

Coaches Think C.J. Stroud Is Just Scratching The Surface



Utah's Kyle Whittingham called him the best quarterback in college football. The Heisman voters declared him worthy of a spot in New York. His teammates and coaches have spent the season praising his preparation and maturity, despite his status as one of college football's youngest stars – a redshirt freshman taking the reigns of one of the nation's most powerful offenses from another former Heisman contender and rarely missing a step in the process.

And yet, just about every Ohio State coach and player thinks that C.J. Stroud is only going to get better, especially after his record-setting performance against Utah in the Rose Bowl, which offered up one of the nation's best pass defenses but was routinely gashed by the young signal-caller.

"He did it in a game where we needed it," offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson said. "That's the No. 1 defense in the Pac-12. They were down some players, but it's one thing to have a big game. It's another to do it on this stage, in this arena, on New Year's Day, with the nation watching. It's about as big as it gets. The great players do this in big games."

That come-from-behind win against the Utes, which saw Stroud launch six touchdown passes and rack up a team-record 573 yards, was not played in a vacuum, either. The Buckeyes entered the Rose Bowl off of a challenging and embarrassing rivalry game loss, enshrouded by questions of team toughness. Stroud fought through that adversity as the team's leader to help deliver the Rose Bowl victory.

"It was a tough month for everybody, for the entire team, for him, for me, the whole group, but (C.J.) had an edge about him," head coach Ryan Day said. "That's what makes a good quarterback, it's when you can get through adversity, have scars on you, and he made up his mind he wasn't going to lose that game."

For the young quarterback, the victory is just another up, on what he and Day have so often called the rollercoaster of the position. But, the value of gaining experience in winning that kind of game isn't lost on Stroud – especially after he dealt with several like in during the regular season.

"Every game, you always have ups and downs," Stroud said. "We opened up the season like that. Took a hard loss in that second game. These are all learning experiences. Then we lose again, and we have a tough game in Nebraska. It's all a learning experience. When you have games like that under your belt, you know how to kind of finish those games off in a sense. You know not to panic, how to stay calm, and

I think that's what we did."

Of course, there's more to quarterback play than that, and as he enters an offseason that will be filled with Heisman hype and of raised expectations, keeping his feet on the ground, as he did against the Utes, will be as critical as anything else for Stroud.

"Hopefully (this game) just shows him that if he stays grounded, trusts his coaches, his schemes and his teammates, the sky is the limit," Wilson said. "I told him yesterday, 'We're the No. 1 offense in the country, and everyone complains about the line, and me and everybody.' We're No. 3 in the country in yards per rush. You guys never talk about that. No. 1 in passing, No. 1 in scoring. But stats are for assistant coaches and losers. The only stat that counts is that you need to win the game, you battle for 60 minutes and you win the game. And we battled through the muck early, had a couple of glitches, but we got hot and made the plays we needed to make to win the game."