia	33	8-15	5-6	4-5	0	2	22		
Payne	27	5-7	5-7	3-1	1	2	15		
Mitchell Jr.	31	3-8	0-0	1-1	5	3	8		
Christie	23	1-6	2-2	0-4	2	2	5		
Fox	18	3-4	3-4	1-3	1	2	9		
Carrington	29	2-6	1-1	1-2	1	3	5		
Totals	200	28-56	24-31	13-19	17	17	88		
Percentages: FG: 50.0%. FT: 77.4%. Three-point field goals: 8-19 (Mitchell 2-6, Hawkins 4-5, Garcia 1-3, Christie 1-3, Carrington 0-2). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 3 (Garcia 2, Payne). Turnovers: 9 (Christie 2, Hawkins 2, Mitchell Jr. 2, Garcia, Payne, Team). Steals: 6 (Hawkins 2, Mitchell, Christie, Fox, Carrington). Officials: Breeding, Daily, Riley. Attendance: 8,558.									



# Local, National Media React To Holtmann Firing

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Ohio State fired men's basketball head coach Chris Holtmann on Feb. 14, ending his seven-year run as the lead man for the Buckeyes.

Holtmann and Ohio State held just a 14-11 overall record and a 4-10 mark in conference play at the time of Holtmann's firing, and the Buckeyes had also lost 16 consecutive true road games, with the last win coming on Jan. 1, 2023.

Although Holtmann had a hot start to his Ohio State tenure, taking the Buckeyes to the NCAA Tournament in four of his first five seasons – the lone miss due to the tournament being canceled in 2020 – Ohio State missed the dance last season, finishing with the school's first losing record (16-19, 5-15) since 2003-04, and was on track to miss the tournament again this year. In the first game since Holtmann's firing on Feb. 18, the Buckeyes – led by interim coach Jake Diebler – knocked off then-No. 2 Purdue, 73-69, in Value City Arena.

Here are reactions from local and national media on Holtmann's firing and the Buckeyes' upset of Purdue as well as where Ohio State goes from here:

"There is no reason OSU shouldn't finish in the top half of the conference eight of every 10 seasons, with the rare 'oops' year happening only due to multiple players leaving for the NBA. Holtmann won 20 games each of his first five seasons, which is no gimme, but also does not jump off the page of a coaching résumé. In hindsight, the loss to Oral Roberts, which was only the 11th time a No. 2 seed lost to a No. 15, was the beginning of the end. After that, fans began looking for cracks in the foundation. And they were easy to spot. The offense too often bogged down in a back-and-forth of wasted energy that was too heavy on dribbling. The defense was more miss than hit, and the inside game nev-

er put a scare into opponents.

"Especially perplexing was Holtmann's inability to attract players from the transfer portal who were anything more than average Joes. And too often less than average.

"It's a shame, really. Holtmann is a nice guy who runs a clean operation. It may be that he was too nice. You can never be too clean, unless your program begins with 'Kan' and ends with 'zona.' But you can be clean and still have a roster peppered with players who like to get their hands dirty, meaning guys who play with an edge and get after it like every game is the last one they will ever play.

"Even then, however, Ohio State has a limited ceiling of success. Since 1960, when the Buckeyes won the NCAA title, only two other 'football-first' schools have won national titles: Michigan in 1989 and Florida in 2006 and 2007. Three years out of 61. Additionally, only six schools that favor football – Ohio State, Michigan, Florida State, Oklahoma, Florida and Wisconsin – advanced to championship games during that span.

"Clearly, it is difficult for football schools to make the necessary crossover to dominate in basketball."

— **Rob Oller,**

**The Columbus Dispatch**

"The interest in the basketball program is quite possibly at an all-time low because everyone has come to terms with what they're watching. Nobody's falling for the early season success anymore, and the January woes are par for the course. Only now there's never a swing back the other way to tease you one last time.

"Under Holtmann, the Buckeyes were a team that was at best good, not great. That was supposed to change last season, but it instead produced the worst season the program's had in over 25 years, and now they're on pace to repeat it. ... And there aren't two more highly rated recruiting classes to put your hopes into this time around.

"This is what a failed tenure looks like. A few flashes in the pan, the ability to hope for something that was probably never going to happen until finally the dam breaks completely and all you're left with is disaster. The one positive is that the football team has spent the past month giving you something else to look at other than the six-year car crash."

— **Stephen Means,**  
**Cleveland.com**

"There's a case to be made Holtmann – who made three NCAA Tournaments in as many years at Butler before coming to Columbus – was too reliant on a traditional program-building method at the wrong time.

