The No. 3 Ohio State Buckeyes (2-0) struggled early, surged late and then finally held on to secure an 81-74 victory over the seventh ranked Florida Gators (1-1) Tuesday night in Columbus.

William Buford led the Buckeyes by scoring 21 points to go along with six rebounds, three assists and zero turnovers. Jared Sullinger had 16 points, Deshaun Thomas scored 15 and Aaron Craft added 13 points and seven assists for an Ohio State team that has now beaten Florida in back-to-back years.

When the Gators came out and scorched the nets to start the first half, victory didn't look so certain for the Buckeyes. Florida started the game connecting on five of their first nine 3-pointers, which helped them build a 17-13 lead through nine minutes of play. What was a rowdy pregame crowd for Ohio State had been hushed by the deadly perimeter shooting Florida is capable of.

"Florida stung us early," Ohio State coach Thad Matta said. "As young as we are, we were constantly making adjustments coming out of timeouts."

Florida had all the momentum and a five point lead with just under six minutes to play in the half when things turned around for Ohio State. The Buckeyes changed their pace defensively, adjusting nicely to the method Florida uses to run their pick and rolls. Ohio State closed out the first half on a 13-5 run and began the second half with a 7-2 spurt that sent the home crowd into a frenzy.

When asked about what he thought changed the game, Florida coach Billy Donovan had a quick answer, “Aaron Craft.” He later elaborated, “Clearly he dominated the game from start to finish. He was the whole key to me in the game... He really did it defensively -- I mean he physically beat up our guards [without fouling]. He physically man-handled our guards, and he did it against everybody we tried to throw at him.”

Craft did play a spectacular game on both ends of the court. The sophomore guard led the way for a Buckeyes defense that caused 16 turnovers against an efficient Florida offense. The Gators were hitting their shots behind the arch (11-22), but from inside the 3-point line, Florida shot just 38% from the field. The Ohio State coaches told their players it was going to take a strong defensive performance to pull off a win, and that’s exactly what the Buckeyes delivered.

“We knew they were going to come in and try to pressure us, try to get it up-tempo to get us out of our game,” Craft said. “We just did a great job as a team adjusting to the run that they made at the beginning, with the open three’s they were making. It seemed like it was going to be a long night, but we did a good job adjusting.”

The Buckeyes had built a comfortable 15 point lead midway through the second half, fueled by the surprising contributions off the bench from Evan Ravenel. The Boston College transfer provided a spark when Sullinger picked up his third foul by scoring six straight points for the Buckeyes while also playing great defense on the other end.

As coach Matta looks to solidify his rotation, Ravenel is making a case for some serious playing time backing up Sullinger and Thomas. “I feel like I bring intensity off the bench. I play hard and try to play good defense and to be a good backup to Jared and Deshaun.”

Who’s Next?

The Buckeyes host the Jackson State Tigers at Value City Arena this Friday. The game will be carried by the Big Ten Network and will tip off at 9:00 EST.

(Photo credit - Jim Davidson - TheOzone.net)

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