It took a little while for the Ohio State Buckeyes (6-0) to shake off the rust, or perhaps the lingering effects of Thanksgiving dinner, to beat a pesky Valparaiso team Friday night. After struggling early, the Buckeyes used a second half surge to rush past the Crusaders for an 80-47 victory.

William Buford led all scorers with 25 points while Jared Sullinger stuffed the stat sheet with 14 points, 13 rebounds, five assists, four steals and one block. Aaron Craft was two assists away from a double-double after putting up 15 points and Deshaun Thomas added 12.

Despite the impressive stats and the 33 point victory, the Buckeyes didn't feel like they played their best basketball. "Our guys weren't making shots, but we got some good looks," Ohio State coach Thad Matta said. "Valparaiso is a good basketball team. We made some mistakes defensively, and they made us pay."

The first half wasn't a work of art for Ohio State. The Buckeyes started sluggishly against Valparaiso, just as they have against everyone they've played this season (aside from VMI). After connecting on five of their first 10 shots, Ohio State went cold from the field and missed nine of their next 11. During that stretch, Valparaiso was able to make up for a few early turnovers with the strong play of Jay Harris, who scored 10 points in as many minutes against the Buckeyes. Things looked to be turning around for Ohio State as they put together a 12-2 run, but the Crusaders responded with a 10-3 run of their own to close the half. The two teams went into the locker room with the Buckeyes leading 33-29.

"They were getting all the loose balls, offensive rebounds and second chance points," Aaron

Craft said when talking about the first half. “You can’t allow that against a good team like Valparaiso. We weren’t communicating enough on defense and that’s a sign we weren’t ready to play.”

Ohio State only had one turnover in the first half, and with taking care of the ball like that, a team like the Buckeyes would usually come away with more than 33 points. But shooting 12/32 from the field (38%), the Buckeyes weren’t able to build a big lead against the Crusaders.

It was a completely different game in the second half. Ohio State came out and blasted Valpo, connecting on their first eight shots from the field. Through five minutes, the Buckeyes put together an 18-2 run that pushed a modest 4 point halftime lead into a 51-31 advantage for Ohio State. The Buckeyes didn’t let up, especially on the defensive end. Valparaiso committed five turnovers in the first five minutes of the second half and missed seven of their first eight shots.

According to Aaron Craft, that’s where the real difference was made. “Defense. We came out [in the second half] knowing what we needed to do. I thought we did a good job on their big guys in the first half, but their guards were making shots. We knew we had to guard them better and we did.”

It wasn’t all defense though. Behind Buford’s strong performance, the Buckeyes were able to put up 47 points in the second half against a good Valparaiso team. Buford scored 17 of his 25 points in the final 20 minutes, and the only senior on the team is really starting to find his groove offensively. “I thought he was good the last couple games,” Matta said. “William [Buford] has been efficient and that’s something we’ve been on him about – playing efficiently on offense.”

With the victory, Ohio State can finally look forward to the marquee game of the non-conference schedule, and maybe the season, when the Duke Blue Devils come to town on Tuesday Night. The two teams will meet as part of the Big Ten / ACC challenge in a matchup that Sullinger is excited about, “It’s going to be fun. Duke is a great basketball team, obviously. They just won Maui [Invitational] for the fifth time. You’re going to see two great teams and it’s going to be a great fight.”

With No. 4 UConn falling to unranked UCF on Friday night, the Ohio State - Duke game will likely feature two top-five teams. The Blue Devils are expected to jump a spot (or possibly two) after their strong showing in Hawaii, where they beat No. 15 Michigan and No. 14 Kansas on their way to winning the Maui Invitational.

The game against Duke will tip off at 9:30 PM EST on Tuesday, November 29 (ESPN).

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