

B1G Championship Game Teleconference: Northwestern's Pat Fitzgerald Previews 'Huge Challenge' Against Ohio State



Right after Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer spoke Sunday on the Big Ten Championship Game coaches teleconference, Northwestern head coach Pat Fitzgerald chimed in and previewed the upcoming conference clash pitting the No. 10 Buckeyes (11-1, 8-1) against the No. 19 Wildcats (8-4, 8-1).

Having had two weeks to study OSU after Northwestern clinched the West Division with its 14-10 win at Iowa on Nov. 10, what did Fitzgerald think of the East Division winner after its Saturday result, a 62-39 rout of Michigan?

With the Wildcats set to take the field Saturday at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, an 8 p.m. kickoff on FOX, Fitzgerald provided an honest and thorough assessment of the Buckeyes.

Pat Fitzgerald

- In the past, Northwestern has given Ohio State fights, most recently the 2016 season when the Buckeyes outlasted the Wildcats by a 24-20 edge at Ohio Stadium. Asked about the recent competition, Fitzgerald was blunt.
 - "We lost, right?" Fitzgerald said. "Doesn't matter if it's close or not. We work our tails off to find a way to win and the first thing we did, like every game, we came back and looked at things whether it was schematic issues or did we have the wrong personnel in or wrong checks. Did we execute the game plan, how do we play fundamentally — you look at all those things and you do that after every game. Obviously, we're a different squad this year and so are they. They're one of the best teams in the country for a reason. They're incredibly well-coached and incredibly talented."
- On defense, Northwestern's depth in the secondary has taken a hit down the stretch, highlighted by star senior cornerback Montre Hartage's injury. With sophomore quarterback Dwayne Haskins

and Ohio State's offense up next, Fitzgerald addressed the sense of urgency to get healthy.

- "Early reports, I hope to get everybody back that we had out," Fitzgerald said. "But we'll see how the week unfolds. ... Every skill guy can score just by catching a hitch or every guy in the backfield just has to make one guy miss and he can take it to the house. Dwayne is so efficient — almost throwing for 70 percent, (42) touchdowns, seven interceptions. That ratio is just absolutely incredible. So yeah, we're going to have our hands full. There's no doubt about that."
- Up against Ohio State's Urban Meyer for the latest occasion, the first in the Big Ten Championship Game, Fitzgerald recalled how the two head coaches have built their relationship over the years as they crossed paths through the Big Ten and the American Football Coaches Association.
 - "Coach and I got to know each other quite well, obviously, as he came into the league," Fitzgerald said. "It coincided with me becoming AFCA, American Football Coaches Association, trustee. So I represent the coaches on our national board and Coach Meyer is very involved and very engaged in trying to positively impact our game, the student-athlete experience and the Big Ten Conference. I appreciate and I applaud him for his candor, his willingness. I think he's incredibly well thought out and the way he articulates his feelings. I think he understands, as coaches, we can make a big difference — not just in our own programs, but in the conference and the student-athlete experience in college football."
- With the West Division clinched for the past two weeks, Fitzgerald rotated film study between Ohio State and Michigan on top of game preparation for Northwestern prior to matchups against Minnesota and Illinois. Asked about his biggest concern playing the Buckeyes, he was blunt and specific.
 - "Everything," Fitzgerald said with a laugh. "They're massive up front on the offensive line. Like I said, the skill positions on offense, everybody's a guy that can score by catching a hitch or a slant. (Sophomore running back J.K.) Dobbins and (junior running back Mike) Weber can take it to the house by missing a tackle. Dwayne Haskins is efficient and explosive of a quarterback as we've seen. The tight ends jump out to me, too. I've been really impressed with (sophomore Luke) Farrell and (junior Rashod) Berry. They've been very impressive on video. On defense, this front is big. They're physical, they're athletic — (sophomore defensive end Chase) Young and (junior defensive tackle Robert) Landers, (junior defensive tackle Dre'Mont) Jones, (junior defensive end Jonathon) Cooper. And then they roll their second wave through. Really dynamic, explosive. The linebacking core, we knew (sophomore) Tuf (Borland) in recruiting and a local kid here in Chicago land. He's a heck of a football player. Got to know (sophomore) Pete Werner also in recruiting. (Junior Malik) Harrison, to me, is really athletic. They do some fun stuff. I love what (defensive coordinator Greg) Schiano's doing schematically. The back end's got all-NFL talent. It's elite-level guys. It's a younger group than maybe we saw a couple of years ago. They're really long, they're really athletic and they obviously are very, very talented."
- Watching what Ohio State's offense did to Michigan's defense, Fitzgerald gave credit to offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach Ryan Day and Meyer's staff for setting up the Buckeyes' athletes accordingly in space and ultimately out-scheming the Wolverines' defensive coaches.
 - "I'm not going to lie, this is an incredibly talented football team and Coach Day did a phenomenal job and the offensive formation variations, running different mesh concepts and taking advantage of Michigan's aggressive press man. Dwayne made some big-time throws. It looked like wheel routes, we call them crescent routes. They got the (running)

backs matched up in favorable 1-on-1 matchups and the line protected really, really well against that defensive front of Michigan. It was really impressive to watch."

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