"Ohio State boasted deep, well-regarded freshman classes the past two seasons, and historically that's the route to take. Yet between the obliteration of strict transfer rules and the proliferation of 22- and 23-year-olds in the sport thanks to the NCAA's COVID-era eligibility waiver, there's never been a worse time for a high-major coach to count on freshmen flourishing as part of a cohesive unit and administrative patience in case they don't.

"Holtmann will be fine, both financially (he has a \$12.8 million buyout coming his

way) and professionally (a guy who is 207-116 with eight NCAA Tournament-worthy teams in 10 seasons in the Big East and Big Ten will not lack for future opportunities).

"And Ohio State will be back, probably sooner than most expect. Jim O'Brien took over a 10-17 team in 1997 and had the Buckeyes in the Final Four within two years (granted, that appearance was vacated as part of an NCAA case). Thad Matta required three years to make the national title game after O'Brien was fired in 2004. And Holtmann transformed a 17-15 team into a No. 5 seed in his first season at Ohio State.

"The Buckeyes made a change, but are they at a true pivot point as a program? It doesn't seem likely."

— **Patrick Stevens,**  
**The Washington Post**

"It seems likely Jan. 2, 2021, was the pivotal day in Malaki Branham's basketball career – and also for Chris Holtmann. Branham wound up in the NBA. Holtmann wound up unemployed. And they were on the same side.

"Entering the third month of his freshman season then, after nearly a full month off because of games canceled due to the lingering COVID-19 pandemic, Branham scored 35 points against Nebraska. ... This breakout against the Huskers at Pinnacle Bank Arena was a moment that seemed to offer considerable promise for the Buckeyes, their coach, and their new star shooting guard.

"Even in the transfer portal era, it's a challenge to build a successful program when top recruits are leaving for the pros without having achieved much of significance, especially when there's no cause to expect they'll enter the draft after one year.

"That almost always results in a calamity. Between 2010 and 2019, there were 39 one-and-done players selected in the first round of the NBA draft without having won an NCAA Tournament game during their college seasons. The coaches of 27 of those players were fired, forced out or left under pressure within five years, including Final Four veterans Rick Barnes at Texas, Ben Howland at UCLA, and Tom Crean at Indiana.

"Six of those one-and-dones played for Hall of Famers who could endure beyond such disappointment: Mike Krzyzewski, John Calipari, Jim Calhoun, and Jim Boeheim. This means for those coaches who weren't enshrined in Springfield (or clearly on their way), there was an (81.8) percent chance signing such a player and seeing him enter the draft without going all Greg Oden on the world was like lining up to collect unemployment – or a multi-million-dollar buyout, anyway."

— **Mike DeCourcy,**  
**The Sporting News**

"In hindsight, Holtmann's inability to know what an elite Big Ten player looks like was evident when he took the job in the summer of 2017.

"He waxed at length then about his emotional tug-of-war over leaving Butler, fawning over a clearly-inferior job where he would never have a chance to win the national championship that was well within his reach, given the resources at OSU.

"The longer Holtmann went down that

road, the more his comments began to expose an annoying, think-small mentality that suggested he would never embrace the expectations he well knew came with the job he had just accepted. Therein was the evidence that Holtmann would struggle to maximize the potential inherent in being the coach at Ohio State.

"Turns out, while Holtmann's body came to Columbus, his mind remained mired in the mid-major mind-set from which he came."

— **Bruce Hooley,**  
**Press Pros Magazine**

"The win (over Purdue) is a big one for Ohio State's season, which comes after athletic director Gene Smith said Feb. 14 that he fired Holtmann during the season because the team needed a change of leadership.

"It got that and a spark of energy with Diebler, who is now hoping to build on this momentum heading into the end of the season.

"Ohio State hasn't won on the road this year and three of its final five games are away from Columbus, but this is a strong start for Diebler and should build confidence in the team.

"Ohio State still has a chance to turn this season around with a strong finish and a Big Ten tournament run. And for Diebler, he has a chance to show he's ready to be a head coach sooner rather than later."

— **Cameron Teague Robinson,**  
**The Athletic**

"Here are some not-so-fun facts about a gig anyone in the industry would consider overloaded with promise: Ohio State has one men's hoops national championship, ever, and that came in 1960. It has reached the Final Four just three times since the NCAA Tournament expanded to 64 teams (and beyond). The Buckeyes haven't won a regular-season or conference tournament championship in a decade. There's something bizarre about a front-porch program at a school flush with resources struggling with consistency at an elite level.

