

Cornerback Play Comes Under Microscope During Off Week



Although Ohio State's defense has shown dramatic strides from a season ago, there are still several question marks surrounding the unit as the Buckeyes enter their off week.

The most notable quandary lies in the play and health of the cornerbacks, a unit that has just six scholarship players. Despite the uncertainty around the position, the Buckeyes still rank No. 8 in the nation in passing yards allowed — giving up just 160.3 yards per game. With attention to the unit, head coach Ryan Day noted that he feels the cornerbacks are close to reaching their potential but need to focus on finishing each play.

"When you're identifying, in all three phases, what needs to improve, the things we've done well, the things we need to improve on, I don't think it's any mystery that one of the things we have to do is finish some plays out at corner," Day said. "We're right there, we just haven't quite finished some of them."

"We have to learn to finish, especially in one-on-one situations because we know that's going to keep coming our way until we can prove that we can," he continued. "That will be a huge emphasis this week."

As the Buckeyes will get a week to refine their abilities, as well as improve health-wise, Day said he plans to test the unit in practice during the off week.

"I just think the more and more times that we put them in those situations, the more comfortable they're going to feel and the better they'll be," Day said. "It's our job as coaches to continually put them in those positions and give them an opportunity to learn from it and grow and get better, so that's what we're going to do."

Second-year cornerback Denzel Burke has come under the microscope for his play to this point in the season after his standout freshman campaign a year ago. Burke led the Buckeyes with 13 pass breakups last season but has seen his production dwindle during the first half of the season — tallying four thus far this year.

Burke has also shown a new-found penchant for allowing big plays this season, with his most notable lapse coming against Arkansas State wide receiver Champ Flemings — who stands at 5-5. Flemings blew past Burke for a 58-yard gain during the teams' Week Two meeting.

Despite Burke's early-season struggles, Day noted that he's seen him make strides as the season has worn on and that he registered one of his better performances against Michigan State on Saturday.

"I think Denzel played better in this game, probably his best game to date," Day said. "He didn't get the ball thrown his way a ton but I thought he played his best game."

While the Buckeyes are still trying to find a balance between its run and pass defenses, defensive coordinator Jim Knowles noted that he feels that his unit has placed a specific focus on working in unison and complementing one another.

"I say coverage and rush, the defense responds by working together," Knowles said. "It's a group effort."