

New Defensive Staff Emphasizes Technique, Playing Fast



Ryan Day brought in co-defensive coordinators Greg Mattison and Jeff Hafley because he thought his players would perform best under their tutelage.

Despite being nearly 30 years apart in age, Mattison and Hafley are quite similar in terms of defensive philosophy. Both preach fundamentals and technique as a cornerstone, while emphasizing the importance of putting one's best players in the best positions to make plays.

"I believe in really sound defensive football that you can do — whether you're in the NFL, whether you're wherever coaching," Mattison said. "I think that means you've got to be able to play an eight-man front at times, you've got to be able to play man at times, you've got to be able to play zone and you've got to be able to pressure."

In the past, Ohio State aligned in strictly man coverage, and the team's reasoning behind it was "because that's what we do." Those days are in the rearview, as the new staff understands the importance of using the best calls to fit the personnel.

"All of those (schemes) depend, really, on the type of players you have," Mattison said. "It's never been schemes that have won. It's what you teach the players to run and then who's running them. And I've been really, really impressed with our players. They are so willing to do whatever you're asking them to do and they're so into trying to be the best they can be."

The players have responded well to the philosophical change. Junior defensive end Chase Young is particularly excited that the coaches are molding the defense to fit the strengths of the team.

"I feel real good," Young said. "We have new coaches and they are saying all good things, they're giving us all great schemes. And I think we fell in love with the scheme, and then it helps us fall in love with the coaches, because they made the scheme around the talent that we have on the team."

In addition to Young, fellow returning starter, senior safety Jordan Fuller likes the simplification of the schemes. Fuller, a two-year starter, sat out during spring camp, but still attended meetings and practices.

"I think the emphasis when this coaching staff came in was to keep everything simple and let us go play," Fuller said. "And they've done a great job of doing that so far."

Fuller likened the Buckeyes' new style of play with less responsibilities to his time at Old Tappan (N.J.), where he was the New Jersey Gatorade Player of the Year.

"I think that's where the confidence comes from," Fuller said of playing faster. "It kind of feels like, I mean, high school you don't have too many responsibilities, so you can just go out and play. And it's a little similar feeling to that, so it's cool."

The Scarlet and Gray defense worked hard throughout the spring to adjust to a new defensive staff with new schemes and transitioning personnel.

Young liked the way his teammates were flying to the football, playing visibly faster than in the past. He especially liked what he saw from the Buckeyes' defensive backs.

"I think it went pretty good," Young said of spring camp. "Definitely for me, it was just refining my technique every practice just working on technique. I think for the whole defense, especially talking about the DBs, we definitely got a lot more confidence. I think we had a good spring, we tried to dominate the offense as many times as we could, and I think we did pretty good."

While Fuller, Young and their teammates are excited for the upcoming season and chomping at the bit to hit somebody in an opposite-color uniform, the philosophical shift on defense is an ongoing process.

With the season still more than four months away, Hafley did not want to single any players out when asked who had been standing out to him. Instead, he focused on the defense as a whole and getting back to the basics.

"The best thing I see is guys are getting better every day," Hafley said. "We just keep talking about technique, technique, technique. And the great part about these guys is they're just buying into everything we tell them. They are trying it, they are coming out, they're asking questions. They know, they're coaching each other."

"So just the improvement in the overall technique, because that's what spring's about. Spring's about creating culture, playing with great energy and getting better at fundamentals and technique, which ultimately are going to win and lose the games. So that's what I think are the biggest strides we need to make and our biggest improvements are coming."

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