The Ohio State Buckeyes basketball team, ranked 9th in the country, are in pursuit of the Big Ten regular season championship. Led by Evan Turner, the Buckeyes have risen to within striking distance for the top spot in the conference. With a record of 20-6 (10-3 in Big Ten play), the Bucks have placed themselves in great position to win the league. Huge games against Purdue and Michigan State take place this week, and whoever comes out the other side of these contests will have the best shot to win it all. But before we get into that, we're going to take a look back at each step the Buckeyes have taken during their ascent to the top.

Where it all started:

Ohio State came into the season ranked 16th in the AP poll. Optimism was high as all five starters and most of the key contributors from the bench returned to Columbus from last year's 22 win squad. The season kicked off with a bang as the Buckeyes *drilled* Alcorn State in a 100-60 victory. Evan Turner got his 'Jason Kidd' on when he recorded a triple double from the point guard position, becoming only the second Buckeye to earn one (Dennis Hopson was the first).

After a similar pasting of James Madison, head coach Thad Matta lead his team to Madison Square Garden for the the 2K sports classic semi-finals and a match up against the North Carolina Tar Heels. The front court for the Tar Heels proved to be too much for the undersized Buckeyes, leading to Ohio State's first loss of the season. The consolation game the next night paired the Buckeyes against Pac-10 opponent California, which Ohio State won 76-70.

Dominating performances against St. Francis (PA) and Lipscomb (which yielded Evan Turner's second triple double of the season) led Ohio State to the Big Ten - ACC Challenge, where they faced off against Florida State. With the ten other games already finished and a 5-5 split of victories between the conferences, the outcome of this game would be the difference in

which league gained all of those precious bragging rights. Fortunately, Ohio State started strong and lead by 11 points at the half. The Seminoles were never able to mount a rally as the Buckeyes finished the game comfortably with a 13 point win.

With things clicking for the Ohio State basketball team, they entered their next contest with Eastern Michigan ranked 15th in the country and a 6-1 record. If it were a movie, this would be the part where the main character experiences a serious traumatic event (like in *Ghost,* when Patrick Swayze was murdered in a dark alley and Demi Moore was helpless in preventing it). Early in the first half, Evan Turner was fouled on a dunk attempt and took a horrendous 7 foot fall directly on his back. X-rays later showed that he fractured two vertebrae and was expected to miss 8 weeks.

I remember watching the game, hearing the rush fall over the crowd when he fell. I remember the sick feeling in my stomach that told me this couldn't be good. I remember feeling like someone had just murdered Patrick Swayze.

Nowhere to Turn...er?

This began a tough stretch for Ohio State. The first game without their team leader (and biggest play-maker) had the Buckeyes traveling to Indianapolis to face off against Butler (ranked 20th nationally). Despite strong performances from William Bufford and David Lighty, Ohio State fell short in a 74-66 loss. The schedule gave some brief relief as three cupcakes (Presbyterian, Delaware State and Cleveland State) turned into easy wins for the Bucks... Oops. Did I just say Cleveland State was a cupcake? Because if I did, that was a mistake. I meant to differentiate them as a non-conference juggernaut and the 'takers' of other teams pride. I can picture our Cleveland State writers nodding their heads in approval right now. I'm glad we're all on the same page.

The relief in scheduling was short lived as Ohio State began a brutal start to conference play, with four of the first five games coming on the road. Things got bad in Madison when the Buckeyes suffered their worse loss of the season, a 22 point shellacking, to Wisconsin. The team then traveled to Ann Harbor and (in my opinion) experienced the low point of the year with an embarrassing 9 point loss to a not-so-great Michigan team.

The Buckeyes were reeling. They had lost 3 of their last 6 games and had fallen completely out of the top 25. When things were looking their worst, Ohio State received good news that star player Evan Turner was ready to come back and play. Turner had effectively cut his "expected-recovery-time" in half, from eight weeks to four and a half. He helped lift the Buckeyes to their first conference win of the season in limited (19) minutes against Indiana. Whether it's fair or not, Indiana isn't the greatest test when it comes to basketball these days, so folks around Buckeye Nation were eager to see how Ohio State would do against Minnesota. Although Turner played well in the game, a sloppy second half helped the Gophers edge the Bucks. At this point, with Ohio State 1-3 in Big Ten play (11-5 overall) and in the bottom half of the conference standings, hope was close to non-existent for a league championship.

