

Ohio State Head Coach Urban Meyer Previews Northwestern



With the 62-39 final at Ohio Stadium over the weekend still fresh, head coach Urban Meyer arrived Monday in the Woody Hayes Athletic Center team room to recap Ohio State's result against Michigan as the focus turns to Northwestern in the Big Ten Championship Game.

After the No. 10 Buckeyes (11-1, 8-1) handled the No. 4 Wolverines (10-2, 8-1) to take the East Division and set up Saturday's showdown, an 8 p.m. kickoff on FOX at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, what does the 23-point rout give OSU into its clash with the No. 19 Wildcats (8-4, 8-1)?

Urban Meyer

COACH MEYER: Thanks for coming. I'll review the champions. Defensive champions for our rivalry game was Chase Young, Davon Hamilton, B.B. Landers. Jonathon Cooper up front. Coop played exceptionally well. Great effort, energy.

Linebackers was Tuf Borland. And then the back end of our defense, Brendon White graded champion and so did Jeffrey Okudah.

Player of the game was Malik Harrison, had arguably his best game as a Buckeye, was all over the field, five tackles, an assist, two tackles for a loss and a sack.

And offense, offensive champions you have offensive line, all five: Isaiah Prince played exceptionally well. Pridgeon, Malcolm Pridgeon; Michael Jordan; Demetrius Knox and Thayer Munford. And once again, the respect we had for that defensive line, to play the way they did they played outstanding.

The quarterback did fairly well too, 20-of-31 for almost 400 yards, 396; six touchdowns; zero interceptions. And once again, tying that in with the offensive line, zero sacks.

Running backs played hard. Mike had 13 carries for 96 yards. And J.K. had 12 carries for 46 yards. Also did well in pass protection.

Tight end, Luke Farrell played very well. Once again had to block some of those defensive ends a few times and had two catches for 16 yards.

And the receivers were exceptional as a group. They had 378 receiving yards and six touchdowns against the number one pass defense against America. You had Johnnie Dixon graded out champion, K.J., Terry McLaurin, Chris Olave, who we've been talking about him for some time now. He had two receptions, two touchdowns and a blocked punt, which I'll talk about in a minute.

And the player of the game had a career day, six receptions, 192 yards receiving and two touchdowns. And that's Parris Campbell.

Special forces awards, special teams awards, player of the game, let's go special effort, Sevyn Banks. As I told him, he's got a gift. Sit here, here's a ball and a blocked punt, go run fast and score, but he did.

Amir Riep, really, really exceptional effort. I called them the heroes, and heroes come cheap nowadays — you jump high and run fast, people call you a hero. No, you're not a hero. Heroes are guys like Amir Riep, an incredible effort on K.J.'s punt return, blocked two people and just exceptional effort. Really happy to see him play like that.

K.J. Hill with a 22-yard punt return. And our kicker, Blake was 10-on-10 on kicks and really did a nice on kickoffs, average hang time was four. Needed you the most, you played your very best and he did.

Players of the game, Chris Olave, elite player as a freshman. Got to be careful anointing a guy that soon, but he's tough. He also runs down, I think he ran down seven or eight kickoffs for us. Justin Hilliard is as good a special teams player I've been around. Had key block on the hands team.

And Kiondre Jones really had a hell of a day, just starts on three units. We call him 4-6 guys. Four to six effort-wise he was phenomenal.

Honored to represent the East in the Big Ten Championship game. That one is over. And getting ready to play a team that plays excellent defense. I just got done watching them for about three hours. I've not studied their offense but obviously they've got an elite quarterback and they do things very well.

Q. You've talked a little bit lately about Dwayne and his development as a team leader. I was wondering, can you point to one point in the season, one play, one game, one period of time where you thought, okay, this guy's going to be the leader that I want him to be?

COACH MEYER: One point, that would be hard, I think. The Maryland game was one that he dropped his pads and dropped some other things probably, too — probably shouldn't say that. (Laughter) but he dropped his pads and at the toughest time in the game against, once again, a defense, a very good defense, and got that yard.

