Coming off consecutive losses to a pair of top-five teams in Michigan and Indiana last week, the No. 13 Ohio State Buckeyes were supposed to have an easy bounce-back game against the Northwestern Wildcats Thursday night.

Despite playing in front of its home crowd and facing an overmatched opponent with just seven healthy scholarship players, Ohio State struggled mightily against Northwestern. The Wildcats had the Buckeyes on the ropes for much of the game before a late 12-0 run boosted Ohio State to a 69-59 victory.

Ohio State (18-6, 8-4 Big Ten) struggled defensively, but the Buckeyes tightened up down the stretch,
"Our defense at the end was key," Ohio State coach Thad Matta said. "We challenged shots a little better and the game came down to us contesting shots. At the end of the game we had one of our best defensive lineups."

Northwestern (13-12, 4,8) shot lights out on Thursday night, connecting on nine of its first 17 3-pointers against the Buckeyes. The hot shooting helped the Wildcats build a five-point lead midway through the second half, and it appeared as though Northwestern was on its way to pulling off a major upset.

"We played well for 39 minutes," Northwestern coach Bill Carmody said. "We had some good looks in those last 90 seconds. We just weren't able to knock them down."

Deshaun Thomas overcame a rough first half and scored 17 of his game-high 22 points in the final 14 minutes against the Wildcats. Lenzelle Smith, Jr. (12), Sam Thompson (11) and Amir Williams (10) all scored in double digits while Aaron Craft chipped in seven points and six assists. The starters did most of the work against Northwestern as the bench produced just seven points for the Buckeyes.

“Thomas really took over at the end of the game,” Carmody said after the game. “In the last 10 minutes, we couldn’t keep the ball away from him. He made plays that good players make.”

The Buckeyes had a huge advantage inside. Ohio State outrebounded Northwestern by 20 (41-21) and snagged an unbelievable 19 offensive rebounds on Thursday night. Ohio State scored nearly 70 percent of its points (48) in the paint and at the free throw line.

Frankly, without the advantage inside, Northwestern would have pulled away with this one.

Nearly half of the Wildcats’ buckets (11 of 23) came from behind the arch, and the occasional backdoor cut kept Ohio State off balance all night. It wasn’t until Northwestern went cold -- missing on four straight 3-pointers down the stretch -- that Ohio state was able to pull away. If not for that late funk, it could’ve been a very different game.

“There were threes that we hit that were tough but then there were some threes that I thought weren’t so tough that we missed,” Carmody said. “I credit the defense for that. They tightened up, not that they weren’t playing hard before, but they really pushed up and did a nice job making it harder to execute your stuff.”

Who’s Next?

Ohio State travels to Madison this Sunday to take on the No. 20 Wisconsin Badgers. The game will tip off at 1:00 p.m. EST and will be televised by CBS.

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