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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

February 25, 2006

A Race To The End

Buckeyes Still In Thick Of Big Ten Hunt

By JEFF RAPP
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

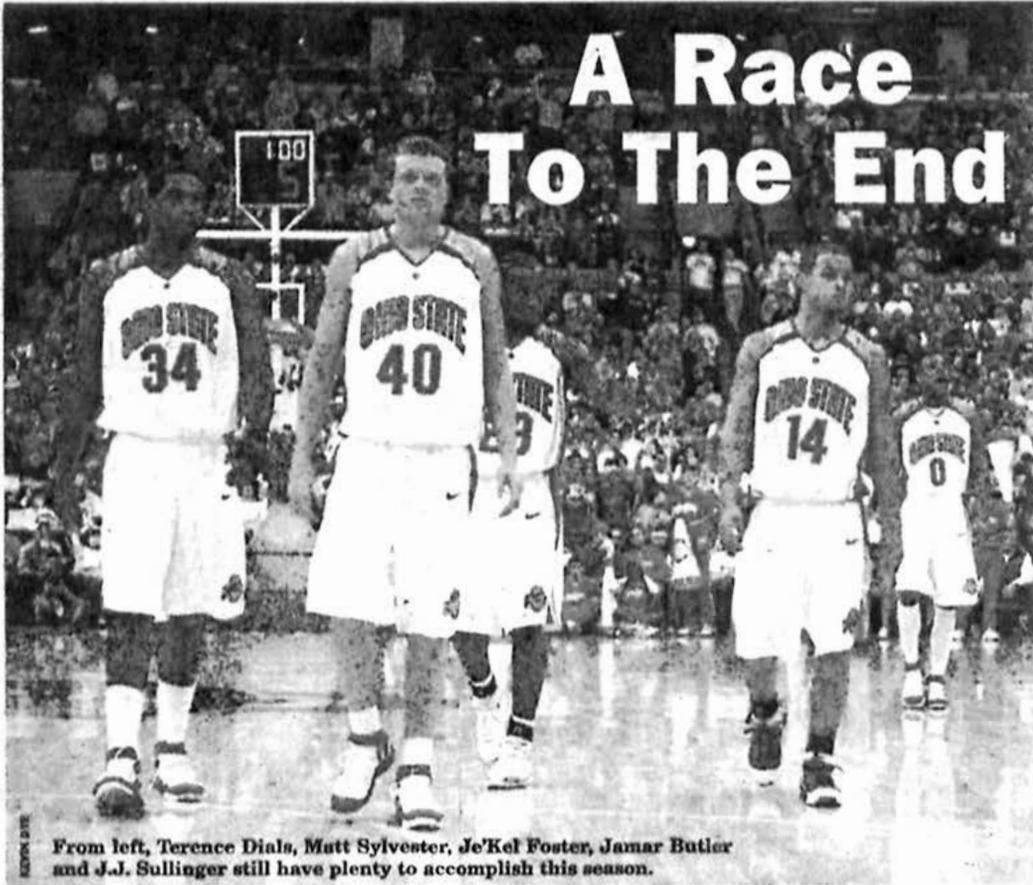
After the Ohio State men's basketball team stayed in a humdinger of a Big Ten race Feb. 18 by outlasting gnarly Northwestern, J.J. Sullinger insisted that he and his teammates were "in high spirits."

The well-worn faces at the dais said otherwise.

Terence Dials looked glazed over after 35 draining minutes in the pivot. Jamar Butler, who now is firmly in the role of carrying the load at point guard, moved sluggishly after logging 38 minutes. Sullinger, normally as bouncy after games as he is on the court, was slumped over after going the full 40.

Listed as high as a 20-point favorite, the Buckeyes fell behind 13-1, built a lead to as many as 15 and let it slip to a precarious two in the final minutes before logging a much-needed 61-52 win. Welcome to the Big Ten, where nothing is easy and logic starts to slip down the drain in February and March, sometimes taking contending teams with it.

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From left, Terence Dials, Matt Sylvester, Je'Kel Foster, Jamar Butler and J.J. Sullinger still have plenty to accomplish this season.

O'Brien Victorious In Case Vs. OSU

By JEFF RAPP
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

After months of being out of the coaching profession and enduring a protracted lawsuit against Ohio State, and after a ruling that could land him millions of dollars and even a return to the bench, you might think Jim O'Brien would be testing his troublesome back by dancing a jig.

Instead, the former men's basketball coach, once revered for leading the Buckeyes to Big Ten titles and a Final Four appearance, sounded somber during a teleconference Feb. 15, the day the Ohio Court of Claims ruled in his favor against OSU for wrongful termination.

Opting not to address particulars of the case, O'Brien answered reporters' questions via teleconference while he was traveling through Florida. He disclosed experiencing many sleepless nights since his firing June 8, 2004, and his subsequent decision to sue the university.

He added that he hoped Judge Joseph T. Clark's ruling would help him put closure to what he called "a very difficult 20 months in my life."

A final ruling on the case was the first item on the

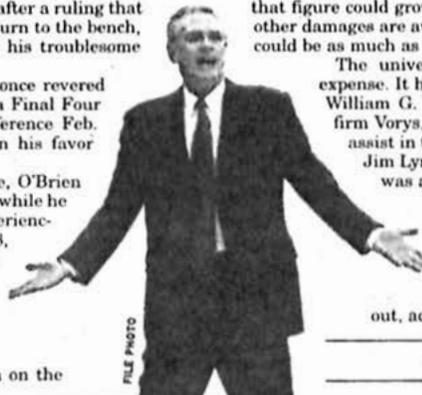
agenda for the Columbus-based Court of Claims on Feb. 15. By midmorning, Clark's ruling had surfaced in news reports.

O'Brien and his attorneys, Joseph P. Murray and Brian K. Murphy, now await the matter of compensation. They sued Ohio State for \$3.5 million in back pay and benefits, but that figure could grow by several million if interest and other damages are awarded. One report said the payout could be as much as \$9 million.

The university already has gone to much expense. It hired attorneys David S. Cupps and William G. Porter II from the Columbus law firm Vorys, Sater, Seymour and Pease LLP to assist in the case, and university spokesman Jim Lynch said the bill for outside services was at \$436,500 as of the end of 2005.

In the end, all that legal expertise didn't change the fact that O'Brien's contract called for Ohio State officials to work through the problem and let the NCAA investigation play out, according to Clark.

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FILE PHOTO

COVER STORY: A RACE TO THE END

With Two Weeks Left, League Is Wide Open

Continued From Page 1

Consider that just in the last couple of weeks the following has happened:

- League-leading Iowa lost to the same undermanned Wildcats Feb. 8 and fell even in the loss column with OSU, Illinois and Wisconsin after a Feb. 18 loss to 10th-place Minnesota.

- Illinois appeared poised to pull into a tie for first place Feb. 4 then promptly lost at Assembly Hall to Penn State, a program that entered having lost 35 of its previous 36 conference road games.

- Wisconsin blew a chance to jump back toward the top of the standings after getting tripped up in West Lafayette by lowly Purdue.

- Preseason favorite Michigan State lost back-to-back league games for the second time this season Feb. 11 and 14 and fell to 2-5 on the road in conference play.

- Michigan and Indiana stumbled into free-fall mode. The Wolverines were bombed at Michigan State Feb. 18 to drop their fourth league game of the month. At 17-7 and 7-6 in the conference, they now have to hustle to even make the NCAA Tournament. Indiana, meanwhile, once 12-3 overall and in contention for the league title at 4-1, accepted the resignation of head coach Mike Davis effective at the end of the season. Many in Bloomington wouldn't

mind if it were sooner; the Hoosiers, now 13-10 and 5-7, have dropped five in a row and seven of eight.

