



For a long time, November in Columbus was reserved for football in the minds of Buckeye fans. But since 2004, when Thad Matta took over as head coach, the Ohio State basketball team has been demanding more attention from the fan base. That momentum will only build this year as Matta enters the season leading a team with serious national title aspirations.

With the season tipping off on Friday night, it's time to preview the 2011-2012 Ohio State Men's basketball team.

Introduction

Ohio State enters this season ranked No. 3 in both the Coaches and AP polls behind first ranked North Carolina and second ranked Kentucky. The Buckeyes are coming off one of the most successful seasons in school history, where they posted a 34-3 record on their way to a disappointing loss to Kentucky in the Sweet 16 of the NCAA tournament. The Buckeyes return just two starters from last year's squad, but key bench players are expected to step into starting roles without much of a talent dip. In addition, the Buckeyes will get help from one of the best recruiting classes in the country, which should provide a depth that Thad Matta has rarely had during his tenure at Ohio State.

Ohio State was named the preseason favorite to win the Big Ten Conference Championship with Wisconsin predicted to finish second and Michigan State to finish third.

Familiar Faces

Ohio State has two returning starters -- Jared Sullinger and William Buford.

Jared Sullinger enters his sophomore season with plenty of hype. Sullinger was the only player in the country to be named a consensus preseason All-American, and he was also voted the Big Ten's preseason player of the year. After averaging 17.2 points and 10.2 rebounds per game last year, Sullinger is the main reason Ohio State is expected to win the conference. His

big body has slimmed a bit after losing 20 pounds during the offseason, and his added strength and quickness will make Ohio State a handful to handle on the offensive side of the court.

William Buford returns as well, determined to redeem himself after a dreadful performance in Ohio State's last game against Kentucky where he missed 14 of his 16 shots. The 6-6 guard from Toledo is one of the best mid-range shooters in college basketball, but his experience will likely be his greatest contribution to the team. Buford is the only senior on this year's squad and has played on two Big Ten championship teams alongside players like Evan Turner, David Lighty and Jon Diebler. He has been one of the most consistent basketball players for Ohio State over the last three years, and with a good season, he could finish at Ohio State scoring more than 2,000 career points for the Buckeyes.

Other names Buckeye fans will recognize in the starting lineup will be Aaron Craft and Deshaun Thomas. Both Craft and Thomas were heavily entrenched in Matta's rotation off the bench last year, but with the departure of David Lighty, Jon Diebler and Dallas Lauderdale -- these two will look to fill the void. Craft is a feisty point guard who distributes and shoots the ball well, but his work on the defensive side of the ball is what he does best. Thomas is a rangy forward and is an absolute monster on the offensive end. When he's hot, Thomas has the potential to be one of the most explosive scorers not just on this team, but in the country. He isn't afraid to get dirty on the offensive glass and his aggressiveness usually pays off well for the Buckeyes.

Young Guns

In addition to what the Buckeyes have coming back, Thad Matta and the coaching staff also have one of the best recruiting classes in the country at their disposal. When you add that to the talented players from last year's class that didn't see much of the floor in 2010 -- it gives the Buckeyes the deepest bench it's had since 2006.

Last year's recruiting class is highlighted by Shannon Scott, a 6-2 point guard from Alapaha, Georgia. Scott is expected to mimic the role Aaron Craft held last year -- a player who will come off the bench and run the team at point guard. Scott is a supremely talented floor general and excels at finding the open holes in a defense. He's so good at it that when he and Craft are on the floor together, Craft will jump over to the shooting guard position.

One of the other freshman expected to see the floor often is Amir Williams, a 6-10 center from Birmingham, Michigan. Williams is an athletic big man who loves to run the floor. He's a little raw in regards to an overall offensive skill set, but his athleticism is impossible to ignore on both ends of the floor. When he shares the court with Jared Sullinger, Williams will play the center position to allow Sullinger to play away from the basket at the power forward position. This will give Sullinger the ability to display another facet of his game that he didn't get to show last year.

A pair of sophomores will see the court more than they did last year -- Jordan Sibert and Lenzelle Smith. The two guards are fighting to join Craft, Buford, Thomas and Sullinger as the final piece to the starting roster. Sibert is more of an offensively talented player -- a smooth

shooter who has gained a lot of confidence after looking shaky at times last year. In Ohio State's exhibition against Walsh last Sunday, Sibert came off the bench and scored 15 points in just 16 minutes of action. Smith is a more rounded player -- a guy who can play solid defense in and contribute on the other end. He's not the shooter Sibert is, but Smith can get to the basket, rebound and distribute better than Sibert. Look for Smith to start and for Sibert to come off the bench to provide a spark offensively.

The Schedule

11/11/11 vs. Wright State -- 9:00 p.m. ET
11/15/11 vs. Florida -- 8:00 p.m. ET
11/18/11 vs. Jackson State -- 9:00 p.m. ET
11/21/11 vs. North Florida -- 8:30 p.m. ET
11/23/11 vs. VMI -- 7:00 p.m. ET
11/25/11 vs. Valparaiso -- 6:30 p.m. ET

11/29/11 vs. Duke -- 9:30 p.m. ET (**Big Ten/ACC Challenge**)

12/03/11 vs. Texas-Pan American -- 12:00 p.m. ET
12/10/11 at Kansas -- 3:15 p.m. ET
12/14/11 vs. South Carolina-Upstate -- 7:30 p.m. ET
12/17/11 at South Carolina -- 12:00 p.m. ET
12/20/11 vs. Lamar -- 8:30 p.m. ET
12/22/11 vs. Miami (Oh) -- 8:30 p.m. ET

Conference Play

12/28/11 vs. Northwestern -- 5:30 p.m. ET
12/31/11 at Indiana -- 6:00 p.m. ET
01/03/12 vs. Nebraska -- 6:30 p.m. ET
01/07/12 at Iowa -- 3:00 p.m. ET
01/10/12 at Illinois -- 9:00 p.m. ET
01/15/12 vs. Indiana -- TBA
01/21/12 at Nebraska -- 8:00 p.m. ET
01/25/12 vs. Penn State -- 6:30 p.m. ET
01/29/12 vs. Michigan -- 1:00 p.m. ET
02/04/12 at Wisconsin -- 2:00 p.m. ET
02/07/12 vs. Purdue -- 9:00 p.m. ET
02/11/12 vs. Michigan State -- 6:00 p.m. ET
02/14/12 at Minnesota -- 9:00 p.m. ET
02/18/12 at Michigan -- 9:00 p.m. ET
02/21/12 vs. Illinois -- 7:00 p.m. ET
02/25/12 vs. Wisconsin -- TBA

02/26/12 vs. Wisconsin -- TBA
02/29/12 at Northwestern -- 8:30 p.m. ET
03/04/12 at Michigan State -- TBA

Big Ten Tournament

03/08/12 vs TBA -- Time TBA

The Roster

*** Projected Starters: ***

Jared Sullinger -- Power Forward / Center

Deshaun Thomas -- Forward

William Buford -- Guard

Lenzelle Smith Jr. -- Guard

Aaron Craft -- Point Guard

Jordan Sibert -- Guard

Shannon Scott -- Point Guard

Amir Williams -- Center

Evan Ravenel -- Forward

J.D. Weatherspoon -- Forward

Sam Thompson -- Forward

Alex Rogers -- Guard

Trey McDonald -- Center

Check back at TheClevelandFan.com throughout the season for more Ohio State basketball coverage, starting this Saturday with an Ohio State - Wright State game recap.

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