

Knowles: Defense A 'Right Now Proposition'



A long pause hung in the air after Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles got asked about the football cliché of a “bend but don’t break defense” Tuesday.

The Silver Bullets’ signal caller took a long swallow of his beverage and began shaking his head slightly.

“I don’t like it. I don’t like it,” Knowles said. “I would never call a defense that I was associated with (bend but don’t break).”

That mindset fits right into the identity Knowles has shown from his defense throughout his career and in his two games at Ohio State, an attacking mindset, eager to dispatch opposing offenses to the sideline.

“To me, it’s a right now proposition,” Knowles said. “We go on the field, I go on the field with the mindset every time of getting the ball back to our offense as quickly as possible. I never even think about bending but not breaking. It’s tough to even switch into that mindset.”

Really that identity has been evident from the first play Knowles called against Notre Dame.

A cornerback blitzed on that down. There was no adjustment period, no early calls for the Buckeyes’ base defense to get its feet under it in a new system against a then-top five opponent.

Yes, the outcome was a 54-yard gain for the Fighting Irish after a catch-and-run from sophomore wide receiver Lorenzo Styles, Jr. But the precedent was set. Knowles’ approach doesn’t waiver, regardless if it’s early or late game.

“When we go up, we have the lead or we put some (younger) guys in the game, I’m still always chirping to go out there and hold the line and stop them right now,” Knowles said. “It’s a habit, it’s a way of thinking.”

Blitzing is always a key tenant of an aggressive defensive ideology.

Knowles has shown a willingness to go zero blitz, even, on several occasions, meaning that there are no defensive backs left in deep zone coverage as at least six players come after an opposing backfield.

“I just know it puts a lot of pressure on the offense to execute,” Knowles said. “When you have it in your arsenal, they have to play for it. There’s risk/reward to it. I’ve become more comfortable with it throughout my career, because I know it’s important to the structure of your defense to have that be something that is always there where you can get after someone. It changes the game.”

For all the aggression he’s shown in playcalling, however, Ohio State is one of just seven defenses in college football that has yet to secure a takeaway.

Giving up just 11.0 points and 264.5 yards per game, good for 21st and 24th nationally, respectively, it’s one area the Buckeyes are looking for more production as players get more comfortable in the scheme.

He stated he’s concerned about the lack of forced fumbles and interceptions, but recalled a two-game period during his time at Duke where his defense collected 10 combined takeaways against Clemson and Florida State but also gave up 100 combined points. In other words, generating turnovers is just “one part of the metric.”

“Either you stop them or you don’t, that’s the way I look at it,” Knowles said. “Taking the ball away is one way to stop them. Getting off the field on third down is another way to stop them. Then sometimes the ball ends up in the red zone — sometimes we did it to ourselves, sometimes it gets there through other ways, it doesn’t matter — then it becomes the field goals. And I think that’s one area we’ve been doing very well.”

Ohio State’s defense receives its next test Saturday against Toledo.