Somehow, the team that has stayed in the picture all along — and hasn't suffered a loss to a league lesser-light — is Ohio State, a depth-deprived outfit with a jack-in-the-box for a head coach and an offense that relies on three-pointers the way Sonny relied on Cher.

After surviving the scare against Northwestern, the Buckeyes were still in ideal position at 19-4 overall and 8-4 in league play — a scant half-game behind Iowa.

The four losses were by a total of 15 points and include Jan. 7 at Indiana, which was ranked No. 16 at the time; Jan. 15 vs. then No. 14 Michigan State in double overtime; Jan. 28 at Iowa; and Feb. 15 at Wisconsin. To its credit, OSU was in position to win them all.

Matta Time

The lone home loss of the season was to the Spartans, a team the Buckeyes were looking to pay back when they headed to East Lansing on Feb. 22. If



SONNY BROCKWAY
EXCITABLE BOY — The Buckeyes are a reflection of their animated second-year coach, Thad Matta.

OSU were to pull that off — in MSU's Breslin Center where it hasn't won since 1992 — it would be another feather in the cap of head coach Thad Matta.

Counting his one-year stop at Butler, three seasons at Xavier and last season's surprising 20-win campaign at Ohio State, Matta entered the month with an all-time record of 48-10 (.828) in February and March. The Buckeyes are nearly keeping up that pace so far this season with a 4-1 mark in February, including their first road win over a ranked team (Michigan) in

two years and dumping a top-10 team (Illinois) by 16 points.

So what is it with this time of year that Matta has now won 52 of 63 games?

"I don't know," the coach said. "I wish I did know. I think it's just that constant pursuit of challenging the guys to do

things a little bit better than we've done them in the past, and maybe a little bit more video individually, just trying to make each guy a little bit better but knowing it's in the context of the team."

While some coaches seem to roll with what they have this time of year, Matta is never afraid to change or challenge.

Sometimes his head bobs up and down in team huddles even when the Buckeyes have a comfortable lead. Against Northwestern, he played his starters the entirety of the second half since forward Matt Sylvester wasn't at his disposal because of a sore back. At Michigan, he went with seldom-used Ivan Harris to spark the team offensively.

What never changes is the enthusiasm or pursuit of excellence.

"His pregame talks and stuff like that are second to none," Sylvester said. "He's unbelievable. He really is."

After OSU played its best defense of the season in shutting down Illinois, Matta lamented the couple of early possessions when his team lost its focus. When the Buckeyes started off ice-cold from behind the arc against Wisconsin and Northwestern, Matta had one instruction: Keep shooting.

Everything the players are doing in practice is merely a different version of the same methods from day one.

"We're doing a lot of the same drills that we started the season with, and you're looking for the improvement in

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COVER STORY: A RACE TO THE END

them," Matta said.

"It's funny how you take a little bit of the past. I go back at night and I look at what we were doing five years ago at this time and four years ago at this time — where our team was with the mindset of wanting them to (improve). It kind of all correlates together."

While Matta seems to have a handle on driving his teams through the toughest grind of the season, he also is dealing with a growing set of concerns:

For one, Sylvester's injury could greatly affect the dispersal of minutes, especially since reserve guard Sylvester Mayes has completely fallen out of the rotation — he hasn't played in four straight games — and backup post man Matt Terwilliger is considered mostly a stopgap for when Dials needs a breather.

Also, the program continues to deal with an array of potential distractions from a still-not-resolved NCAA ruling for past transgressions to former coach Jim O'Brien's recent triumph in court against the university for wrongful termination to persistent rumors that Matta might be a viable candidate for the opening at Indiana.

Ohio State fans can only hope that the exhaustion the Buckeyes showed after the Northwestern game was a result of chasing Wildcats around for the majority of the shot clock and not an indication that all the recent headlines are taking a mental toll.

On the surface, at least, the Buckeyes claimed they would trudge on undeterred.

"I haven't really put too much thought into it," Sullinger said. "I saw on the news that Coach O'Brien won his lawsuit, but I don't think that has anything to do with us. As far as the Indiana job and Coach Davis, I don't think that has too much tie to what we're doing, even if they throw Coach Matta's name into that. He would have to tell you for sure, but I doubt he has put any interest in that."

Added Butler, "We really don't talk about that. We try to keep that away from us and try to focus on playing basketball and doing what we need to do next."

Matta said recently that he would address the IU rumor with his players if he felt the need. With a Big Ten title on the line, he has no plan to bring up OSU's scrapes with O'Brien and the NCAA.

"It doesn't come up in practice," the coach said. "The NCAA stuff wears on me — I'd be lying if I didn't say that — but there's nothing that I can control. And that's the thing I continuously

remind myself every day when I wake up. We can't control it, and we've got to continue to control what we can."

What Matta can control is preparing his team for the next game, and he does it with a focus that borders on scary.

After the Buckeyes won at Michigan Feb. 9, the coach wouldn't divulge any particular strategies he used after the game, citing the Feb. 25 rematch with the Wolverines. As he left Crisler Arena with his blinders on and his mind already on Illinois, Matta whisked right past U of M stars Courtney Sims and Daniel Horton. He did stop to exchange pleasantries with Graham Brown, but only after the Michigan center intercepted him and broke him out of his focus stupor.

Matta's passion clearly has spurred the Buckeyes to unexpected heights, but it comes with a price of almost never being able to sit back and enjoy it as it unfolds.

"I don't know if I've ever had fun during the season in my coaching career because you're always preparing for the next game," he said. "I say that and I love what I do, but it's not fun because your mind's always going to the preparation, your mind's always going to 'How are we going to stop them? How are we going to score against them?'"

"By the same token, I have enjoyed this team. I just want us to play better basketball, and I know that we can."

His inner candle always burning, Matta manages to use it to stoke the fires inside the Buckeyes.

"Our confidence comes from him," Sullinger said. "He knows how to win. He has the formula. He's one of the best at it, amongst the top. We just get it all from him."

"He's a young guy and he's young at heart — really young at heart," Sylvester added. "I don't know what it is exactly, but he's just a very good motivator of people. He just knows how to motivate. I think Thad would be great at whatever he did, whether that was being CEO of a Fortune 500 company or a college basketball coach."

Senior Send-Off

Matta, though, isn't the only thing urging on the Buckeyes. The team features four senior captains — Dials, Sylvester, Sullinger and Je'Kel Foster — who are hungry to leave Ohio State as champions, especially considering the tumultuous times they have endured.

"It's the coaching, but we also have four seniors who really get us into things and keep us focused in practice and when we're going into games," said junior wing Ron Lewis, whom Matta

refers to as OSU's sixth starter. "They really drive home the message that we've got to get this win and we're not going to slack off."

"Having four seniors like we have right now is helping us out greatly," said Butler, a sophomore who credits his impressive maturation this season to backcourt mate Foster. "They've been through this and they're really pulling us through."

The trials and tribulations the seniors have endured in their careers match their accomplishments.

Sylvester, who once shared Ohio Division I prep player of the year honors with Sullinger, has had a roller coaster of a five-year stay including a medical redshirt and several injuries ranging from a balky back to a foot problem to a gunshot wound. Dials also endured a medical redshirt year and spent much of the 2003-04 season trying to explain the Buckeyes' shortcomings then serving on the university's search committee for a new coach after O'Brien was fired.

Sullinger is a Columbus native who spent one year at Arkansas, transferred when the team dismissed head coach Nolan Richardson, sat out a year, and often has been labeled since as failing to live up to his billing at OSU. Foster also started his college career elsewhere, playing at two different JUCOs after he was barely recruited. Last season, he was a role player who had to play behind Tony Stockman for 20 games before winning a starting role.