The job of a quarterback — and I can't tell you how many times we've told him and I've told him — that the job of the quarterback is to get a first down, to move the chains.

Q. So that's what it was about, more than anything, was being able to run the ball and get —
COACH MEYER: I think that's a big part of it. That position is, as you've heard many times around here is arguably the most unique position in all of sport. What he's asked to do — and coaches aren't on the field, there's ten other guys looking at him every snap. And you better give the right answer and they better trust and believe in him. And our guys certainly do.

Q. What else about leadership qualities — I think some of the players talk about how he was quieter earlier in the season —

COACH MEYER: He's getting a little bit more to him.

Q. A little more vocal. And you saw that happen?

COACH MEYER: Yeah, we noticed the change, too.

Q. When we talked about your leaders this year, I think for the most part we discuss guys who keep things even keeled and keep their teammates focused. But core energy guys, who are guys with high motors whose energy is contagious?

COACH MEYER: Parris Campbell, Johnnie, Terry. On offense, Isaiah Prince, has been exceptional at that. And that's — J.K. Dobbins is in that category, too. On defense, I put Tuf Borland in that category. Dre'Mont at times. And Coop.

Q. Chris Olave's parents showed up for the Michigan game. Did you guys have an inkling that he would have a breakout performance and make one of those phone calls, or was it just coincidence that they were there at the right —

COACH MEYER: So, you're asking if, do we call the families to come in and give us a little extra juice. (Laughter) that's good. I'll write that down.

Q. (Indiscernible) they had had an inkling they were a big part of your plan on that?

COACH MEYER: I'll say, as we always do around here, that's just like Wyatt Davis was going to get his first start as a Buckeye, and there's a lot of confidence around here because I've been talking about it for five weeks now. He's the next man in.

And Chris Olave, you've just have seen a gradual, so instead of an inkling, you just see it in practice. And by sheer numbers now, with Austin Mack out, he's in the rotation. He's knee-deep in the rotation now.

Q. I remember when you were the coach at Florida, when you guys beat Ohio State in the national championship game, after that you talked about how you use all kinds of things as motivation for your players. That wasn't just the reason you guys won, but you used a lot of motivational tactics. It seems to be something about you when you're an underdog, so I'm curious what motivational tactics you might have you used heading into the Michigan game?

COACH MEYER: That's the one, there wasn't — there actually was a great pregame speech. It was by Parris Campbell. And that's a 365 game. That's not a one-time shot. That's not "win one for the Gipper" type of thing. We've been working on that one, and that goes from our strength staff to training staff to summer, to spring ball, to summer training to training camp. That's a 365 game.

Q. Wyatt Davis looks like he'll get his chance. Is there anybody else in the mix there, like Bowen. Can you discuss that?

COACH MEYER: We were right in the middle of that. Wyatt Davis will get a start. And Josh Myers is so close, he's had a great month and half of practices. And Branden Bowen was the starting right guard before he got hurt. He's back to almost what he was.

So this is a big week for all three of those guys. And the other guy is Josh Alabi. Remember about five weeks ago we were down to the last tack, last group of guys, and now we've got some depth.

Q. When did Dwayne take to film study, become — when did it move from homework assignment to —

COACH MEYER: That's a good question for Ryan. I think he's always been that. He was very well

trained.

Q. When he first got here —

COACH MEYER: You'd have to ask Ryan. I know that Bryson, his quarterback coach, as he went up through — I told you, when I went and saw him in that recruiting trip and I sat and watched that workout. It wasn't only a great performance, but the coaching was fantastic. So he's been pretty well developed.

Q. If you are a student, how often is that? Is that every day?

COACH MEYER: If you're a quarterback, it's every day.

Q. And that's always with coach or on the phone or —

COACH MEYER: Well, it can't be with a coach. But it's every day. There's 20-hour rules and stuff like that, but you're probably a lousy quarterback if you're spending 20 hours getting ready for a game. So they all have iPads, and one of the strengths that him and Coach Day have done a good job of is identifying the protections.

