



The Ohio State Buckeyes started the regular season with expectations of a Final Four, but finished with a fluster of losses that had many people questioning the team's mental strength and toughness.

The Buckeyes used that as motivation and rolled through the East region, capped by a 77-70 victory over the Syracuse Orange in Boston Saturday night. Ohio State's victory -- it's 31st of the season -- punched Ohio State's ticket to New Orleans for their first Final Four appearance since 2007.

Ohio State coach Thad Matta talked about the late season struggles and how it motivated his team, "That loss [to Wisconsin in February] opened their eyes and said, 'Hey, maybe we're not as good as we think we are.' Maybe it got us pointed in the right direction."

Jared Sullinger elaborated, "When we were going through that slump in February, everybody was saying this basketball team was kind of on a downhill. We heard negative comments. I want to thank y'all because through all the adversity, we constantly pushed through that."

Sullinger finished the game with 19 points and seven rebounds despite playing just six minutes in the first half due to foul trouble. Lenzelle Smith, Jr. suffered a laceration above his right eye that required three stitches, but he overcame the injury and an 0-4 shooting performance in the first half to finish the game with 18 points -- half of which came from behind the arch via three momentum-changing 3-pointers. The Buckeyes had four scorers in double figures as Deshaun Thomas had 14 and William Buford finished with 13.

The key to Ohio State's victory was Smith Jr., who's 3-point shooting in the second half helped Ohio State soften Syracuse's tough 2-3 zone. Aaron Craft talked about Lenzelle's toughness, "He was a little out of it the first half after getting hit and getting those stitches, but he did a great job at halftime of kind of regrouping and sticking together," Craft said. "He knocked down some big shots for us."

Ohio State's victory didn't come easy. The Buckeyes were playing a motivated team in Syracuse that had dealt with more off-the-court drama than any team in the country. Even without star center Fab Melo, the Orange gave Ohio State all it could handle in the East Regional Finals.

The Buckeyes started the game hot and rushed out to an early 9-2 lead before Syracuse answered back with a 6-0 run of their own. Sullinger picked up his first foul two minutes into the game and was whistled for his second four minutes later. The Buckeyes were leading 13-11 when he went to the bench, but the team stepped up defensively in his absence.

Syracuse's dribble-drive was effective early, but Craft and Co. tightened the grip and cut off the easy driving lanes. Freshman Amir Williams made a few mistakes filling in for Sullinger and Ravenel, but largely played very well, especially on defense. Williams played nine minutes and produced three points, four rebounds, two blocks and an assist. His play and a strong defensive effort helped Ohio State enter halftime tied at 29 despite playing without Sullinger for 14 minutes.

Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim knew they missed an opportunity in the first half, "We got Sullinger in foul trouble early and we didn't take advantage of it," Boeheim said. "You know when he comes back in he's going to be difficult..."

And he was. After scoring just four points in the first, the Buckeyes forced the ball down low and Sullinger produced. The All-American found open shooters when Syracuse's zone collapsed and punished them inside with interior scoring when the perimeter was blanketed. Sullinger's presence inside helped the Buckeyes open a 46-36 lead six minutes into the half.

Syracuse didn't cave though. Brandon Triche got aggressive and took advantage of Sullinger's foul trouble with bull-headed drives to the basket. The Orange put together a 15-5 run, but Ohio State still held a slight 52-51 lead with just under eight to play.

That's when Smith Jr. and Sullinger stepped up. Smith Jr. hit a huge three on Ohio State's next possession and Sullinger scored the Buckeyes' next five points. A teardrop floater from Smith Jr. later gave Ohio State a five point lead and the Buckeyes converted at the free throw line when Syracuse began to foul to close out the game.

"As I take a moment to reflect, I mean, I don't know if I could be prouder of a basketball team in terms of what -- everything that they've been through," Matta said. "We never lost two games in a row. You look at the losses we had this year, hard-fought games."

The Buckeyes will meet a familiar foe in New Orleans. Ohio State will play the Kansas

Jayhawks -- a team they lost to earlier this season when Jared Sullinger was injured -- for a chance to play for the National Championship.

*(Photo credit - Jim Davidson - [TheOzone.net](#))*

[Follow @davidreg412](#)