

Ohio State's Offense Will Be Shaped Around Its Starting Quarterback



Ohio State head coach Ryan Day doesn't want to force a square peg into a round hole when he ultimately picks the quarterback to lead his offense this fall. The Buckeye head man, entering his third season at the helm of the program, has seen his offense take a number of forms since he arrived as the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach in 2017.

In that first season, the Buckeyes integrated the quarterback run fully and utilized a number of quick-hit passes and screens to best showcase the snappy release and running ability of J.T. Barrett. In 2018, Day veered more into air raid tendencies, allowing Dwayne Haskins to carve up defenses with plenty of mesh looks, paired with vertical shots from four- and five-receiver sets.

Once Justin Fields took over, the offense morphed again, adopting more of those downfield looks to best showcase Fields' accuracy when launching the ball deep, probably his No. 1 trait as a passer. As Day stares down the three-man quarterback race in 2021, he knows that the offensive base will remain, but he doesn't yet know what the specifics of offense will look like for the Buckeyes this fall, and he's not going to decide until he's made his choice at quarterback.

"I think that we're still not there yet with these guys, we're figuring out where we want to spend our time in terms of emphasizing," Day said. "Our offense is our offense, it hasn't changed when J.T. (Barrett) was the quarterback, when Dwayne (Haskins) was the quarterback and when Justin (Fields) was the quarterback, but we (need to know what we) want to emphasize. The plays really haven't changed but if you have 100 plays in a game, 80 plays in a game, what do you emphasize based on their strengths.

"There three different quarterbacks, now they are very similar but I think all three have different strengths and weaknesses so as we go into a game we're certainly going to do the things that they do best. I don't think I have the answer to that yet. Some of them do get the ball out of their hand quickly, and that's good. I think they do have good accuracy underneath, but I also think that they do a decent job throwing down the field as well. In a perfect world you'd like to a little bit of both, but again, the strength of college football coaching is to find out what they do really well and emphasize that."

As it stands in April, entering the long offseason summer in which Buckeye coaches and players will spend the majority of their time apart, the focus for everyone is not on hammering out those details yet,

but on getting a better grasp for the fundamentals and for the unchanging base of the offense. Once that's set, Day can start to nail down the minutiae that will best showcase his signal caller's ability.

"They're tasked with being obsessed with learning the offense and a lot goes with that," Day explained. "They have to get in the weight room with (strength and conditioning director Mickey Marotti), they have to get stronger, faster, quicker. We grade our guys in there and we have a champions meeting right before preseason camp and if you're gold, that means you're one of the top performers in the weight room, and that's the first thing they have to do.

"But then it's also off the field stuff, studying film, watching film and wearing out the XO system. That's what they have to do. The fluency in the offense, they're getting there but they have a long way to go. It was very basic, we worked on fundamentals and techniques (this spring) and like I said, we're playing catch-up here. Obviously we would love to have somebody that's in year two or three here, we don't have that luxury. We have some young guys and they have work to do.

"It's a race, like I said the other day, to make up for time that we don't have, that's just the truth of it. We'd love to be practicing all summer, we'd love to be practicing right now, we can't do that, so the only way to do that is to watch film and have these guys do work on their own. We can try to give them some worksheets and different things to help them work on their own but at the end of the day they have to be self-motivated."

During that process, Ohio State tries to keep things simple, and looks to avoid specializing. Although the Buckeyes do have different things in their offense that they can choose to highlight, they avoided that in the spring, keeping everyone on the same plan to see who could and couldn't handle the basics of Day's system. That allowed the young passers to focus on doing their jobs, which their coaches felt they did throughout the spring.

"They make the players around them better," offensive coordinator Wilson said. "They're able to distribute the ball to the playmakers we have. I think in spring you saw they all did well, you guys saw during some of the practices and in the spring game, we mixed up the reps pretty evenly. I think we can look at the numbers from the spring game and I guess Jack didn't have as good a day as the others but he still had more passes. We play a little bit to their strengths but they're all kind of the same, so it's not like (we have specific plays for each guy). Maybe that hurts those guys, but we didn't really get into emphasizing certain things for certain guys, we just run the offense that's in for now and see how they manage it."