Q. Since you guys have returned from the bye week, your defense has had a little bit of fluctuation in terms of how it's played, okay against Nebraska, very good against Michigan State, obviously not good against Maryland, good again last week. Where do you sit with where you guys are sitting in terms of progress defensively?

COACH MEYER: We're making progress. The pass defense is bothering a lot of people, bothering people and giving up plays. I think rush defense and our linebackers, I thought, played very well Saturday. Our defensive line, you felt like you kind of controlled the game with the defensive line. They're just making catches on this. And that's going to be a huge part of this game.

Q. Other side of the ball, you talked a little bit about the offensive line after the game, but we've seen in the past where you had a line build and build and build throughout the season, towards the end it's very good. Are you starting to see that with this group?

COACH MEYER: Yeah, it started whenever. You've got a big guy now missing, Demetrius Knox, which was a big hit. But I have seen the consistency. We've all seen consistency start — I can't give you the exact time, but they're playing very well right now.

That was their best — that was one of the best I've seen. Once again, it's all, why would you say that? Well, the respect we had for that team we played.

Q. Do you have a number of the percentage of time Michigan blitzed you guys on Saturday?

COACH MEYER: I could find that out. But it's a high — I know right out of the chute it was a high percentage. And I can't give you that number.

Q. I asked you on the call yesterday about the Tate Martell package near the goal line. I don't know if you had more time to review that. But now that Dwayne Haskins is dropping things, I was wondering if that had any impact on the way that you are viewing that?

COACH MEYER: It hasn't been decided. I'm a Tate Martell fan. So I'm pushing it real hard. And we're going to do what's best. But I think your question was appropriate yesterday. But certainly not him. To say, well, it's not working because he's not doing a good job; there's other things involved.

Q. Not something that's anti-Tate, but it seemed more necessary that you could need that back.

COACH MEYER: I want him in the game.

Q. Obviously we've seen Chris Olave, I think Taron Vincent had a role on third down in the last game. Tyler Friday. There's some freshmen, true freshmen who are doing some things for you at the end of the year. Highly recruited class. In general we know what Olave is doing. How is that group coming along?

COACH MEYER: Good. Josh Proctor is another name that is one of those unsung heroes for us. And Teradja Mitchell played one of his best days, wiping guys out on kickoff. And once again one of the unsung heroes that we called them yesterday. And I showed — the whole team sat right here and it was probably 30 minutes of watching the heroes play. And it's called field position. It's called selflessness. Keandre Jones was ridiculous. But he's not a freshman. But a very good class.

Q. You've done it a long time, for guys this late in the year, some of the first-year guys who just got here, what do you have to see for them to be able to help you? What are you looking for?

COACH MEYER: Practice. And at this point it's been decided. It's about five, six weeks ago it's the guys that — the care factor, the intensity. Josh Proctor went from a nonproductive teammate to a very productive teammate. And it all started with a couple of motivational, inspirational meetings and confrontational meetings. But he's a good kid from a good family and wants to play. Now he is playing at a very high level for us.

Q. I know you want to look forward, not look back, but can you take us a little bit inside the offensive game planning for that Michigan game. Just seemed like you guys in week 12 had a great idea of what you wanted to do and your players went and executed it. Ryan and Kevin and you and the whole offensive staff, can you give us a brief look at what last week was like and how it came together with the plan?

COACH MEYER: It was going to come down to one-on-one matchups; we knew that, not just receiver. They're man-free. That's their base coverage. Their second coverage is cover-2.

And when I say one-on-one battles and you win the battle, you win the war. And we have enough guys win the battle, you win the war. And that goes from Isaiah Prince blocking their number three, to Thayer Munford blocking their 15 and also the inside guys blocking No. 10, who is a hell of a player for them. But the one-on-one matchups, you know, our guys did a — obviously you saw it. And we worked extremely hard on that. But you also have talented guys that really care.

Q. What makes K.J. Hill unique?

COACH MEYER: He's one of the toughest — he's a real tough guy. He's got a little arrogance to him. And he's very talented. Not as fast as some of these other guys, but he's a student of the game. He's one of those guys that understands space, understands leverage. He's got great ball skills.