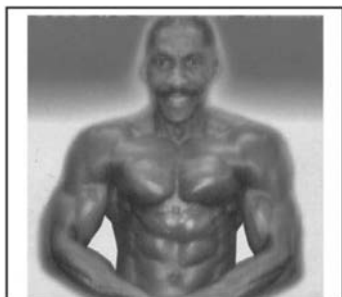
"Maybe the number is arbitrary, maybe not, but the pattern is emblematic: This is the 10th time in 11 seasons Ohio State will finish with double-digit losses. It lost nine the other year.

"It is not easy to win national titles. They only give one out every season. So none of this will stop candidates from seeing what could be. But they also should arrive with a clear-eyed appraisal of what has been.

"In the end, the college athletics scales have tilted so far in favor of the Big Ten and the SEC that a job in one of those leagues promises a level of stability and funding not found elsewhere. And if Ohio State higher-ups decide they really, really want to be absolutely elite in men's basketball, you'd expect this is one of the schools where decision-makers can put plenty of money behind their intentions.

"It's a very good job. The results, historically, nevertheless haven't matched the potential. Warning sign? Opportunity of a lifetime? That's in the eye of the beholder."

— **Brian Hamilton,**  
**The Athletic**



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# Predicting Holtmann Replacement Not A Slam Dunk

As one of the posters on our BuckeyeSports.com Forum pointed out, this is the time in the hiring process that Buckeye fans think that every coach in the country is just dying to come to Ohio State – in this case to be the men's basketball coach.

Coach K and Jay Wright are available. Bill Self should jump at the chance to escape the hinterlands of Kansas and come to our thriving metropolis of Columbus. After Jake Diebler and his Buckeyes scored a buzzer-beating upset over Tom Izzo and his Michigan State team on Feb. 25, maybe Izzo figures, "If you can't beat them, join them."

With the exception of the Urban Meyer hire in football, Buckeye fans are generally a little disappointed in the ultimate choice by the administration, though John Cooper was a fairly popular choice because he took his Arizona State team to the Rose Bowl and beat Michigan. That was music to Buckeye fans' ears!

I'll never forget how disappointed Buckeye fans were when the search for a coach to replace Cooper came down to Glen Mason and Jim Tressel – hardly sexy choices. We saw how the choice of Tressel worked out, so you never know.

Most of the names you hear in the early part of the search are just speculation. I thought it might be fun to look back at the early "candidates" for open basketball coaching jobs during the Buckeye Sports Bulletin era. Let's take a trip down memory lane and see if you remember some of these coaches, as found in the pages of BSB, starting with replacing Eldon Miller.

According to the Feb. 28, 1986, issue of BSB, OSU athletic director Rick Bay claimed that as of Feb. 11, he hadn't talked to anyone about replacing Miller (who was fired on Feb. 3), especially Indiana coach Bob Knight who, according to a Cleveland television station, had applied for the job.

A spokesperson for IU said the report of Knight's application was "completely unfounded" and Knight later issued a statement saying he was staying put.

Other names bandied about for the job included Iowa State and former Michigan coach Johnny Orr, Tennessee coach and former Buckeye Don DeVoe, Boston College coach Gary Williams and Ohio University coach Danny Nee.

By the next issue of BSB, two weeks later, little progress had been made. DeVoe was granted permission to talk to OSU officials and one Columbus TV station said DeVoe had already been in town.

OU athletic director Harold McElhaney said of Nee, who had led the Bobcats to two MAC championships in the previous four years, "I don't want to lose him, but if they don't take him, they are out of their minds."

A local radio station did a straw poll on who the next coach should be, and the first 17 callers gave 17 different names.

One person whose name was mentioned frequently quickly let it be known that he was not interested.

"I have no desire to coach," former OSU star John Havlicek said. "If I were going to be a coach, I would have done it a long time ago."

Havlicek, however, stumped for his former teammate, Larry Siegfried.

"Larry would give his right arm to be the new coach," Havlicek said. "It would be a labor of love for him."

Knight, a former teammate of Havlicek and Siegfried, reiterated that he was not interested.

"I think I've made my position on jobs clear for a long, long time," he said. "I haven't had an interest in another job since I've been here, and I certainly don't now."

It should be noted that Indiana won the NCAA championship the following season.

A fellow coach in the Hoosier state was a little more pragmatic.

"I'm very happy at Purdue and I'm not thinking about changing my job," Boilermakers coach

## THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

Gene Keady said. "But I'm like any coach. In this crazy business if an incredible offer is made and they go through the right channels, I'd listen."