Even with all their experiences, they are not well-versed in lofty things such as contending for a Big Ten championship. In fact, only Dials has played in the NCAA Tournament, and that was sparingly as a true freshman.

"You look at these guys, and even (J.J.) at Arkansas and the careers that they've had — this is uncharted water for these guys," Matta said. "That's kind of been a theme for them, that we haven't had a lot of guys on this team who have been in this situation."

"You want them to enjoy the ride. People get caught up in the end result in early February, and it's not about that. It's about the journey, it's about finding ways to play better, it's finding ways to come closer as a team."

Matta said he often motivates the team leaders by appealing to their senior urgency.

"There are precious few games left for these guys, and it is in the back of my mind and for these guys," he said. "I think one motivating factor is I don't think there's a senior class in the country that's been through what these guys have been through. As I said, last year's

seniors helped us lay the foundation for this program, and for these guys it's leaving your mark on this program and being guys that are kind of the pillars of Ohio State basketball, and they've got a golden opportunity to do that."

OSU's chances of actually winning a piece of the title took a hit at Wisconsin Feb. 15 as the team couldn't hang on to a double-digit lead. But when asked if that loss was eating at the Buckeyes more than the other three, Matta replied, "No, because I think that they understand that we have to play better, we have to play smarter, we have to play harder, and we have to find ways to get the job done, whatever it is."

Foster said the Buckeyes left Madison still believing they could reach all their goals.

"We didn't talk about it, but I think every guy knows that we still have a chance," he said. "It's not over yet. Each team still has quite a few games, and you never know what's going to happen in the Big Ten."

"We have to go right now. I don't think a team that will lose five games is going to win the Big Ten. Our margin for error is small right now. We understand that."

"You look at what these guys have accomplished thus far this season," Matta said, "and I think one of the motivating factors is how is it going to end and understanding full well that we are the ones who can control how it ends. That's the message I've said to those guys: Let's control our own destiny. Let's not put it in somebody else's hands."

Down The Stretch They Come

After trying to change history at Michigan State Feb. 22 and hosting Michigan Feb. 25, the Buckeyes head into what they hope will be a long and prosperous March. The regular season winds up with a trip to Northwestern March 1 and the home finale with Purdue March 5.

That leads into the March 9-12 Big Ten tournament, at which OSU's seed could be anywhere from first to eighth depending upon the result of the upcoming two weeks.

Matta's goal of controlling destiny, though, is still in place. Four wins would guarantee at least a share of the title and likely would give it to the Buckeyes outright. They see no reason not to shoot for the moon.

"We feel that way because of how tough the Big Ten is," Butler said before Iowa was upset by Minnesota. "Any team can lose any given night. We just know we have to win out now and play our part and see what happens. I still feel good about this team."

"Last year, we had a different mindset," Sullinger said. "We were trying to spoil teams' seasons. Now teams are trying to spoil our season, so we understand that. You have a target on your chest and you definitely have to bring it every night. You have to have an against-the-world type of attitude."

The current Buckeyes haven't been down this path before but they know it will be steep.

"I've never been a Big Ten champion, but to win I'm sure it's going to take the whole team and the coaching staff to come together," Foster said. "And we have to play great defense. You win championships by playing defense. The five guys on the court have got to be like a fist."

"If we play Ohio State basketball, definitely it will come out the way we want it to. If we play together, I think we can beat anybody in the country."

2005-06 OSU Men's Basketball Statistics

19-4 Overall (8-4 Big Ten)																
Statistics through games of Feb. 19																
Player	G-GS	Min.-Avg.	FG-FGA	Pct.	3P-3PA	Pct.	FT-FTA	Pct.	Off-Def.	Tot.-Avg.	PF-DQ	AT	TO	BS	ST	Pts.-Avg.
34 Dials, Terence	23-23	683-29.7	131-234	.560	0-1	.000	73-110	.664	53-130	1838.0	63-1	15	47	21	22	335-14.6
23 Foster, Je'Kel	23-23	759-33.0	109-203	.537	65-132	.492	39-51	.765	15-85	1004.3	53-2	68	51	3	57	322-14.0
12 Lewis, Ron	23-6	587-25.5	82-172	.477	31-87	.356	81-103	.786	13-66	793.4	30-0	29	49	2	12	276-12.0
14 Butler, Jamar	22-21	696-31.6	67-144	.465	34-75	.453	56-67	.836	22-50	723.3	38-0	101	36	3	23	224-10.2
00 Sullinger, J.J.	23-22	646-28.1	77-150	.513	23-49	.469	44-66	.667	51-102	1536.7	56-2	38	39	11	20	221-9.6
40 Sylvester, Matt	22-18	541-24.6	69-168	.411	22-63	.349	21-29	.724	17-38	552.5	50-1	63	34	5	6	181-8.2
32 Mayes, Sylvester	19-2	291-15.3	31-86	.360	14-46	.304	7-12	.583	4-15	191.0	17-0	38	25	2	19	83-4.4
03 Harris, Ivan	20-0	181-9.1	32-64	.500	16-41	.390	2-2	1.000	8-8	160.8	19-0	1	5	0	6	82-4.1
42 Terwilliger, Matt	22-0	245-11.1	23-46	.500	0-0	.000	8-19	.421	16-24	401.8	29-0	10	5	9	7	54-2.5
21 Bell, Brayden	6-0	31-5.2	4-13	.308	1-6	.167	1-2	.500	4-11	152.5	4-0	1	2	1	0	10-1.7
33 Payne, Samuel	5-0	15-3.0	1-8	.125	0-5	.000	1-2	.500	0-1	10.2	2-0	0	0	0	1	3-0.6
TEAM										27-23	502.2	0		1		
Ohio State	23	4675	626-1288	.486	206-505	.408	333-463	.719	230-553	783-34.0	361-6	364	294	57	173	1791-77.9
Opponents	23	4675	581-1355	.429	126-394	.320	211-313	.674	272-493	765-33.3	388	307	336	64	123	1499-65.2

OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Wildcats Can't Capitalize On Slow OSU Start

By ADAM JARDY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

After its Feb. 18 tussle with visiting Northwestern, the Ohio State men's basketball team likely had to remind itself that a win is a win, no matter how ugly it might have been.

The Buckeyes (19-4, 8-4) overcame a dismal start and a determined bunch of Wildcats (12-12, 4-8) to keep pace near the top of the Big Ten standings with a 61-52 victory at Value City Arena.

The visitors proved to be trouble for the Buckeyes from the very beginning. Northwestern scored the first nine points of the game and held the prolific OSU offense — which entered the game tops in the Big Ten at 78.6 points per game — without a field goal until just past eight minutes into the first half.

Ron Lewis' jumper finally found the net to make the score 13-3, and it came on the Buckeyes' 13th shot of the game.

"We came out to start the game and could not buy a basket," OSU head coach Thad Matta said. "To our guys' credit, they kept defending down 9-0 and then held them to 20 points in the first half."

The Buckeyes looked listless three days after having a four-game winning streak snapped on the road at Wisconsin. As a team, they shot 29.2 percent from the field and were a gloomy 1 for 10 (10.0 percent) from beyond the three-point arc in the first half.

The second half would be somewhat better. After taking a slim 21-20 advantage into the locker room, the Buckeyes opened the second half on a 13-2 run to push their lead to 34-22 with 15:04 to play.

After a layup by Tim Doyle just under

two minutes into the second stanza, the Wildcats didn't score again until the 14:04 mark, enduring a 16-minute stretch at the end of the first half and beginning of the second in which they scored just five points. During that drought, they went from enjoying a 10-point lead to facing a 12-point deficit.

"They just came after us and we weren't able to handle it," Northwestern head coach Bill Carmody said. "Their pressure on our guards really bothered us."

