

12/19/2011: State of the Big Ten, Volume 47 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

No. 2 Ohio State managed to hold off South Carolina for a 74-66 win last weekend, but it came at a small price.

Sophomore forward Jared Sullinger, who is probably the best player in the entire Big Ten, left the game with a bone bruise in his foot. This injury took place in just his second game back for the Buckeyes after back spasms prevented from playing in a pair of games earlier this month.

Even though this foot injury might be nothing more than a bruise, Ohio State head coach Thad Matta would be wise to keep Sullinger on the bench for the Buckeyes' remaining two non-conference games this week.

Ohio State plays at home on Dec. 20 against Lamar and then makes the bus trip into downtown Columbus on Dec. 22 to face Miami (Ohio) inside Nationwide Arena. These are two games the Buckeyes can with minus Sullinger's services, so letting him rest until their Big Ten opener next week against Northwestern would probably be of benefit to both him and the team in the long run.

As good as the conference is right now (currently half of the Big Ten is ranked in the AP top 25), Ohio State is still its

top team, and for good reason. The Buckeyes remain the one Big Ten team that has the most legitimate, realistic chance of playing in the Final Four this season, and perhaps even the national championship game. That's how loaded they are.

Sullinger attempted to return from his back spasms for Ohio State's game at Kansas back on Dec. 10, a game the Buckeyes ended up losing with him on the bench. Without his presence grabbing the attention of every Jayhawk player who stepped on the court, Ohio State just didn't look the same, especially at the offensive end.

This is also why the Buckeyes remained second in the rankings last week even with the 11-point loss at Allen Fieldhouse. Sullinger and Ohio State have enough respect from college basketball pundits across the country that they didn't fall in the rankings after that game.

Matta knows this, which is why the move to not play Sullinger against Kansas, yet let him come off the bench last week for a game against South Carolina-Upstate remains befuddling.

Now while the Buckeyes are still head and shoulders above the rest of the conference, the 18-game Big Ten stretch will remain a grind like it usually is. That's why having a 100 percent Jared Sullinger by the time Northwestern pays that visit to Value City Arena is important.

Ohio State will need him then, and in March for the NCAA tournament. Again, as demonstrated nine days ago in Lawrence, Kan., this Buckeye team without Sullinger is going to struggle against good teams like Kansas, especially on the road. Come tourney time, the competition only gets tougher with each game.

Matta ought to be fortunate that a bone bruise is all that happened to Sullinger last weekend in South Carolina. Now he has an opportunity to do what he should have decided to do last week after falling at Kansas.

Sullinger doesn't need to prove his productivity against Lamar or Miami (Ohio). That's why resting him these next two games would serve in both his best interests, and the best interests of Ohio State going into next week and beyond.