

Day Seeing Dividends Of Disruptive Defense



Nine months of discussion over the scheme of new Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles brought about plenty of talking points. Knowles' desire to play "offense on defense" was one of the biggest ones.

Facing a second-and-7 at the Buckeyes' 16-yard line on its first possession of the game, Notre Dame went backward two yards Saturday after sophomore defensive tackle Michael Hall, Jr. blew up a run in the backfield.

That may not sound noteworthy, but note it Ryan Day did at his press conference Tuesday. Hall's stop had come on the heels of a 54-yard Fighting Irish catch-and-run two plays earlier.

"The easy thing to do would have been to go like, 'Ope, here we go again,'" the Ohio State head coach said. "We've talked long and hard that, with our style of defense, at any point we can get a negative play, get them off-schedule, force a field goal or force a punt because of the different schemes and styles that we run. And that's exactly what happened."

For the first time Saturday the Buckeyes got to put Knowles' new defense to the test, and he put on display the aggressive, chaos-creating designs that were his trademark at Oklahoma State. It started with the defensive line. Notre Dame averaged just 2.5 yards on 30 carries rushing against Ohio State's front, even with an offensive line purported to be one of the nation's best.

"It was great to see them play the way they did," Day said. "We've seen a lot of that in the preseason, we've seen a lot of that last spring, guys in the backfield making plays."

Knowles used both fronts and personnel as chess pieces. The "Jack" position, a hybrid defensive end/linebacker, lined up all around the field. Defensive tackles and ends shifted to present a plethora of looks to opposing blockers pre-snap and stunted post-snap to change the picture again.

The aforementioned Hall lined up in one-technique, three-technique and five-technique defensive tackle

or defensive end throughout the action.

“Identifying what’s happening is probably the biggest challenge (against Knowles’ defense), getting everybody on the same page,” Day said. “When you’re having a hard time communicating and identifying what’s going on, it can create confusion.

“I think at the end of the day with this style of defense, Jim’s philosophy is that they make you work every play. The quarterback and the offensive line.”

In the secondary, the Buckeyes’ safeties were flying to the ball and making things happen. One of the bigger surprise standouts, given that he entered the night as a backup on the two-deep, was third-year Lathan Ransom.

Well, surprising to some.

“It didn’t surprise me,” Ohio State safeties coach Perry Eliano said. “Lathan’s had a great fall camp. He practices well, loves what he does. He prepares well. So what you saw on Saturday did not surprise me.”

Ransom piled up seven tackles including a key third-down stop of star Notre Dame tight end Michael Mayer that left him a yard short of the line to gain.

“He’s just a football player that is very instinctive,” Eliano said. “When he goes, he goes. And obviously he has a great impact when he makes plays on the ball.”

Ransom entered after Ohio State fourth-year safety Josh Proctor whiffed on a tackle the first play from scrimmage, the 54-yard play that preceded Hall’s backfield stop. Eliano and Day both stated that both players will be needed going forward, though.

“The good news is we have really good depth, across the board and certainly on defense and in the secondary,” Day said. “Those guys are gonna get to play, and when they get their opportunity to play they’ve gotta make it count.”

Alongside Ransom, fourth-year safety Ronnie Hickman picked up four tackles of his own, setting the defense from the “adjuster” position.

“The thing I love about Ronnie is, he’s really stepped up his game off the field in preparation,” Eliano said. “His mentality, studying the game, understanding what to look for. Obviously you can tell, because he’s playing extremely fast.”

That is still without mentioning the nine-tackle, two-sack night of third-year linebacker Tommy Eichenberg, who didn’t come off the field against the Fighting Irish. All told, the Buckeyes shutout Notre Dame the final 41:56 of gametime and kept the Golden Domers under 100 yards of offense in the second half.

Ohio State will be looking for similar performances from its defense as the season progresses.

“That was a job well done, but that doesn’t mean anything this week,” Day said. “We say it all the time after Sunday practice, once practice is over and we walk through those doors (at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center) and up to victory meal, the game is done from the week before no matter what

happens.”