The Buckeyes eventually pushed their lead to 15 with 10:39 remaining when J.J. Sullinger scored on layup set up by a Terence Dials steal at the other end, putting Ohio State ahead 44-29.

But Northwestern finally began to get going again. Led by guard Mohamed Hachad and forward Vedran Vukusic, the Wildcats went on a 19-6 run over the next five minutes and climbed back to within 50-48 at the 5:31 mark.

The first four points of the run came from Vukusic while Hachad accounted for the rest on a variety of layups, jumpers and dunks.

But after that run, the Wildcats couldn't get any closer than two. It was 52-50 after a layup by Bernard Cote at the 3:44 mark, but Dials, who had been held in check for nearly the entire game,



KEVIN DYE

STRENGTH UNDERNEATH — Quiet for much of the game, Ohio State senior center Terence Dials (34) turned things up a notch in crunch time against Northwestern, scoring eight of his team's final nine points in an important 61-52 win.

scored eight of his team's final nine points to help the Buckeyes finally put the Wildcats away.

"I wasn't scoring at the rate I wanted," Dials said of his early-game troubles. "I just had to find ways to get to the bucket and get points. I knew they weren't a great rebounding team, so I tried to hurt them that way."

Hachad and Vukusic were the only two Wildcats to finish with double-digit scoring totals, netting 19 and 17 respectively.

The Buckeyes greatly benefited from extra time at the charity stripe. Northwestern was just 1 for 2 from the line for the entire game, while the Buckeyes connected on 18 of 30 attempts. Guard Jamar Butler led the way by going 7 of 8 from the line as a result of constantly attacking the basket.

OSU did not lead until 1:06 remained in the first half when a Lewis jumper put the Buckeyes up 21-20. The score held until the half ended.

Lewis, who started in place of an ailing Matt Sylvester, scored the first five points for the Buckeyes and had 11 of OSU's 21 first-half points.

"Ron carried us there through the stretch where we couldn't get a basket," Matta said. "He got inside their defense and I think ended up really igniting us."

Sullinger led the Buckeyes with 16 points, while Lewis had 15 and Butler had 12. Dials finished with 14 points and 15 rebounds despite going just 4 for 10 from the free-throw line.

But most concerning for a team that has relied on its three-point shooting to be effective was the output from the Big Ten's leading long-distance shooter, Je'Kel Foster. After being held to seven points and going 1 for 5 from beyond the arc against Wisconsin, Foster finished with a season-low two points on 1-of-7 shooting vs. the Wildcats. He missed all six three-

pointers he attempted.

No Buckeye hit more than one three-pointer, and OSU hit treys on back-to-back possessions only once. As a result, the team was an ice-cold 3 for 23 from beyond the arc during the game for just 13.0 percent and shot just 37.0 percent overall (20 for 54) from the field.

"We had good shots, and they were shots we've made before," Matta said. "We've got to continue to shoot, keep the confidence level up and get back with it."

With Sylvester sidelined with a stiff back, Matta did not resort to his bench for much of the game. Only seven Buckeyes saw playing time, and the two reserves who did play — forward Ivan Harris and center Matt Terwilliger — played for only five minutes each.

Despite the difficult win, the Buckeyes pulled to within a half-game of conference-leading Iowa, which was upset by Minnesota later in the afternoon. OSU found itself tied with the Badgers for second place in the Big Ten with four games remaining in

the regular season.

"We're sitting up here answering questions like we lost," Sullinger told the media after the game. "We won the game. Northwestern definitely plays a different style of basketball than most teams, and it's effective. It's hard to play against them."

"But we got the win and we're happy about it. I don't think we need a jolt at all. We got the jolt we needed coming off a loss. We got a win and a tough win."

Ohio State 61, Northwestern 52

Feb. 18, 2006
Value City Arena; Columbus, Ohio

	fg	ft	rb	a	pf	tp
Northwestern	11	11	11	24	14	2
Doyle	2	0	0	2	1	4
Vukusic	36	8	18	0	1	4
Cote	28	3	8	0	2	6
Hachad	36	9	15	1	1	1
Moore	39	3	8	0	1	2
Jenkins	11	2	0	0	1	0
Seacat	15	2	0	0	2	3
Williams	7	0	0	0	0	1
Scott	8	0	0	0	1	0
TOTALS	200	24-58	1-2	8-31	13	19

Percentages: FG: .414, FT: .500. 3-point goals: 3-20. 150 (Moore 26, Vukusic 1-7, Jenkins 0-2, Seacat 0-2, Cote 0-3). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: 3 (Vukusic 3). Turnovers: 12 (Vukusic 5, Moore 3, Doyle, Hachad, Jenkins, Scott). Steals: 6 (Hachad 2, Seacat 2, Cote, Moore).

	fg	ft	rb	a	pf	tp
Ohio State	40	6	12	34	5	7
Sullinger	40	5	14	34	5	7
Lewis	40	5	14	34	3	1
Dials	35	5	8	4	10	1
Butler	38	2	10	7	8	1
Foster	37	1	7	0	1	3
Harris	5	1	2	0	1	0
Terwilliger	5	0	1	0	0	0
TOTALS	200	20-54	18-30	18-45	7	10

Percentages: FG: .370, FT: .600. 3-point goals: 3-23. 130 (Sullinger 1-4, Lewis 1-5, Butler 1-7, Harris 0-1, Foster 0-6). Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 4 (Sullinger 2, Dials 2). Turnovers: 11 (Butler 4, Dials 3, Foster 2, Sullinger, Lewis). Steals: 7 (Sullinger 2, Dials 2, Foster 2, Terwilliger). Halftime: Ohio State 21, Northwestern 20. Officials: Steed, Skiles, Banks. A: 18,500.

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OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

OSU Goes Kohl Down The Stretch Vs. Badgers

By JEFF RAPP
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The last time the Ohio State men's basketball team had a look at Alando Tucker, the 6-6 Wisconsin forward was wearing a protective mask and struggling to consistently finish off plays and drain free throws.

The Buckeyes won that game Jan. 18 in Columbus, a turning point for a program that was dumped three times by Wisconsin last year even though the Badgers also were dealing with the sudden loss of two key reserves.

In the Feb. 15 rematch in Madison, it was the No. 12 Buckeyes who were down, blowing a double-digit lead and again failing to make significant plays down the stretch at the Kohl Center in a 78-73 loss. OSU hasn't won there since 2000, a year the Buckeyes went on to win a share of the league title.

Tucker, by the way, played at a Big Ten MVP level with game-high totals of 27 points and 16 rebounds. He logged a full 40 minutes but still had the vitality down the stretch to hurt Ohio State with drives into the lane, offensive rebounds and determined play.

"He sold programs and popcorn, too," Wisconsin head coach Bo Ryan told reporters after the game. "It had to be fun to watch if you could just sit back and watch the game because his energy was everywhere."

It wasn't fun, however, for the

Buckeyes, who fell to 18-4 overall and 7-4 in the Big Ten, dropping further behind conference-leading Iowa (20-6, 9-3) and into a tie for third place, a half-game behind Wisconsin (18-7, 8-4).

OSU led by as much as 13 in the first half and enjoyed a 37-28 advantage at the break. However, the Badgers hung 50 on the board in the second 20 minutes with Tucker staying hot, guard Kamron Taylor coming to life and forward Ray Nixon emerging down the stretch.

The Buckeyes were led by center Terence Dials, who logged a second straight double-double with 24 points and 11 rebounds. Jamar Butler had 17 points, and Matt Sylvester added 14 points and six assists.

Center Brian Butch supported Tucker with 17 points while Taylor had a dozen and Nixon had 13 — 10 of them in a fateful 12-4 run that erased a 62-57 deficit and gave the Badgers the lead for good at 69-66.

