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BTO Exclusive: Last Man Standing

KAHN: Due to early departures for the NBA, Ohio State's David Lighty is the only Buckeye remaining from one of the greatest recruiting classes in history.

By ANDREW KAHN

New York —Last season was supposed to be David Lighty's breakout year. He was the team leader, an upperclassman setting the tone for a young Ohio State squad. Lighty was doing just that, including tying a career high with 21 points against Jacksonville to improve Ohio State's record to 7-0. Unfortunately for Lighty and the Buckeyes, it would be his last game of the season, as he suffered a broken bone in his foot.

Lighty is back in action for the No. 15 Buckeyes as a junior after receiving a medical redshirt.

He scored 11 points and pulled down four rebounds in Thursday's 77-73 loss to No. 6 North Carolina in the semifinals of the 2K Sports Classic at Madison Square Garden. Friday's consolation game saw Lighty score 11 points to go with six rebounds while playing all 40 minutes in the Buckeyes' 76-70 victory over No. 13 California.

"I'm just happy to be back," Lighty said on Thursday. "Last year I was sitting on the bench watching. I try to lead by example; being out on the court allows me to do that."

From an outsider's perspective, it's been somewhat of an unfulfilling college career thus far for Lighty. The 6'5 guard/forward from Columbus was part of the "Thad Five," Ohio State's 2006 recruiting class that was as good as any in the country. Those freshmen took the Buckeyes all the way to the national championship game.

The biggest stars of that team—Greg Oden, Mike Conley Jr., and Daequan Cook, all freshmen—bolted for the NBA after the title run. Othello Hunter stuck around for one more year but then he, too, entered the draft. By the time practice began for the 2008-09 season, only one player from that magnificent squad was still in Columbus: Lighty.

Is it weird for him to look around and see he's the only guy left from that team? "A little bit," Lighty said. "I still keep in contact with them. It's college basketball, that's life—you've got to deal with it."



0 Lighty didn't exactly make a splash in his rookie season. When there are three soon-to-be first-round draft picks (two taken in the top four) on the court, who's going to notice the guy averaging less than four points a game?

Lighty's sophomore year, however, more people had to take notice. He was named captain, started every game (as opposed to just seven the year before), and his minutes doubled, from 16 a game to 32. His production went up in about every important statistical category, as he averaged nine points and nearly four rebounds per contest.

Still, Lighty wasn't the Buckeyes' leader. "It was [senior Jamar Butler's] team," Lighty said. "I was still learning the system, learning how to be a leader."

Ohio State, as expected, was not nearly the team it had been the previous year. The season did end in a championship, though, albeit in the NIT.

But with star sophomore Evan Turner, current NBA center BJ Mullens, and Lighty, Ohio State had bigger expectations heading into last season. Then Lighty got hurt. The Buckeyes still won 22 games and got back to the NCAA Tournament, but lost in the opening round to Siena. One would think Ohio State would've gone farther with a healthy Lighty.

"Having him come back this year is just tremendous," Turner, now a junior, said. "He's a great leader and he always competes."

He competes especially hard on the defensive end, where he can guard opposing perimeter players as well as big men. Against an extremely tall North Carolina team, he spent time guarding 6'10" Ed Davis, who's got five inches on Lighty.

"I try to work my tail off on defense," Lighty said. "I'm up for the challenge, whoever it is. One through five, I'll go out there and check them."

In one particular sequence against Carolina, Lighty knocked down a 3-pointer, then raced across the court to get a steal and a lay-up to cut the Carolina lead to eight and ignite the run that saw Ohio State get within two. Ohio State head coach Thad Matta referred to him as a "one-man press" on that particular play. It's no coincidence that Lighty stepped up late in the game.

"I've been around the longest, been to the Final Four, been to the championship," Lighty said. "I've seen a lot of things in those situations so I'm just trying to tell the younger guys how to handle themselves...and [to] try not to get rattled when things go wrong."

On that championship team he mentions, Lighty was somewhat of an afterthought; then came the failure to get an NCAA Tournament bid and the injury. Now, Lighty has the chance to establish a name for himself — leading a team ranked No. 15 and expected to contend for a Big Ten title.

"He's a glue guy," Matta said. "He's a guy that's been through a lot of the wars. We need David to play well for us to be a good basketball team, no question about it."

The veteran leader of this team is determined to make the most of this season. "People might have forgot about me last year, from me not playing," Lighty said. "I'm back this year to come out and show what I have to offer."

As his well-rounded game has shown, that's a little bit of everything.

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