

Column: The Kids Are Alright



Unless you're really straining, it's going to be pretty hard to pull much of anything out of Ohio State's 59-7 blowout of Akron on Sept. 25. The Buckeyes took care of business against a bad team. They kept their backup quarterbacks in safe and simple situations and rode their offensive stars, while looking to limit Akron's only offensive dimension on defense, shutting down the legs of quarterback DJ Irons and forcing him to throw to overmatched wideouts.

That's all good and well. But, for the sake of projection moving forward or for identifying improvements from the brutal first three showings of the season, there just wasn't a whole lot there on the drab turf of Ohio Stadium. Ohio State has a bunch of former blue-chip prospects, Akron doesn't.

What does serve as an interesting piece of the formula, though, is the rise of some of those younger blue-chip Buckeyes. For the second straight game, freshman halfback TreVeyon Henderson and freshman defensive tackle Tyleik Williams showed up in a big way, with the former again pacing the Buckeye offense and the latter making an impact essentially every time Ohio State worked him onto the field. Freshman cornerback Denzel Burke has seemingly graduated into starter status full time, as has Henderson, but Williams seems to be on the way as well.

He shouldn't be alone in making that leap, despite being one of the youngest members of the defense. For the second straight week, it was the young Bucks that showed the most bite on both sides of the football. Offensively, Emeka Egbuka took full advantage of his first reception, snagging a short toss and nearly taking it to the house, coming up just short after an 85-yard scamper.

Freshman halfback Evan Pryor looked solid in limited time too, earning touches late in the matchup and turning them into impressive gains, picking up 35 yards and a 12-yard touchdown run on just five carries. It's hard to justify taking someone like Henderson or even Miyan Williams off the field for the latter (though he should be third in the lineup), but it seems like Ohio State should give some serious thought to getting Egbuka more involved with four-receiver sets - which it hasn't used consistently in years. Especially if the Buckeyes aren't going to pass to their tight ends, giving them very little to contribute on passing plays that don't call for maximum protection.

Defensively, it's significantly more difficult to find viable excuses for keeping the youth off of the field. Williams is already one of the two best tackles on the team, and for a group that's going to lose three

seniors after this season, it would be seemingly pretty valuable to establish Williams as a starter now, so that he can bolster a much younger defensive line in 2022. What are Antwuan Jackson, Jerron Cage or Taron Vincent contributing that the Virginia native can't?

Elsewhere on the line, J.T. Tuimoloau seems to be close to establishing himself as a full-time starter at defensive end too, although it's hard to know if he'll remain in that role with both Zach Harrison and Tyreke Smith are fully healthy - he certainly should, but that's a different story. He shouldn't be alone as a freshman end that the Buckeyes can rely on. Like Williams at tackle, freshman defensive end Jack Sawyer is at least as competent as those ahead of him on the depth chart.

Three true freshmen on a starting defensive line is a scary thought for a self-styled playoff contender, but with how much defensive line coach Larry Johnson likes to rotate his players, getting the pair of all-world recruits more time together would be beneficial both for Ohio State's present and its future.

Beyond them, Steele Chambers and Cody Simon aren't quite as young - third- and second-year players, respectively - but they too should be leaned on ahead of more experienced linebackers like Teradja Mitchell and Palaie Gaoteote. They've flashed quite a bit more ability in playing the intermediate zone coverages that Ohio State likes to dial up, and they're easily the fastest linebacker pairing on the team, which matters a whole lot more with Matt Barnes calling the shots and working plenty of double A gap blitzes into the fold.

Interestingly, the secondary seems to have gotten the memo before these other groups, because Ohio State has already leaned heavily into the youth there. Burke, Cameron Martinez, Lathan Ransom and Ronnie Hickman are all seeing significant playing time and should continue to do so as the season evolves. Cameron Brown is good enough to avoid relegation, but Bryson Shaw, Sevyn Banks and Marcus Williamson certainly aren't.

A lineup with Burke and Brown on the outside, Martinez in the slot, Ransom as the deep safety and Ronnie Hickman at the bullet looks to be Ohio State's best option, and it's just a nice little bonus that every one of those players would likely return for a potential title run in 2022. Ohio State's odds of that get a lot better if the rest of the defense follows suit, though.