Nixon started his personal barrage by hitting both ends of a one-and-one with 5:49 to play. OSU got its lead back to five at 64-59 with 5:10 to go when Ron Lewis was fouled on a fast break and answered with a pair of free throws. After that things went noticeably sour for Ohio State, which fell to 3-3 on the road in league play.

The Buckeyes converged on Tucker and made him front-rim a hook shot but were unable to corral the defensive rebound — a glaring problem throughout the evening. Afforded another chance, Wisconsin took advantage as Nixon drilled a wide-open three with 4:38 to play, trimming the score to 64-62 to the delight of the crowd of 17,142.

"It's a great feeling when you hit a big shot or make a great basket and you feel the building erupt," said Nixon, a versatile but sometimes forgotten senior. "So many people had dropped down on Alando, we got an open look because he was successful on the inside."

After Sylvester missed everything on an off-balance 17-footer and J.J. Sullinger lost Michael Flowers' subsequent air ball from the corner with only teammates around him, Nixon struck again by hitting a short pull-up in the lane. Wisconsin would finish with a 20-2 advantage on second-chance points thanks to 15 offensive rebounds.

With the score tied at 64, the Buckeyes had a rare second opportunity at the other end as UW couldn't control a Dials miss. However, Ohio State guard Je'Kel Foster checked back in on the dead ball at the 3:13 mark with four fouls and promptly misfired on an 18-footer. Tucker then gave Wisconsin its first lead since the 13:13 mark of the first half with a pair of free throws.

The Buckeyes finally responded when Butler drained a jumper with a foot on the arc to tie the score again at 66 with 2:42 to go, but Nixon took a short kickout pass from Tucker and hit another bomb at 2:25. The Badgers were ahead 69-66 and never lost grip of the lead from there.

Butler — who was 8 for 8 at the stripe — made a pair of free throws but a dagger sequence followed. The 6-11 Butler made a three that danced on the rim to give UW a 72-68 lead with 1:45 to play, and Tucker blocked Dials on the other end.

"He didn't look like he was going to dunk it, so I figured I could just step in and try to alter his shot," Tucker said. Still, the Buckeyes had a chance

until Lewis missed a wide-open three with 39 seconds to play and OSU down 74-68.

The Buckeyes finished with a season-low four three-pointers in 17 attempts after hitting a combined 28 of 47 (59.6 percent) from that range in wins over Michigan and Illinois the previous week.

"They did a good job of taking away the three from us, but we helped them," OSU head coach Thad Matta told the Ohio State Basketball Radio Network. "We didn't move offensively and we didn't have the execution we needed."

Ohio State was still sharp enough in the first half to build the lead to 35-22 with 2:23 remaining as Sylvester hit a three off a feed from Butler. The lead changed hands eight times in the first eight minutes, but OSU began to build up a cushion by lobbing the ball to Dials over fronting Wisconsin post players.

The Buckeyes were fortunate to have a nine-point lead at halftime as Dials, Sullinger and Matt Terwilliger sat out the final minutes of the stanza in foul trouble.

Dials played admirably in the first half by hitting all five field-goal attempts and both tries at the free-throw line. He then was downright dominant in the early part of the second half, scoring 12 of OSU's first 14 points.

However, Wisconsin began to shade a second defender on Dials and he did not score in the final 12:38 of the game.

Meanwhile, Tucker kept plugging. The Big Ten's leading scorer coming in at just over 20 points per game, he pro-

ceeded to cause defensive breakdowns with his ultra-aggressive forays to the basket.

"He made big plays," Matta said. "He drives and finishes. When he's making his free throws — wow."

"He does a great job of moving without the ball, and then when the shot goes up he's always in rebounding position. He got the best of us tonight."



KEVIN DYE

17 FOR 14 — Jamar Butler, shown in action during a recent home game, had 17 points in a losing cause Feb. 15 at Wisconsin. The Ohio State sophomore also went a perfect 8 for 8 from the free-throw line.

Wisconsin 78, Ohio State 73

Feb. 15, 2006
Kohl Center, Madison, Wis.

	fg	ft	rb	a	pf	tp	
Ohio State	min	ma	ma	o-t	a	pf	tp
Sylvester	36	6-13	1-1	0-1	6	3	14
Sullinger	22	0-0	0-0	0-3	0	5	0
Dials	30	10-16	4-6	2-11	1	3	24
Foster	35	3-9	0-0	0-2	3	5	7
Butler	33	4-10	8-8	2-2	3	4	17
Harris	11	0-2	0-0	0-0	0	0	0
Lewis	26	2-4	4-4	0-4	0	0	9
Terwilliger	7	1-2	0-0	1-1	0	3	2
TOTALS	200	26-56	17-19	7-27	13	23	73

Percentages: FG: .464, FT: .895, 3-point goals: 4-17, .235 (Butler 1-3, Lewis 1-3, Sylvester 1-4, Foster 1-5, Harris 0-2); Team rebounds: 3. Blocked shots: None. Turnovers: 10 (Dials 3, Sullinger 2, Butler 2, Sylvester, Foster, Lewis). Steals: 8 (Foster 3, Dials 2, Sylvester, Lewis, Terwilliger).

	fg	ft	rb	a	pf	tp	
Wisconsin	min	ma	ma	o-t	a	pf	tp
Chappell	16	1-3	0-0	2-7	1	1	2
Tucker	40	10-18	7-11	7-16	2	2	27
Butch	31	6-9	2-7	1-3	1	2	17
Nixon	30	4-6	2-2	0-0	3	1	13
Taylor	39	3-10	6-6	0-0	3	1	12
Bronson	2	0-0	0-0	0-1	0	0	0
Flowers	23	1-4	3-4	2-5	1	3	5
Gullikson	7	1-2	0-1	0-1	0	3	2
Krabbenhoft	12	0-1	0-0	0-1	3	0	0
TOTALS	200	26-53	20-31	15-38	14	17	78

Percentages: FG: .491, FT: .645, 3-point goals: 6-14, .429 (Butch 3-4, Nixon 3-5, Flowers 0-2, Taylor 0-3); Team rebounds: 4. Blocked shots: 3 (Chappell 2, Tucker). Turnovers: 12 (Tucker 4, Butch 2, Nixon 2, Taylor 2, Flowers, Gullikson). Steals: 5 (Butch 2, Chappell, Tucker, Flowers). Halftime: Ohio State 37, Wisconsin 28. Officials: Valentine, Collins, Jansen. A: 17,142.

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OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Arc Madness



This OSU Team Is Its Most Dangerous Ever At Shooting The 3

By ADAM JARDY

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

As the men's basketball season winds down, Ohio State's assault on the school's three-point shooting records is heating up.

Before an uncharacteristically chilly 3-for-23 performance against Northwestern on Feb. 18, the Buckeyes had made 203 three-pointers as a team, putting them in third place for most three-pointers made in a season. And with four regular-season games left along with several anticipated postseason contests in the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments, Ohio State has a chance to become the most successful long-distance shooting team ever to wear the scarlet and gray.

"We spend an inordinate amount of time shooting the basketball in practice," OSU head coach Thad Matta said. "I think that's something that we take great pride in."

The Buckeyes have already set some new team records this season. They attempted 36 three-pointers against Florida A&M on Jan. 30, eclipsing the old high-water mark of 35 set against Chattanooga on Nov. 27, 2004.

But OSU saved its best effort for its rival to the north. On the road against Michigan on Feb. 9, the Buckeyes connected on 12 of 16 attempts from beyond the arc in the first half to set a school record for most three-pointers in a half. They finished 15 of 24 in the 94-85 nationally televised victory.

"It's got to be demoralizing when we're shooting it like that," said senior forward Matt Sylvester, who was shooting just under 35 percent for the season. "Sometimes you can kind of see the air go out of the other team when we really get hot."

