

CFB Coaches Critical Of Buckeyes Defense, Offensive Line, Complimentary of Skill Players In Athletic Article



Ohio State is perceived by opposing coaches as a team with multiple question marks on defense and offensive line while having a talented offense with pro-ready skill players, according to an article published by The Athletic on Tuesday.

In the article published jointly by Nicole Auerbach, David Ubben and Justin Williams, the reporters asked eight coaches whose teams have faced both Ohio State and Penn State this season about the strengths and weaknesses of the two programs — with each of them having differing opinions on the matter, particularly when it comes to the Buckeyes.

Opposing coaches had a mix of positive and negative things to say about Ohio State's defense — which currently ranks third in the nation in fewest points allowed with 9.7. According to one assistant who played Ohio State earlier this season, defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' unit lacks the talent needed to dominate games.

"Defensively, it's not like they are stacked with dudes," the assistant said. "It's just not the type of Ohio State defense where you throw on the film and think, 'F—, how are we gonna block these guys?'"

This is a sentiment that was shared by many of the interviewed coaches. According to the article, nearly every coach that spoke with The Athletic listed Ohio State's secondary as the biggest liability on the team, with one coordinator saying that they fall short of the standard set by the unit in years past.

"The secondary as a whole probably is not what people are used to seeing," the coordinator said. "They're going to play a ton of man and expect the guys up front to get home and protect the guys on the back end, but when they don't, I think that's where they're vulnerable. I wasn't blown away by the back end."

"Their safeties and corners are actually average, maybe even below average," one assistant said. "I know that's a crazy thing to say about Ohio State, but I think the corners are overrated and the safeties are average."

While the interviewed coaches had negative things to say about Ohio State's secondary, with one specifically listing cornerback Davison Igbinosun as a liability when not in press coverage, they did

think positively of coach Larry Johnson's defensive line. One assistant lauded the play of defensive ends J.T. Tuimoloau and Jack Sawyer, saying they have wreaked havoc on opposing lines so far this season. Through six games, the tandem has a combined 4.5 sacks, two quarterback hurries and six tackles for loss.

"The two D-linemen were frickin' unbelievable," said a coordinator who faced Ohio State. "It was almost like having two receivers out there at D-lineman. It looked like they were working releases out there on O-linemen...Those are two top-tier guys who will be playing on Sundays. I knew Sawyer was a good player but wasn't expecting him to be as explosive as the other one."

The interviewed coaches also had mixed reviews about Ohio State's offense, which currently ranks 20th in the nation at 36.0 points per game. While they shared a range of opinions about first-year starter Kyle McCord, with one saying he is "deceptively accurate," they were especially complimentary of Ohio State's pass catchers, which boasts talents of future first round NFL draft picks Marvin Harrison Jr. and Emeka Egbuka, along with potential pros Julian Fleming, tight end Cade Stover and others.

"They've got the best receiver room in college football," an assistant said. "It's comparable to an NFL receiver room. All three of their starters will play on Sunday."

"(People) talk about (Stover) as a pass catcher, but he's a dirty work guy in the run game," the assistant said. "He's physical, he tries to throw his face in the fan when he's blocking. He's kind of the unsung hero for them in the run game."

Like many others, the coaches also were critical of Ohio State's new-look offensive line, which has faced heavy scrutiny so far this season for their inconsistent play, where they have often missed assignments and committed costly penalties. One assistant coach particularly saw left tackle Josh Simmons and right tackle Josh Fryar as liabilities, both of which are first-year starters.

"We felt like we could attack the edges against those guys, especially since the guards were both returning starters," the assistant said. "Attacking the edges against them was definitely in our game plan."

"I wasn't impressed with the right tackle Fryar," another assistant said. "When we played them, I thought he was just okay."

While each coach shared many criticisms regarding head coach Ryan Day's 2023 team, some did push back on former Notre Dame head coach Lou Holtz' scathing remarks about the program's lack of physicality, with many of them saying the weaknesses lie more on the personnel rather than the mentality and identity of the team.

"No. No. They're not soft," one assistant said. "I can't believe (Lou Holtz) said that," said one assistant.

"I don't think they're soft," another assistant said. "Just inexperienced, maybe not as much star power as they usually have. But I bet they have a lot of young guys who will end up being pretty good but are still finding their way."