



Maybe this Ohio State team is maturing.

We've watched these Buckeyes lose big leads against Illinois and Wisconsin in ugly, momentum crushing losses this season. Whether it was a lack of team chemistry or a lack of killer instinct, it didn't seem like Ohio State had the mental fortitude to make a run come tournament time.

That lack of mental fortitude looked to be rearing its ugly head last night in Ohio State's sweet 16 matchup with Cincinnati. Ohio State was comfortably in charge, leading by 12 points heading into the second half. The momentum swung rapidly though as the Bearcats caught fire, hitting nine of their first 11 shots to start the second. Meanwhile, Ohio State had gone absolutely cold and Cincinnati tied the game with a 16-4 run that spanned just five minutes.

That stretch and multiple timeouts by Ohio State coach Thad Matta still couldn't shake the Buckeyes out of their funk as Cincinnati took a four point lead with just under 12 minutes to play.

Needing something to spark the team, Aaron Craft put his foot down and started making plays. In a four minute span, Craft forced four turnovers and accounted for five of Ohio State's 10 points in a 10-1. The Buckeyes kept their foot on the gas and pushed their six point lead out to a 13 point lead before Cincinnati could recover. The Buckeyes went on to cruise to an 81-66 victory.

Jared Sullinger confirmed that the Buckeyes have a tendency to let their guard down, "We've

got two types of basketball teams: We've got the cool guys and then the blue collar guys. I thought to start the second half we got into the cool guy mode and we kind of let our guard down."

Ohio State was fortunate to overcome the near-debacle, but Matta praised a good Cincinnati team, "Give Cincinnati credit, they came out and stung us to start the second half, and we had to take some timeouts there to kind of refocus what we were doing..."

Deshaun Thomas led all scorers with 26 points to go along with seven rebounds. Sullinger went 9-10 from the free throw line on his way to scoring 23 and the Buckeyes received a surprising lift with Lenzelle Smith Jr.'s 15 points. Craft was all over the place, snagging six steals to compliment 11 points, five assists and five rebounds. Buford was the only Buckeye who really struggled, going 1-8 from the field for just four points.

Ohio State shot an efficient 48% on the night and connected on eight of their 17 3-pointers. Withholding that tough stretch to start the second half, the Buckeyes were able to get what they wanted against the smaller Bearcats team.

"We just read their defense really well tonight," Sullinger said. "And you've got to give that to the coaches and putting us in situations where we can succeed."

Ohio State started the game a bit sluggishly, missing their first three shots as Cincinnati raced out to a 5-0 lead. That didn't last long as Smith Jr. got the Buckeyes going -- scoring five of the team's first nine points -- and Ohio State went on to answer with a 13-2 run. Sullinger and Thomas dominated the paint, setting the tone with six offensive rebounds through 10 minutes of play. Sullinger also got Cincinnati's Yancy Gates into early foul trouble as the big man played just 11 minutes in the first half.

The Bearcats were keeping things close despite being outplayed for much of the half and Cashmere Wright hit a pair of free throws to make it 27-22. That's when Thomas exploded, scoring eight straight points (including two consecutive 3-pointers) that put Ohio State up by 13. Cincinnati tried to answer, but Ohio State's relentless defense kept the Bearcats in check. The Buckeyes held Cincinnati to just 39% shooting in the first half and forced nine turnovers. Ohio State used 30 combined points from Thomas and Sullinger to shoot 45% from the field while committing just four turnovers. All that helped the Buckeyes take a 37-25 lead into the locker room at halftime.

"I was really good in that zone," Thomas said. "Flashing and kicking it down to [Sullinger] and just getting in the open area and just knocking down shots."

That same mindset will be pivotal Saturday night when Ohio State faces off against Syracuse in the Elite 8. The Orange are famous for their stifling zone defense -- and Deshaun's ability to slash and hit mid range jumpers will be crucial for Ohio State. The game will tip-off at 7:05 pm EST.

(Photo credit - Jim Davidson - TheOzone.net)

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