

Young Ohio State Team Builds On UConn Experience Into Louisville Matchup



Ohio State came into the season one of the most inexperienced in college basketball, with six of the 10 major contributors so far being freshmen, three being sophomores and the other being a junior transfer in her first season with the Buckeyes.

That has meant some early growing pains, including a home defeat against Ohio and a 15-point loss to South Dakota in Las Vegas.

But on Nov. 24, the Buckeyes faced off against the No. 4 team — as well as the most prestigious women's basketball program — in the country in UConn, and they showed every bit of capability that they have.

Ohio State battled the Huskies in a back-and-forth game for much of the matchup, eventually falling 73-62. The 11-point margin was as large as it got all game, with the Buckeyes bringing it within six points late before UConn's Crystal Dangerfield took over, scoring the final six points for the Huskies to bury Ohio State's chances at the upset.

But even in the loss, there was plenty for a team with majorly underclassmen to learn from coming so close to a monumental win.

"I thought we played hard and we competed, and we gave ourselves a chance," Ohio State head coach Kevin McGuff said. "Just down the stretch they made more plays than we did, and that was ultimately the difference in the game."

That experience against the Huskies will be of use on Thursday, when the Buckeyes take on their second top five team in No. 2 Louisville, who is coming off a 72-62 victory over then-No. 1 Oregon.

"Louisville's got a great team, obviously they're coming off a spectacular weekend down in the Virgin Islands where they beat the No. 1 team in the country," McGuff said. "We'll obviously have a big challenge with them, but it's another great opportunity for us to play one of the best teams in the country."

For freshman guard Jacy Sheldon, the matchup against UConn was her first experience against a

national powerhouse, and she finished with two points and two assists in 12 minutes. Since then, Sheldon has earned her first collegiate start, while also getting a double double with 13 points and 10 rebounds, while also grabbing four steals.

The first-year guard thinks these difficult matchups, even in potential defeats, will help the team more than anything else.

"We've played a lot of tough games already, and we have a lot coming up, and I think it's only going to make us better," Sheldon said. "I think we've had some losses too that we didn't come into the game ready, and I think we've learned from those, so I think the whole nonconference schedule is really helping us grow."

McGuff also knows the difficult schedule can be a blessing in disguise down the line, especially for a team still learning about what it is.

"It always seems like a great idea in the offseason, and then when you're in it, you wonder how stupid you are to do this," McGuff said laughing. "We're going to learn a lot about ourselves and really expose where we have to get better."

"It's not easy, but you know what? I don't really want it to be easy, you don't ever get to anything great if you go through something easy."

The Cardinals will come to Value City Arena as heavy favorites, just as UConn did less than two weeks prior. But the Huskies left with a game that is tied for the closest they have played this season, and if the Buckeyes can again put all the pieces together, Louisville may not be quite the monumental task that it seems.

"I think we knew going into that game that we could compete with them and we did," Sheldon said about the UConn matchup. "Since that game, we know we have it in us, so I think we just have to come ready to play game every game now."

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