We're goin' streaking!

I'm not too sure what happened to this Ohio State team after the Minnesota loss. I don't know if Thad Matta gave the team a "gut-check-time" type of speech. I'm not sure if some of the older guys called a players only meeting to rally the troops. Maybe the entire team sat down and watched that scene from the movie *Old School,* where Frank the Tank (Will Ferrell) stood up at a crowded party and yelled " *WE'RE GOIN' STREAKING!".* Personally, that's on my top five 'most inspirational movie scenes of all time' list. Regardless, whatever transformation this team experienced after that game, it sparked an 8 game conference win streak (going into this past weekend) fractured only by a tough out of conference loss to West Virginia. The win streak featured two back to back wins over ranked opponents -- Purdue and Wisconsin respectively.

During this stretch, Ohio State has averaged scoring over 70 points a game, while holding their opponents to 59. The team chemistry has been fantastic with the offense operating efficiently and the defense moving actively in their assignments (whether they're playing zone or man to man). Evan Turner has not only emerged as the front runner for Big Ten Player of the Year, he has also forced himself into the National Player of the Year conversation as well.

Is it "bust *out* the Champaign" or "bust *up* the Champaing"? The Buckeyes can never tell the difference.

The streak vaulted Ohio State to a three way tie for first place in the Big Ten standings with Michigan State and Illinois (and Purdue trailing half a game behind). This past Sunday's match up with Illinois was billed as a marquee game. Apparently, Ohio State was the only team that received the message. The Buckeyes blew the doors off of Assembly Hall early with pin-point shooting and stingy defense. Ohio State pulled to a 16 point lead by half time and never let the Fighting Illini get close enough to manage a comeback in the second half.

The stat of the game goes to Mr. John Diebler, Ohio State's starting shooting guard. He gave us a very Diebler-esque line with 11 field goal attempts (all coming from behind the 3-point line), making six of them for 18 total points.

The highlight of the afternoon belongs to David Lighty. After receiving an outlet pass from Evan Turner, Lighty rushed to the basket and slammed home a "thunderous reverse dunk". If you watch the YouTube video, it happens at the six second mark. It was a dunk that I personally tried to recreate on my friends 7 foot basketball hoop. It was a humbling affair that found me getting blocked by the rim. It resulted in a mild abdominal tear for yours truly and a humiliating video that my friends also put on YouTube. It took me 3 hours to locate and delete that video. They had named it "The worst display of athleticism, EVER!!!".

Player of the game honors go to Evan Turner for his all around performance -- 16 points, 11 rebounds and 8 assists. That boy is *good*.

All of this culminated to Illinois' worse loss on their home court in decades.

Where we are and where we're headed...

That brings us to the present. Currently, the Buckeyes are ranked 9th in the AP Poll and are a half game behind Michigan State for the league lead. The Buckeyes take the court tonight (in Columbus) against 4th ranked Purdue in a *huge* battle with implications that are just as big. Tonight's game will be part two of the series as Ohio State defeated the Boilermakers 70-66 in West Lafayette earlier this season. The Buckeyes had to overcome a 13 point halftime deficit that was built largely because of Robbie Hummel's career night. In the first 20 minutes of action, Purdue's Hummel hit 8... 8 maddening three pointers on his way to 29 first half points. In a classic display of "anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better", Evan Turner refused to be out-gunned and put up 23 second half points in leading Ohio State to the 4 point victory.

Look for Purdue to try and exact their revenge tonight in Value City Arena. The winner of this game will be one step closer to taking the regular season conference title, so all of us should expect a full out battle.

Y'all come back now, ya hear?

Check back this Friday for a full review of the Purdue game and a detailed preview of this Sunday's match up against Michigan State!