The job ultimately went to Boston College's Williams.

When after three seasons, Williams left to go to his alma mater, Maryland, the first names to pop up as his potential replacement were Terry Holland of Virginia, Billy Tubbs of Oklahoma, Bob Huggins of Cincinnati, Knight, Bobby Cremins of Georgia Tech, Joey Meyer of DePaul, and Keady, according to BSB managing editor Mark Rea, writing in the July 1989 issue of BSB.

"When the dust finally settled," Rea wrote, "the Buckeyes were actually working from a list that included the following: Nolan Richardson, Arkansas, Pete Gillen of Xavier, Lon Kruger of Kansas State, Roy Williams of Kansas, Jim Crews of Evansville, Cy Alexander of South Carolina State, Mike Newell of Arkansas-Little Rock, Mike Deane of Siena, Don DeVoe, former head coach at Tennessee, and Randy Ayers, assistant under Williams at Ohio State."

According to Rea, "Richardson, 47, was thought to be the Buckeyes' top choice for the position. He got support from several school officials and head football coach John Cooper, who coached at the University of Tulsa when Richardson was basketball coach there."

Rea indicated that Gillen and Crews were also getting a lot of support.

But in the end, the job went to the 33-year-old Ayers.

One candidate who wasn't pleased with the choice of Ayers was DeVoe, who played for the Buckeyes in the early '60s and was endorsed by both Knight and legendary OSU coach Fred Taylor. DeVoe had tried for the job three times and said he was getting the message.

"My feeling is obviously they don't want Don DeVoe as their basketball coach," he said. "I felt this time the timing was right for me at Ohio State, and instead I was turned down for someone who's never coached a college basketball game."

Ayers was gone after the 1996-97 season, fired along with women's coach Nancy Darsch on the same day.

BSB's initial "Hot 15," as compiled by editor Steve Helwag and basketball beat writer Jeff Rapp, consisted of Steve Alford, Southwest Missouri State; Tommy Amaker, Duke (assistant); Rick Barnes, Clemson; Jim Clemons, Dallas Mavericks; Tim Floyd, Iowa State; Eddie Fogler, South Carolina; Gillen, now at Providence; Huggins; Mike Jarvis, George Washington; Knight; Rick Majerus, Utah; Mike Montgomery, Stanford; Skip Prosser, Xavier; Tubby Smith, Georgia; and Maryland's Williams ("Knows better than any of the candidates what's possible at OSU and could be tired of living in shadow of tough ACC programs").

By the time the next issue of BSB came out, the list of candidates was becoming more defined.

"Several of the top men's choices have probably gone by the wayside as South Carolina's Eddie Fogler, Georgia's Tubby Smith and Clemson's Rick Barnes, a former OSU assistant many thought was Geiger's top choice, all reportedly agreed to lucrative long-term extensions at their present schools," Helwag and Rapp wrote.

"BSB believes the head coaches still with a realistic chance of heading to Columbus as of press time include Pete Gillen of Providence, Rick Majerus of Utah, Mike Montgomery of Stanford, Tim Floyd of Iowa State, Skip Prosser of Xavier and Steve Alford of Southwest Missouri State."

"Cincinnati boss Bob Huggins, a one-time

graduate assistant (at OSU) remains a dark horse."

Some sources were insistent that Huggins was the top choice, but UC officials said he had not been contacted and OSU president E. Gordon Gee was adamant that was not the case.

"That comes as a total surprise to me," Gee said of the reports. "I can assure you I don't know Coach Huggins whatsoever, so for anyone to say he is my top choice, that is absolutely false. I have no favorite."

Years later, of course, Gee would become Huggins' boss at West Virginia.

Additional names that had surfaced since BSB put out its initial "Hot 15" were PJ. Carlesimo of the NBA's Portland Trailblazers, Dave Odom of Wake Forest, Jim O'Brien of Boston College, Mike Deane of Marquette, Ralph Willard of Pitt and Jim Harrick, formerly of UCLA.

Ironically, it was O'Brien, thrown in with the final group of candidates, who ultimately got the job.

By 2004, O'Brien, who took the Buckeyes to the Final Four in his second season in Columbus, was fired after allegations of NCAA violations were revealed, and Geiger was looking for a new coach again.

While previous searches had produced lengthy lists of possible candidates, by the time BSB went to press after the firing on June 8, 2004, the list had been reduced to a truncated group that remains legendary in Buckeye basketball lore for its lack of depth.