Last season's Ohio State squad set single-season records in both three-pointers made and three-pointers attempted. According to junior guard Ron Lewis, that gave the Buckeyes the confidence necessary to shoot with as much authority as they have this season.

"It is contagious," he said. "Last year, we broke the record and have some tremendous shooters on this team. It's tough for the other team because when we're all hitting they probably feel like they can't defend it."

It's difficult to predict where the next trey will come from, but three Buckeyes are leading the way from beyond the arc.

Before the Northwestern game, OSU ranked second in the country in team three-point shooting, hitting on 42.1 percent of its long-distance shots, and three Buckeyes — Je'Kel Foster, J.J. Sullinger and Jamar Butler — were connecting at a rate of 48.5 percent or better.

Of the three, Foster led the way by shooting at a 49.2 percent clip and was on pace to become the all-time leader in career three-point shooting percentage, surpassing the mark of 44.6 set by Doug Etzler from 1992-95.

In less than two seasons, Foster has elevated himself to the seventh-most prolific three-point shooter in OSU history. His 127 total made three-pointers through 23 games this season put him just 12 behind

former teammate Tony Stockman and within striking distance of the all-time record of 153 shared by Brent Darby and Scoonie Penn.

After struggling for a few games during the middle of the season, Foster exploded in a big way against Minnesota. He missed his first shot from beyond the arc but then nailed his next seven consecutive threes to propel the Buckeyes to a 67-53 win.

In a four-game stretch in January, Foster was just 8 for 29 from three-point territory.

"The one thing about Je'Kel Foster is there is nobody more upset than he is when he doesn't play particularly well," Matta said. "One thing you know about Je'Kel is there will never be a lack of effort."

The Florida A&M game that followed that swoon began a four-game streak in which Foster went 21 for 27 (77.8 percent) from downtown including 12 in a row at one point — another new school record. The senior from Natchez, Miss., has twice been named the Big Ten Player of the Week this season — once after scoring a career-high 28 points against Iowa State on Dec. 17 and again after his outbursts against Florida A&M and Minnesota.

Despite all the accolades put up by his long-range snipers, Matta said the three-point is not the only look his offense is designed to give.

"We don't have a play in our system that isn't designed to get us a two-point shot," he said.

Foster's influence has directly affected his backcourt partner Butler. As a freshman, the 6-2, 200-pound point guard spent much of last season both learning from and building a relationship with Foster.

That, according to Matta, has paid dividends this season.

"I think that he and Je'Kel kind of built a bond together, and I think it really helped Jamar grow as a competitor and a player," the OSU coach said.

That bond has helped Butler improve on his freshman campaign that saw him start 12 games but shoot just 23.0 percent from beyond the three-point arc. While his primary goal as a point guard is not always to score, Butler's offensive prowess has helped Ohio State defeat Michigan and Illinois in recent weeks.

"I just gained more confidence," he said. "I didn't score as much last year but I really learned my systems."

Against the Wolverines on Feb. 9, Butler scored a career-high 20 points and was a perfect 2 for 2 from beyond the arc. Three days later at home against Illinois, he re-established his career high by scoring 22 points and hitting on 5 of 6 treys.

For his efforts, Butler was named the Big Ten Player of the Week.

"I just feel like if I'm left open, I can hit the shot," he said.

Butler was ranked sixth in the Big Ten — and third on the Buckeyes — in three-point shooting percentage through Feb. 19, connecting on 48.5 percent of his long-range shots.

That total put him just behind Sullinger, who was part of the Buckeyes' long-range onslaught against the Wolverines with a perfect 3-for-3 showing during that

Long-Distance Calls

Led by Je'Kel Foster, the Buckeyes are bearing down on a number of school records in the three-point-shooting section. Here is a look at some of the records in reach. Statistics for this season are through games of Feb. 19. All team records are since 1986-87, when the 19-foot, 9-inch three-point line was universally enacted throughout Division I college basketball.

TEAM RECORDS

Three-pointers made in a season

Record: 259 (2004-05)

2005-06: 206

Three-point field-goal percentage, season

Record: .418 (119-285, 1986-87)

2005-06: .408 (206-505)

INDIVIDUAL RECORDS

Three-pointers made in a career

Record: 418 (Brent Darby, 2000-03; Scoonie Penn, 1999-2000)

Je'Kel Foster: 127

Three-point field-goal percentage for a career

Record: .446 (Doug Etzler, 1992-95 — 107-240)

Je'Kel Foster: .458 (127-277)

Three-pointers made in a season

Record: 88 (Scoonie Penn, 1998-1999)

Je'Kel Foster: 65

Three-point field-goal percentage for a season

Record: .500 (Doug Etzler, 1993-94 — 17-34)

Je'Kel Foster: .492 (65-132)

game. The Columbus native was third in the Big Ten through Feb. 19 with a 46.9 three-point shooting percentage.

After donning a pair of white tights underneath his home uniform against FAMU, Sullinger had gone 7 for 11 from beyond the arc before missing three of four against Northwestern. (It should be noted that Sullinger's legs were bare vs. the Wildcats.)

The Buckeyes have seen more than just three players contribute to their record-setting three-point shooting performance this season. In an offense that features four guards and one big man in the middle, players such as Lewis, Sylvester and Ivan Harris have proved they can step in and knock down the long ball.

Harris scored a season-high 15 points against Florida A&M by going 3 for 6 from beyond the arc, while his 11 points against the Wolverines came in a span of five minutes and helped the Buckeyes overcome an early 13-point deficit.

From top to bottom, this Ohio State club has shown opponents that the three-pointer could come from just about anyone from anywhere on the court.

That's just fine with Matta.

"I've got confidence that we can shoot the basketball," he said. "Just by looking at percentages over (23) games, I'm comfortable with that."

"But there's no formula with it. We don't say, 'Hey, we've got to make 10 threes in this game,' and we don't give them a figure and say, 'Let's get at least 20 of them up.' We take those shots because we believe they're good shots for us."

COVER STORY: O'BRIEN VICTORIOUS IN CASE VS. OSU

All That's Left Is To Determine Damages

Continued From Page 1

"They wanted this guy so much they were willing to draft a contract that was so beneficial to him," Mark Conrad, a sports-law professor at Fordham University, told *The Columbus Dispatch* after studying the case.

"He had leverage. Ohio State wanted this guy more than he wanted them, no doubt about it."

Anatomy Of A Lawsuit

On April 24, 2004 — the day of the Ohio State spring football game that year — O'Brien informed then-athletic director Andy Geiger of a civil lawsuit one-time nanny Kathleen Salyers had filed against former Columbus couple Dan and Kim Roslovic in which she disclosed that O'Brien had made a four-figure payment to a prospective player.

Salyers also claimed that the OSU coaching staff had knowledge she was providing money, clothes, meals and academic assistance to former player Slobodan "Boban" Savovic.

Geiger touched on those topics as he announced O'Brien's firing six weeks later with the blessing of university president Dr. Karen Holbrook, stating that the coach had been "terminated for cause."

However, the crux of that cause — namely that O'Brien was in complete breach of his contract and NCAA rules by admitting he wrote a personal check worth at least \$6,000 to the family of former signee Aleksandar Radojevic — was disputed in court and eventually proved to be not enough reason for the dismissal, according to Clark.

The judge agreed with Ohio State that the payment — which O'Brien has maintained throughout was intended to be a loan — breached the coach's contract but added that it was a "single, iso-

lated failure of performance" that didn't warrant termination on its own.

He added, "While plaintiff's conduct prior to disclosing the loan was not completely consistent with good faith and fair dealing, plaintiff did make a good faith effort to resolve the dispute. (Ohio State) chose a course that was adversarial."

