

Column: Spring Showed Why Defense Should Be Better



Ohio State's struggles on the defensive side of the football against Michigan and Georgia to close last year have been broken down, written about, discussed and then written about again in the past three months and change.

It's been since 2019, when top five draft picks Chase Young and Jeff Okudah anchored things, that an OSU defense has kept a championship aura about it throughout the entire season.

In 2020 inconsistencies came to a head in the National Championship Game against an elite offensive unit in Alabama, who blew the Buckeyes out by a 52-24 margin.

In 2021 OSU lacked answers against Oregon on defense in a 35-28 loss that led to the demotion of then-defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs, and the defense got beat down by Michigan later that year. Utah put up 45 points in the Rose Bowl but Ohio State got the win thanks to great offensive performances.

Then came 2022, a statistical improvement in the first year of defensive coordinator Jim Knowles, but those lapses against the Wolverines and Bulldogs left a sour taste in the mouths of Buckeye fans.

What the defense needs is consistency. It looked strong in much of the first half against Michigan, but long touchdowns opened the floodgates for OSU's first home loss in the rivalry since 2000. The Buckeyes came out of halftime and shut Georgia out for the entire third quarter, only to blow a 14-point lead in the fourth.

In the eyes of head coach Ryan Day, that consistency is what's started to show on defense this spring, particularly in the secondary.

"You try to look at it through the whole 15 practices, what you've seen," Day said after the spring game Saturday. "If you're starting to see the secondary get some hands on some balls, then all of a sudden it doesn't happen for a few days, it's probably not real. We've seen that for almost 15 practices, what you saw today (in the spring game). So that was really good."

Then you take a look at the pieces Ohio State's defense has and it's hard not to expect production now

that they have a year in Knowles' system under their belts.

Two five-star defensive ends bookend the defensive line, with junior Jack Sawyer returning to his more natural three-point stance to come off the edge. J.T. Tuimoloau had one of the best individual defensive performances in a game in school history against Penn State last season, but much like the defense around him, could use more consistency in his production.

All signs indicate junior defensive tackle Mike Hall can recapture the success he found in the first half of 2022, racking up 4.5 sacks in six games, before an injury limited him from there.

The linebackers were arguably the most dependable part of the defense last year and both starters return with ample depth behind them. That includes senior Tommy Eichenberg, fresh off collecting 120 tackles in 2022, who will run alongside multi-year starter Steele Chambers. Senior Cody Simon rotated in last season and is fresh off a strong spring. Former five-star C.J. Hicks showed tremendous flash in pass coverage with two pass breakups (nearly interceptions) in the spring game. He could also see the field as a Jack.

Then there's the above-mentioned secondary. Junior cornerback Denzel Burke suffered a down year dealing with injury, but showcased his potential in a strong freshman season (he broke up 12 passes). He looked like a blanket in the spring game, and he's joined by a resurging junior Jordan Hancock and Ole Miss transfer Davison Igbinosun, an interesting option with his length.

Experience litters the safeties room with Josh Proctor, Lathan Ransom and Syracuse transfer Ja'Had Carter. But five-star Sonny Styles seems impossible to keep off the field, and fellow sophomore Kye Stokes continues to look strong while Cam Martinez has taken starting reps at nickel. There's a lot of strong options for Knowles to roll with.

On paper, OSU's defense has a chance to be truly championship caliber in 2023. Whether paper becomes reality is another story.