Q. And this is your fourth time at the Big Ten Championship game. Given the circumstances of this year, the ups and downs, how special is it for you to be back in this situation?

COACH MEYER: Only special if you win it. It is — Coach Mick and I talked about that, about what is the objective. I used to say compete for championships in November. And he went a step further and said get to Indy. Now we're in Indy so go win it.

Q. Can you give us your impressions of Northwestern and what you've studied so far?

COACH MEYER: Their coach and I have been friends for a long, long time. I think he's one of the best

coaches in college football. I don't "think" he is. He's one of the best coaches in college football. And his kids plays like that.

I've known Coach Hankwitz since he was at Colorado. And Mick McCall, known him since he was a high school coach in Denver. They're just great people that coach their tails off and their players are a reflection of their staff.

Q. Specifically defensively, what is it that you see from them that just stands out?

COACH MEYER: They keep it in front of you. They're very smart guys. They obviously — getting too much technical. But they understand. It's all tied together. And they keep the ball in front of you. I don't know — I'll probably get that here in a minute. But their big plays, you just don't see big hits against them.

They're primarily a zone-coverage team. And they keep the ball in front of you. And sometimes that's — nowadays that's harder than a team that you know is going to be man coverage across the board.

Q. Wyatt Davis, talk about him a little bit. But here you are going into a Big Ten Championship game and starting a guy for the first time. What's the anxiety level taking that into account? What have you seen from him specifically in the last several weeks that made you talk about him so much?

COACH MEYER: Just practice. I'm sure you heard that many times. All of a sudden you see the guy — we have an inside drill every Tuesday. And you just saw this kid, a highly recruited guy that was a little lost in the weeds his freshman year. And fatigue would often get him.

Once he figured that out — came from one of the best programs in America, in California. But just a guy, he's a rugged guy. And he's been scratching and clawing for playing time ever since probably five, six weeks ago, and has been close. But we didn't want to disrupt the flow of the five guys in there.

Q. I get this question all the time. How are you doing?

COACH MEYER: Good.

Q. What are your plans?

COACH MEYER: Good.

Q. And Saturday, you know, the TV cameras seemed to be on you as much as it was the action on the field.

COACH MEYER: Good.

Q. And just what are your plans — (laughter)?

COACH MEYER: Good.

Q. — post whatever?

COACH MEYER: Good.

Q. You're good. That's a definitive statement.

COACH MEYER: Good.

Q. I don't know if you call them the pop pass or push pass or whatever it is with Parris. There was some debate about whether it should count as a run or a pass. How do you guys count it?

COACH MEYER: Pass.

Q. What do you like about that play?

COACH MEYER: It's like any play, it's the who that's doing it. For a guy like non-Parris running it, it's okay. With a guy like Parris, we try to design as many plays to have him touch — a little bit like Curtis Samuel a few years ago, he's that checker that you want to touch the ball. There's no easier way. Now, there's risk to that, too. But I think our coaches really do a great job picking the time and making sure it's the right time to call it, et cetera.

Q. I guess the point is to mitigate the risk by making it count as a pass in case the exchange doesn't go as smoothly?

COACH MEYER: That's exactly right. You don't have to — that's a great question. We used to do the hand-off, you have to slow down a little bit. Here, it's just you run through it.

Q. You guys treat special teams a little more special than most programs do. Thinking about Chris Olave and the other freshmen, is that a good way to kind of keep those highly recruited freshmen who aren't playing as much as they're used to engaged, and also for you to evaluate when they're ready to contribute to the offense and the defense?

COACH MEYER: Special teams is something that — I get your question. But that's not the way we treat it. We treat it: You will not play a down at Ohio State until you contribute on special teams. It's three phases of the game.

There's all kinds of stuff in this room that talk about the plan to win and talk about the gospel of Ohio State football and it's all about field position, et cetera, et cetera. And from Zeke Elliott, to whomever, you're just not playing.

And that's very clear around here. And every great player — I'm willing to say every great player we've ever had started on a special teams phase and had to play well in it.