Rea had narrowed the list to down Vanderbilt coach Kevin Stallings (who reportedly was the other finalist when O'Brien got the job), Rice head coach Willis Wilson, Penn head coach Fran Dunphy and former Los Angeles Lakers assistant and former Buckeye player and assistant Jim Clemons.

Earlier in the process, Knight, now at Texas Tech, and former NBA coach George Karl were reported to have actively pursued the job, and "fast-rising stars" such as Marquette's Tom Crean and Thad Matta of Xavier were said to be in contention.

Crean released a statement saying, "I have not made myself a candidate for another opportunity and am happy at Marquette."

Matta told the Cincinnati Enquirer, "I am not a candidate. It's that plain and it's that simple."

It took 31 days from O'Brien's firing for Geiger, who drew criticism from local and national media for the delay, to find his man, and it was, indeed, Matta.

While some had speculated Matta was the center of the search all along, both Geiger and the coach denied that.

"My first contact with Andy was June 24," Matta said at his introductory press conference on July 9. "I know that I was in a lot of people's minds about this position early on. I was identified as one of the people who should be interested in this job. But I didn't know if I wanted to be interested. I had a job and I had a great job."

Matta was scheduled to meet with Geiger early on July 7 but struggled with that decision the night before.

"I still wasn't sure I even wanted to come up here," he said. "But once I decided, it all just kind of fell into place from there."

Matta ended up at Ohio State for 13 seasons before he, too, was essentially fired.

BSB went to press shortly after the June 5 announcement about Matta.

"Because Matta's departure was unexpected, there had been limited speculation as of press

time on who Ohio State's next head coach would be," BSB reporter Ryan McGlade wrote in the June 2017 BSB. "Some potential options included Xavier coach Chris Mack, Arizona head coach Sean Miller, Butler coach Chris Holtmann or even Oklahoma City Thunder coach Billy Donovan."

It took only four days for Smith to name Holtmann on June 9.

"The Ohio State University men's basketball program is one of the most respected in the country, and our coach must respect that great tradition," Smith said at Holtmann's introductory press conference on June 12. "We sought a high-intensity individual with an emphasis on academics, someone who is relentless in recruiting with great ties to the great state of Ohio and the contiguous states. We found a proven winner who is a community-engager and bottom line fits our culture."

And now the search begins again.

## Writing Was On The Wall

Once Ohio State squandered an 18-point second-half lead on its home floor to lose to a mediocre Indiana team on Feb. 6, I think everyone knew that Holtmann's days at Ohio State were numbered. The only question seemed to be if Smith would wait until the end of the season or pull the trigger sooner. It turned out to be the latter, and Holtmann was given his walking papers on Feb. 14, a day after another road loss, this time to Wisconsin.

I liked Holtmann. It seemed like everybody liked him. It was almost as if his middle name was "good guy." Smith apparently was so attached to him that he was very publicly overcome when announcing his firing. But Smith knew, as we all did, that the program – and attendance – was on a clear downward spiral.

For me, the parts never added up to the potential for Holtmann and his Buckeyes.

Most will point to the stunning 75-72 overtime defeat to No. 15 Oral Roberts in the first round of the 2021 NCAA Tournament, a game where the No. 2-seeded Buckeyes held a 74-70 lead with 1:07 left in the second half (the start of a disturbing trend of blowing second half leads?) as the turning point in Holtmann's tenure.

I might suggest another event that occurred at the end of the following season as the potential beginning of the end. That is when Ryan Pedon, who had been with Holtmann since his days at Butler, left his position as an assistant at Ohio State to become head coach at Illinois State. In the seven seasons Holtmann and Pedon were together, their teams went 154-76 (.670) with appearances in the NCAA Tournament every year but the COVID year when there was no tournament. In 2016-17 they went to the Sweet 16 with the Bulldogs.

After Pedon's departure, Holtmann's Buckeyes went just 30-30.

Is there a connection?

## BSB To The Young

In the last issue I noted we are going to be offering a radically-reduced gift rate directed at groups that we feel will either help us or are likely to renew after their initial gift subscription runs out.

We are still offering a gift subscription to anyone under the age of 35 – our most difficult demographic – for just \$19.95, less than the cost of printing and mailing the paper. We hope that some in that age group will find that reading a newspaper is fun.

Send your gift names and addresses with check or credit card information to PO Box 12453, Columbus, Ohio, 43212. Don't forget your three-digit security code (four for American Express). Or you can give us a call at (614) 486-2202 for credit card orders or questions. Mention the "Under 35" special.