

Knowles' Defense Shows Cracks In Armor Against Wolverines



Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles spent countless hours trying to fix the Buckeyes' defense over the offseason and into the regular season, tirelessly working to ensure that his group's shortcomings in 2022 — specifically giving up big plays to Michigan and Georgia — would not be replicated in 2023.

Through the first 11 games of the season, it looked as if Knowles' hard work had paid off. With a retooled scheme that included more physical defensive backs such as cornerback Davison Igbinosun and safety Sonny Styles entering the starting lineup, along with stars Denzel Burke, J.T. Tuimoloau and Tommy Eichenberg taking extra steps in their development, the Buckeyes' unit dominated opposing offenses week-in-and-week-out, allowing just 9.3 points and 252.9 yards per game, good for second and third in the nation.

More importantly, they accomplished their goals of limiting big plays, with the group allowing just one explosive play over 40 yards all season, that being a 45-yard "fumblerooski" run by Rutgers' running back Kyle Monangai on fourth-and-1.

The Buckeyes continued to accomplish their goals of limiting big plays Saturday against Michigan, allowing just one gain over 30 yards on yet another trick play, this time a running back pass from Donovan Edwards in the third quarter that went to tight end Colston Loveland for 34 yards. But the positive feelings about the overall improving state of the defense were erased in the team's most important game of the season, where they allowed a season-high 30 points to the Wolverines en route to a crushing 30-24 defeat, with 219 of those yards and 16 of those points coming in the second half alone on four straight scoring possessions.

"(It was) not enough," Knowles said after the game. "Ultimately, you have to win this game, and I certainly feel like we were a play short. So that's something that I have to keep working on."

The shortcomings of Knowles' defense were most evident while defending against the rush after halftime. The Buckeyes flexed their muscles in the trenches in the first half, allowing just 27 yards on the ground on 15 carries to star tailbacks Blake Corum and Edwards. But the script flipped entirely in the final 30 minutes with a trip to the Big Ten Championship on the line, where Knowles' group allowed

the tandem — along with quarterbacks J.J. McCarthy and Alex Orji — to rush for 122 yards on 21 attempts, including a back-breaking 22-yard score from Corum at the end of the third quarter that broke a 17-17 tie and gave the Wolverines the lead for good.

But perhaps a more important pitfall was the Buckeyes' inability to get off the field in the second half, especially when the team needed a stop most. In the second half alone, the Wolverines embarked on time-shaving drives of 3:10, 3:40, 4:00 and 7:00 that resulted in three field goals and the Corum touchdown, a long sequence of plays that kept Kyle McCord, Marvin Harrison Jr. and the Buckeyes' offense on the sidelines for significant portions of the second half.

"I think you saw it," Knowles said. "We just didn't get the stops when we had to. Had some guys in position, didn't make the plays. You always wish you had - just made those plays in the critical moments. I thought the guys played hard, but it's just disappointing for the players."

Day said Michigan's final seven-minute drive in the fourth quarter was the most back-breaking, as it not only allowed the Wolverines to march down the field and extend the lead to 30-24, but also leave McCord and the offense with just 1:05 left on the clock and no timeouts. Although they had succeeded in a similar situation earlier in the season against Notre Dame, the coach admitted this put the offense in a tough spot, eventually leading to McCord getting pressured and throwing a game-ending interception by Wolverines safety Rod Moore with 25 seconds remaining.

"They did a nice job running the ball," Day said. "We ended up hanging on in the end and giving our offense a chance to win, but too much time off the clock there. We have to get a stop and get off the field."

Despite turning in an impressive overall report card in 2023, Knowles' second season as defensive coordinator ended much like his first, with a disappointing loss against arch-rival Michigan that occurred in large part because of his defense's inability to string together stops. This reality — fair or not — will likely force the coordinator to once again answer some tough questions about his unit's blemishes in The Game and face another long offseason of self-evaluation.