Q. And shifting gears, how much did Randy Walker kind of influence the way people play offense in the Big Ten now?

COACH MEYER: Randy, offensive coordinator sitting in that room in there — I'll say this: Randy Walker is one of my favorite guys. I love his family, his wife. I've been to the golf tournament.

And, yeah, he was an inspiration for me. Actually played against him in 2001, Bowling Green days. But just the way he handled himself. You pick — as a young coach, you pick guys the way that — he's won at every level and the way he handles himself.

Great story: He was an I formation guy at Miami Ohio. Then he went to Northwestern, and the I formation wasn't going well. And they made a transformation, was that Zak Kustok that changed — really, you've got to give him credit. And a lot of that, they went down talked to Rich Rodriguez. Great history there about Clemson's offense moving up to Evanston. And they were awesome.

Q. Yesterday Pat Fitzgerald said because they had the Big Ten West wrapped up for a couple of weeks, two weeks ago he spent the week watching Michigan. Last week he spent watching you guys. How much of an advantage is that for them and to you then to have to catch up?

COACH MEYER: That's a huge advantage. (Laughter) it is. I mean, I can assure you, we weren't watching anything other than our rival. I think that's an advantage. It certainly is.

Q. Do you have to catch up?

COACH MEYER: That's what we're trying to do right now; yeah, sure. I think the biggest thing is we just played a very physical game and our goal — I think what our offensive linemen have done, they played 95 plays against Michigan State, very rugged defense. They went and played 105 plays against Maryland where the 105th play was as important as the 22nd. And they just went against the No. 1 defense in America, a bunch of rugged players.

The priority is about freshness, knowing what you're doing. Right when I get out of here, me and Mick are going to plan the whole week to make sure that happens.

Q. When you look at the importance — when you look at Haskins' performance after the game, how important do you feel like his — when he came in versus Michigan last year, how important was that in his development knowing what the game was like in terms of seeing his leadership kind of grow from this game?

COACH MEYER: If you remember, the week before it was terrible. We played — it really wasn't terrible. It started terrible. And in the rain against Illinois. And that was — that's a great question, because you throw him — in my opinion, you throw him in that Team Up North game last year, without fighting through what he had to fight through, which he was getting grieved on the sideline pretty good after the way he performed. And he goes in and really rallies it up in bad weather — you guys remember that game? I'm sure you do.

That's all — filling your toolbox is a term we use around here. He was filling his toolbox. Because he certainly would not, in my opinion, would not have been able to do that in the rivalry game last year. And obviously the way he's been playing, it's just constant experience and filling the toolbox.

Q. When you see — what does he need to prove, if anything, this week in his first championship game as that leader?

COACH MEYER: To go win the game. Offensive football is a 10-yard war. Win each war. And however you get that first down, get the first down. And that's how we approach it.

Q. You've done this a long time. There's this idea of playing to the level of your competition. If you look at results this year, it could be argued there's been some of that. Is it an extra challenge when you have superior talent, when guys are just better than the guys across from them, to keep them at a level —

COACH MEYER: It is. I would not put this in that category, though. They won 15 out of 16 Big Ten games. You watch them play. They're very — they're not averaging 55 points a game. But they're very productive. I think they only have two fumbles lost the entire year.

The kicking game, very sound at what they do. So, yeah, we play at the level of competition. That happens sometimes. You'd like to not have that happen. It does. That certainly is not this case. I've already talked to a lot of our players, and the greatest thing about this day and age, where it was hard 20 years ago, it's all digital video that's on your iPad like that and they're watching it and our players are already reacting — especially their defensive front. And I don't know if that No. 2 is going to play, but he's a dynamic player. And their quarterback is outstanding.

Q. I know you don't talk playoffs, but you realize how important it is to put back-to-back Michigan-type performances together?

COACH MEYER: Their punt — they've rushed 12 times on punt rush. So we've got to be prepared. They skinny the short edge, too. So we have to be really sound on that.

Q. To piggyback on Tim's question, no disrespect, but you're 7-0 against Michigan. There's speculation out there. Will you be coaching Ohio State next season?

COACH MEYER: I plan to coach. And their kickoff team is very good, too. (Laughter). And they really understand and contain and all those types of things.

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