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Buckeyes beaming at Penn's decision

By Rusty Miller
The Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Scoonie Penn wasn't sure where he would go in the NBA draft, so he decided to stay at Ohio State for three sure things: a good team, good times and a degree.

"I basically feel like if I was to make the decision to go out, I think I could make it" in the NBA, Penn said Tuesday, announcing he'd be back with the Buckeyes for his senior season. "I'm confident enough that, yes, I can play. But I don't have to worry about that. My main focus is working hard in the offseason and worrying about this team."

Penn, the Big Ten's co-player of the year, had been considering his options since Ohio State's surprising trip to the Final Four.

The third-team All-American said he kept his eyes and his mind open.

"All you want to focus on is your dream, your goal of becoming a professional athlete," he said. "It was hard to see anything else because that's all I wanted. I still want it. But I realize there's other things in life besides becoming a professional athlete."

Penn said he didn't know how high he might have gone in the draft because it was difficult to factor in the underclassmen who almost daily add their names to the list of seniors available.

Ohio State head coach Jim O'Brien was vacationing in Florida, but associate head coach Rick Boyages said there was a glut of quality point guards in the draft.

"He's somewhere in the pack," Boyages said. "The obvious names that come to mind besides Scoonie are Andre Miller at Utah, Steve Francis at Maryland, Jason Terry at Arizona, William Avery at Duke. ... There are probably eight or 10 point guards and Scoonie's right in there in the top five or so."

The squat, 5-foot-10 shooting guard from Salem, Mass., became a crowd favorite of Ohio State's fans, who had been beaten down by five consecutive losing seasons. Before last season even began, Penn brashly predicted the Buckeyes would make it to the

NCAA tournament — despite going 8-22 overall and 1-15 in the Big Ten while Penn sat out a transfer year from Boston College.

But with Penn averaging 16.9 points, 4.3 assists, 2 steals and 4 rebounds a game, Ohio State posted one of the biggest turnarounds in NCAA history. The Buckeyes finished 27-9, were second in the Big Ten at 12-4 and were the surprise team of the NCAA tournament before losing to eventual champion Connecticut 64-58 in the national semifinals.

Songs about Penn were played on local radio stations, and kids chanted his name and begged for autographs after games. His uniform No. 12 became so popular that someone stole it out of the team's dressing room shortly before the start of the UConn game.

"When you get to a situation like that, I know a lot of players say this might be the best time to leave, while your name's out there and you're on top," Penn said.

But Ohio State returns much of last year's team, in addition to several top prospects including 7-foot-3 junior-college standout Aleksandar Radojevic.

Penn said he wasn't worried about a disappointing season.

"In a way, I do feel it was a Cinderella season. We had a terrific run and personally I had a great year," he said. "But I feel with the type of team we have coming back and the same coaching staff, I feel we can only get better."

In addition to another run at the NCAA tournament — Penn has never missed one in two years at BC and one season at Ohio State — he also said he was on schedule to graduate in March.

"One of the most important things to my family would be to see me walk across that stage and receive my degree," he said. "That's all I need to know."

Penn, who would become the first member of his family to graduate from college, said he told O'Brien of his decision last week.

"The thing he said to me was, 'Are you sure this is what you want?' I said, 'Yes, it's my decision. I've been thinking about it and this is exactly what I want,'" Penn said.

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