Clark put much of the blame on Geiger, saying the former AD refused to work toward a resolution or discuss the matter with O'Brien's attorneys.

"The court finds that the damage was repairable," the judge wrote. "Indeed, the court finds that with time and effort, trust could have been restored."

Clark also noted that O'Brien's loan was "for humanitarian purposes and not for the purpose of gaining an improper recruiting advantage."

That gave some credence to the coach's Dec. 12, 2005, statement in court that, "It was the right thing to do because of the circumstances of the family."

The 7-3 Radojevic was at a Kansas community college when he signed with the Buckeyes in November 1998. At the time, his family was back in the war-torn region of Montenegro in the former Yugoslavia and was dealing with the death of Radojevic's father and mounting medical bills.

O'Brien said he gave the money, which came out of a personal account, to former assistant coach Paul Biancardi to deliver to the Radojevic family in late 1998.

The university had received a cryptic letter from a Serbian club team coach saying Radojevic had played professionally there. After investigating the matter, the NCAA notified OSU's compliance office on Feb. 2, 1999, that Radojevic was not an amateur and therefore was not eligible to transfer to a Division I school.

O'Brien publicly railed against that decision but testified that he knew all along that Radojevic — who would go on to be a lottery pick in the '99 NBA draft — would never play at Ohio State.

"He had lost his amateur status," the coach testified. "Unless something was going to change, he was not going to play for an NCAA institution."

"We didn't get anything out of this and I told (Geiger) that I had not done it for any other reason than to help out the kid's family."

Ohio State insisted O'Brien's payment was a violation of NCAA bylaw 13.2.1, claiming that Radojevic was still technically a recruitable student-athlete.

In a formal, legalese-filled letter to O'Brien indicating he would be terminated unless he resigned by 1 p.m. on June 8, 2004, Geiger wrote, "Although you explained that you gave him the money to assist him with his family's dire financial situation in light of the Serbian war, that reason, however noble, does not excuse your action. In our discussion on April 24, 2004, you admitted that you knew your action was a violation of NCAA rules, and you are correct."

Geiger maintained his position in



FILE PHOTO

FAVORABLE JUDGMENT — Former Ohio State head coach Jim O'Brien won his wrongful termination lawsuit against the university and may be awarded as much as \$9 million in compensation for lost wages, benefits and interest.

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COVER STORY: O'BRIEN VICTORIOUS IN CASE VS. OSU

court, as did Holbrook, who testified Dec. 13. "The issue was the coach had entered into a clear violation of NCAA bylaws. It was considered to be a blatant violation and an egregious violation, and one that had no remedy."

The program still faces seven formal allegations of wrongdoing by the NCAA that involve the O'Brien era. The final ruling and announcement of any further NCAA sanctions are expected by early March.

Murray claimed in court that the impending dealings with the NCAA affected the university's handling of O'Brien.

"Ohio State panicked," he said. "It panicked about the possibility of facing the NCAA. It rushed to judgment."

Murray did not field any questions during the teleconference and did not return phone messages from BSB.

O'Brien, however, gave a lengthy reaction the day of the ruling.

"Obviously I'm very, very happy with the outcome with the decision today," he said. "I'm grateful for the Court of Claims, for the decision that they made. But I can't help but say I'm tremendously disappointed that this matter had to be resolved in the manner that it did."

"As much as it's a nice outcome for me, I still really don't feel that there are any real winners in this thing, and I sincerely wish that we hadn't ended up at this juncture."

O'Brien said he filed suit for the sake of his personal reputation, even though he was noncommittal about wanting to re-enter the coaching profession. He also maintained that he ran a clean program in his seven seasons at OSU and in previous head coaching stops at St. Bonaventure and Boston College.

Still, he didn't gloat about the ruling. "I don't know if vindication is the right word," he said. "It's relief maybe more than anything, relief that in fact we did win this case, a case that we felt very strongly about. It's relief that we're getting closer and closer to a resolution."

More To Work Out

Ohio State officials had a decidedly different reaction.

Speculation is that the ruling on the damages could take as long as eight months, and Ohio State almost certainly would use its opportunity to appeal at that time.

In a statement from the university, vice president and general counsel Christopher M. Culley hinted as much, saying, "The Court of Claims of Ohio has ruled that Coach O'Brien breached his contract but has also concluded that the breach was not so egregious as to frustrate the essential purpose of the contract. In that respect, the court decided that the coach's breach of trust did not warrant his dismissal. The uni-

versity respectfully disagrees with that view.

"The next step in this process is phase two of the trial, on the issue of damages. The court's present decision will not be subject to appeal until that phase has been completed."

Holbrook also released a statement: "As a member of the NCAA, fully supporting its values, Ohio State works diligently to follow that organization's highest standards and adheres strictly to NCAA bylaws. In this matter, we have acted forthrightly in compliance with NCAA rules and in the best interests of the athletics program and the university."

In defense of OSU's position with the NCAA investigation, Holbrook repeatedly has referred to O'Brien's firing — along with the decision to self-impose a postseason ban on the program last year and leave a pair of scholarships unawarded — as evidence the school is taking the allegations seriously.

O'Brien recently told reporters in Chicago that it was "crazy" to defend himself before the NCAA infractions committee and therefore help OSU's cause while the two entities were embroiled in the lawsuit.

"I have a lot of mixed emotions about a lot of this stuff," he said.

However, O'Brien remains steadfast in his belief that he needed to tell his side of the story to try to quell the notion that he made an illegal inducement to a recruit, as his loan is often portrayed.

"It's funny — in fact, one of the (reporters) from Columbus asked me what I was even doing (at the NCAA hearings in Indianapolis and Chicago) and why I was pursuing this, and I feel very, very strongly that I needed to defend myself in this," the former coach said. "We have run a very, very clean program and a lot of the things that were said were not very flattering."

"I have taken great pride in how we attempted to deal with kids in our programs down through these years, and never once was there the slightest blemish on my reputation as a college basketball coach. I just felt the need to have to defend this, and if nobody else was going to defend me, I really needed to be very proactive in trying to defend myself. And in so doing, quite honestly, I think indirectly I was defending the university as well and the basketball program."

O'Brien, who appeared grayer and thinner in court than he had in his final days as Ohio State coach, said being out of coaching and concentrating his efforts on the case have taken a toll. He said he tried to pass time by staying in touch with friends and other coaches and attending high school games in the Boston area.

Other than that, he couldn't come up

with much.

"I know what I haven't been doing, and that's sleeping," he said. "Perhaps it's hard for people to understand, but this has been on my mind in the very last thought I would have going to bed and the absolute first thought I would have waking up in the morning, and a lot of hours in between."

"I've had a lot of sleepless nights and this stuff has been on my mind, and the disappointment for how this whole thing got played out has not gone away."

O'Brien opted not to speculate on whether he would have been willing to settle out of court, which happens a vast majority of the time in sports contract cases.

When asked what Ohio State could have done differently, he said, "I have no comment on that. They did what they did. We responded the way that we responded. I can't speak for them as to how they felt they needed to approach it."

The former coach did, however, talk about where he stands in the court of public opinion.

"People are going to feel about me how they feel," he said. "What I do know is that I have had tremendous support

from the people that are very, very close to me and that has been the most reassuring. How anybody else responds to this, I really have no control over that."

He later added, "My reputation in this business has always meant a lot to me, and without question that has been soiled. That to me has been the most damning because I can go get another job. I can always replace some lost income — you would think, anyway — but the thing I've always told my players is your credibility and your reputation is of the utmost because once you lose that, it's hard to get that back."

O'Brien also dealt with a ready, two-part question: Does he desire to coach again and does he believe he will ever get that chance?

