The Buckeyes kicked off their 2012 tournament run with a sloppy 78-59 victory over the Loyola (MD) Greyhounds in Pittsburgh yesterday. Deshaun Thomas shined, scoring a career-high 31 points to go along with a game-high 12 rebounds, but the team committed 18 turnovers and went through long stretches of inefficiency on offense.

Ohio State coach Thad Matta was just happy to win, "Obviously this tournament is about advancing, and that's what we did tonight," Matta said. "I don't think we played at the level we need to. Our guys know that. Give Loyola a ton of credit for that. They came at us."

Still, the Greyhounds were severely undersized and had little chance of an upset with Jared Sullinger (12 points, 11 rebounds) and Thomas dominating the glass. The Buckeyes outrebounded Loyola 49-24 and collected 16 of those from the offensive glass -- which turned into 15 second chance points for Ohio State. The Buckeyes were also able to get to the line early and often, which helped overcome some early shooting struggles. But the star of the game was Thomas, who hit 13 of his 22 shots from a wide variety of ranges.

"Deshaun was excellent on the boards and also scoring the basketball. He pretty much carried this team," Sullinger said. “I don't think we would have won it without him."

Thomas made as many field goals (13) as the rest of the team combined with Sullinger and Buford struggling through large parts of the game. Sullinger came out hot and hit two of his first three shots, but he finished the game missing nine of his final 11. Buford came out of the gates and missed four straight before hitting a 3-pointer late in the first, and if it weren’t for two late 3-pointers in the closing minutes of the game, his 17 point finish would have been 11 off 3-9

shooting.

The Buckeyes will move on to play Gonzaga on Saturday, a team that looked impressive while dismantling West Virginia in a 77-54 rout Thursday evening. Matta knows his team will need to bring a better effort to move on to a third straight sweet 16, "We got to get ourselves ready to go," Matta said. "Obviously with what Gonzaga did tonight, we got another great challenge on Saturday."

The Buckeyes started the game sluggishly, committing two turnovers while missing two shots and a free throw in the first five possessions of the game. Loyola used Ohio State's brief funk to build a 5-1 lead, but that was short lived as Sullinger brought the Buckeyes back by scoring six straight points.

The pace of the game was leaning more toward the up-tempo style Loyola likes to play and Ohio State looked out of its element early. But as the game wore on, Ohio State's size advantage became a huge factor as the Buckeyes shot 19 free throws through 20 minutes (making 15 of them them). Deshaun Thomas got going and scored 14 first half points while Sullinger chipped in 12. Ohio State's dominance in the paint and efficiency at the line helped them overcome shooting 12-35 from the field (34% in the first half). The Buckeyes had a 25-16 edge in rebounding (with 12 offensive boards) and took a 42-31 lead into the locker room at halftime.

The second half was a repetitive cycle -- the Buckeyes would build a huge lead and then let up a bit. Loyola would fight back and cut the deficit to around 10 or 12 points before Ohio State would flex its muscle again. Thomas was spectacular in the second half, going on a stretch where he scored 13 straight points for the Buckeyes. The team shot the ball better as well, connecting on 61% of their shots from the field in the second. Ohio State had built a 70-50 lead in the closing minutes when Matta pulled his starters, but Loyola put together a quick 9-0 run that forced Matta to reinsert Thomas, Buford and Sullinger. The three starters helped Ohio State close the game out with eight unanswered points as the Buckeyes went on to win 78-59.

"We made our runs and then we relaxed," Matta said after the game. "We'd make our runs again, then we would relax."

The Buckeyes have a quick turnaround as they're set to play the Gonzaga Bulldogs Saturday afternoon. The game will tip off around 2:50 and will be televised by CBS.

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