

Dependability In Return Game Missing Piece For OSU Special Teams



With Ohio State boasting the nation's No. 1 total offense and No. 7 total defense at the midway mark of 2022, both sides are rightfully drawing most of the pundits' attention nationally.

There is, of course, a third phase of football, however — special teams.

That's where, it could be argued, the Buckeyes could stand to make some of their biggest strides, specifically in kickoff and kick return, as the season moves into its back half.

"We've got to do a better job fielding the ball," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said. "I think if we do that, then we feel a little bit better about all of it."

Arguably the biggest strength for Ohio State's special teams so far has been second-year punter Jesse Mirco.

He hasn't been needed much with the above-mentioned No. 1 total offense, but thus far this season Mirco's averaged 43.4 yards across 15 punts. Out of those 15, 10 have been downed inside the opposing 20-yard line. That's 66.7 percent of all Mirco's boots.

Mirco also called his own number and ran to convert a fourth-and-2 late against Rutgers.

"I feel like I'm going alright," Mirco said. "Punting's been good, punt unit's been good, making plays."

Second-year wide receiver Emeka Egbuka has done a quality job returning opposing punts, picking up 34 yards on five returns for a 6.8 per-return average. That doesn't include a long touchdown return he recorded against Arkansas State that was called back after graduate linebacker Teradja Mitchell leapt over the Red Wolves' punt shield.

Egbuka also muffed a punt fielding it over his shoulder against Rutgers, however, leading to the Scarlet

Knights' lone touchdown in week five. The Buckeyes have also experimented with third-year linebacker Chip Trayanum at kick returner, and he's muffed as many kicks as he's run out, two a piece.

The latter muff, which came against Michigan State, did end up in a return across OSU's 45-yard line, though it was also called back on a penalty. His two returns that weren't penalized have resulted in 22 total yards.

"Certainly, you can't be doing that," Day reiterated about muffing returns. "We should be fielding the ball better. I think we've got some good time right now to look at that and have the right personnel in all groupings. Certainly in special teams as well."

The last question mark that has lingered for Ohio State is on kickoff. Despite having three scholarship kickers — one of which, Parker Lewis, was ineligible for a few games to open the season — first-year walk-on Jayden Fielding has handled kickoff duties for the Buckeyes. Three of his kickoffs have gone out-of-bounds, though 19 of his 41 kickoffs have gone for touchbacks.

It remains to be seen if Lewis, who transferred from USC to Columbus this offseason, gets involved in kickoff duties in some fashion. Graduate kicker Noah Ruggles is still on field goal off a 20-for-21 performance in 2021, though he missed spring practices and has been relatively untested with a 2-for-3 mark in 2022.

With the offense firing and defense rounding into form, answering the lingering questions on special teams could be another piece to a national championship puzzle.