"We'll just have to play it by ear and see where it takes me," he said. "If I would get an opportunity to coach, if I want to coach, I'd go from there. I'm really not sure about those."

"We'll see how this thing plays out. I guess there's more work to be done. I'm just really hopeful and optimistic at this point that both the university and myself, we can somehow find a way to put this behind us for the benefit of all of us."

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THE VIEW FROM 15TH AND HIGH

Next Year's Next Year. Enjoy The Current Team

Why is it I get the feeling that some Ohio State basketball fans are so blinded by the future of the program they are not enjoying this season as much as they should?

The Buckeyes are challenging for the Big Ten regular-season title for the first time since 2002, when they finished in a four-way tie for the conference crown.

They seem all but assured of an NCAA Tournament bid, barring some sudden ruling keeping them from postseason play. And with the competitive nature of play in the Big Ten, league schools always seem well prepared for the Big Dance — at least one conference team has made the Final Four in five of the last seven years — so the Buckeyes have a chance to make some noise if they make the tournament for the first time in four seasons.

But not only is this Buckeye team doing well, it is fun to watch. They hustle. They have a solid force inside with Terence Dials. And with their uncanny ability to drain the three-point shot, they are never out of a game, as was proven recently at Michigan.

In a battle of ranked teams, OSU trailed the Wolverines 21-8 out of the gate. The Buckeyes would then put on a three-point display — including making 11 of their final 12 shots from beyond the arc before intermission — that allowed them to come back and lead at halftime and win the game by nine points.

The Buckeyes are a group of guys that it's fun to pull for. Many of them have survived some really tough times. They experienced two down years, a sudden coaching change after allegations that left the program in turmoil and a self-imposed postseason ban last season after new coach Thad Matta finally got the team back on track.

They have absorbed it all and just kept winning.

And all this from a bunch of players who were not that highly regarded to begin with. There, I believe, is the reason some Buckeye fans are seemingly looking past this year's club to next season and beyond. People are so blinded by the "Thad Five" — led by everyone's No. 1 high school player, Greg Oden — that they just assume even bigger things are in store for the Buckeyes next season.

Those same fans may be forgetting just what the team will be losing. In seniors Terence Dials, Je'Kel Foster, J.J. Sullinger and Matt Sylvester, the Buckeyes will be losing four of five starters. They will be giving up more than 59 percent of their scoring and nearly 63 percent of their rebounds.

More importantly, perhaps, the Buckeyes will be losing a tremendous amount of leadership. In fact three of the seniors — Dials, Sullinger and Sylvester — are in their fifth year around the college game. They know the ropes.

There is no guarantee next year's freshmen will be up to Big Ten par on the court immediately, and it would be unfair to expect them to fill any leadership void.

Great recruiting classes are never a guarantee of future success anyway.

When I first started following Ohio State as a cub reporter back in the 1970s, Eldon Miller brought in a class for the ages that also was built around one of the best prep centers in the country in Herb Williams. That recruiting class featured six players: Williams, Marquis Miller, Kenny Page, Todd Penn, Carter Scott and Jim Smith.

THE VIEW FROM 15TH AND HIGH
Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

The scenario in 1978, Miller's second year, was a little bit different in that rather than replacing a bunch of talent as the Buckeyes must next season, the "Miller Six" were filling a talent void from teams that had been 6-20 in Fred Taylor's last season and 9-18 in Miller's first year in Columbus.

Williams, Page and Smith all broke into the starting lineup that first year and the Buckeyes improved to 16-11. That's a good turnaround, but not the type of record people will be looking for from OSU next season. The Miller Six wound up making it to the then-smaller NCAA field only once in their four years. In 1979-80, with Kelvin Ransey from the recruiting class ahead of them and Clark Kellogg from a couple of years behind them, they posted a 21-8 record, defeating Arizona State in the Big Dance before losing to UCLA.

By the time the group reached its senior year, it slumped to a disastrous 14-13, still one of the most disappointing seasons in Ohio State basketball history.

Williams proved to be the real deal, leaving OSU as the school's all-time leading scorer and No. 2 rebounder (to the legendary Jerry Lucas) and going on to a long career in the NBA. Smith was a four-year starter, and Scott was a three-year starter who finished his stay in the school's top 20 in scoring.

Penn, listed at 5-9, was probably too small for the Big Ten but still cracked the starting lineup for an extended stretch as a sophomore. Miller was with the team for all four years but, hampered by injuries, had little impact. Page looked strong as a freshman, scoring 12.3 points a game, but was gone after just one season for reported disciplinary reasons.

My point in all this is that there are no guarantees, regardless of how good a recruiting class might be. So let's savor this year's Buckeye team because it is truly a bird in the hand.

Losing In Court Of Opinion

Jim O'Brien may have won his wrongful termination lawsuit, but if one of the reasons he pursued his case was to protect his reputation, I think that horse is long out of the barn.

First of all, I should qualify all of this by saying that I really liked O'Brien and was stunned and felt somewhat betrayed when all the stories started coming out about the goings-on in the program during his tenure at Ohio State. O'Brien appears to have won his case on what seem to be technicalities.

While the final NCAA findings have not been released, no one seems to be disputing that O'Brien gave money to Aleksandar Radojevic. It seems disingenuous of the coach to claim the "loan" was OK because he knew Radojevic was not an amateur when, at the time, he was trying desperately to get the big man eligible for the Buckeyes. Funny how you change your tune when you are trying to win a court case rather than an eligibility fight.

Regardless, as athletic director Andy Geiger said at the time of O'Brien's dismissal, "It's Recruiting 101." His coach had to have known that giving Radojevic the money — even as a loan and even for humanitarian reasons — was a no-no. That he didn't reveal giving the money for several years seems to further damage his credibility.

And that doesn't even take into consideration the case of Boban Savovic, whose stay at Ohio State appears to be littered with NCAA violations and would seem to indicate a lack of control or oversight on the part of O'Brien and his staff.

In fact, if Dan and Kim Roslovic had paid Kathleen Salyers the money she alleges she was promised, we — and Ohio State and the NCAA — would probably not know about any of this and O'Brien might still be coach, though the program, for whatever reason, seemed unfortunately to be heading in the wrong direction.

Intentionally or unintentionally, O'Brien did plenty to harm his own reputation. There's no need to blame Ohio State for that. I wish him the best and say thanks for some great years here, but perhaps he needs to take a little more responsibility if he wants to get a good example for his former players and win back the hearts of Buckeye fans who once praised him.

As for Ohio State, it's beyond me why they didn't settle with him at the time of his dismissal. I certainly don't know why they didn't settle with him once he brought suit. All of those high-priced lawyers had to have seen that he had a good chance of winning his case.

I also sympathize with the position that Geiger and Ohio State were in. Knowing the extent of the possible violations and knowing how the NCAA works, they had to feel that dismissing O'Brien was best for them in the long run. Their quick action along with the self-imposed postseason ban last year are the cornerstones of their case for leniency from the NCAA. Keeping O'Brien around would almost certainly have hurt that case.

Forget about the lawsuit. This is one situation where there are no winners.

Measuring Merrill

Box scores don't always tell the whole story in basketball. But several recent box scores from Ohio State women's basketball games seem to tell a lot about Debbie Merrill.

Against Iowa on Feb. 12, the senior forward scored 17 points, pulled down nine rebounds and had seven assists against one turnover. At Minnesota four days later, she had 10 points, seven rebounds, eight assists and no turnovers. Now that's contributing in all facets of the game.

For the season, the transfer from Cincinnati is fourth on the team in scoring, second in rebounding, second in blocked shots, second in steals and, remarkably for a forward, tied for first in assists. That takes a lot of pressure off everything Jessica Davenport.

You have to wonder what it would have been like to have Merrill for all four seasons. Let's appreciate her for the one season we do have.

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