

My Thoughts: Jim Knowles' Defense Does Its Job In Cotton Bowl



As the offensive struggle that was the 2023 Cotton Bowl progressed Dec. 29, Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and his unit found themselves in an all-too-familiar situation. As they had done on numerous occasions throughout the season, Ohio State's offense — one that was missing consensus All-American wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. and 2023 starting quarterback Kyle McCord — was sputtering early on. They looked entirely disjointed and unprepared with Devin Brown — and then true freshman Lincoln Kienholz — under center, and they more punts (six) than first downs (five) as they entered the AT&T Stadium locker room at halftime.

Ohio State's offensive ineptitude forced Knowles and his defense to — once again — buckle down and put the team on their backs for the entire game, just as they had done in wins against Penn State, Wisconsin and even Notre Dame. And — for the most part — the defense delivered. With the Buckeye offense continuing to look like a shell of its once-dominant former self as the game progressed, Ohio State's defense performed just as it had all season, limiting Missouri's offense to just 14 points and only 128 passing yards, keeping the Buckeyes in the game until the tail end of the fourth quarter.

Ohio State's defense did show some cracks in its armor late in the game by allowing two touchdowns in the final frame — which ultimately led to the 14-3 loss — but that was likely a product of some tired legs that stemmed from the Buckeyes' constant punting. But they also did a number of positive things that should not be forgotten when discussing the somewhat forgettable Cotton Bowl loss.

The Buckeyes' defensive successes in Dallas were most evident on the front four, which dominated for most of the night in what will likely be its last-ever game as a full unit. Larry Johnson's group accounted for five of Ohio State's six sacks on the night along with six tackles for loss, a constant string of pressure that made Missouri's highly-touted offense resemble Iowa's for the majority of the game. This dominance was largely spearheaded by defensive end Jack Sawyer, who put forth by far his best performance as a Buckeye with three sacks and four total tackles.

Sawyer's strong Cotton Bowl outing may very well be one of the only positive things Ohio State fans can take from this game. The former five-star had received a ton of flak from Buckeye nation — and also the BSB office — in the early portion of the season due to his overall inefficiency and inability to get to the quarterback. But in the last couple of weeks of the 2023 season, and especially in the Cotton Bowl, he showed the world exactly the type of player he is capable of being moving forward. If Sawyer does decide to come back for his senior season in 2024, look for him to transform into a complete game-wrecker, which could propel him to the first round of some NFL mock drafts.

Ohio State was certainly not as sharp on the back end, particularly toward the end of the game when Missouri's run game began to establish itself and quarterback Brady Cook completed a pair of significant downfield passes. But I still was impressed with the overall physicality and intensity the group played with, particularly with Denzel Burke, who showed off his elite open-field tackling skills with two key stops in the first half and five tackles overall. Burke's performance may have very well propelled him to become an early second-round — maybe even late first-round — NFL draft selection if he does choose to forgo his senior season with the Buckeyes.

Knowles and Ohio State's defense received some criticism after a subpar ending against Michigan — and their recent fourth-quarter collapses are certainly something that needs to be addressed this offseason. But the overall showing in the Cotton Bowl should provide fans with validation that Knowles' defense does in fact work with the right pieces in place. If Ohio State can continue to get to the quarterback and play with aggressiveness and physicality in the secondary, the group should be in line for another strong season in 2024.

Don't worry, Buckeyes fans, Knowles' defense will be just fine moving forward — and there are some major reinforcements coming as well. It's the offense that needs a serious makeover. But that's a conversation for another day, or another column.