

Previewing The Spring: Several Holes To Fill In Special Teams Units



After a season filled with blunders, Ohio State's special teams units have come under scrutiny ahead of the spring practice sessions for the 2023 campaign.

The Buckeyes saw several failed experiments in their return game, while their desire to catch their opponents off guard with fake punts at key junctures of the Michigan and Georgia games failed due to various reasons ranging from penalties, miscommunication and too many men on the field. Not only will the Buckeyes have to right several of their wrongs from last season, but will need to fill the contributions of long-time long snapper Bradley Robinson and sure-footed kicker Noah Ruggles.

With several factors weighing on special teams coordinator Parker Fleming's shoulders, he said it was difficult to reflect on the special teams' struggles last season while eyeing improvements entering the spring.

"It's hard to put a summation on a year like that. It started off strong, we knew we had a big game to start and we kind of knew we had certain points along the way that we had to play really well, and when you look at it, at the end of the year, we didn't finish as strong as we wanted to," Fleming said. "It's hard to wrap your head around sometimes, we worked really hard and came up short. So what're we going to do? Work harder."

Ohio State's struggles were apparent, however the Buckeyes had the legs of Ruggles and punter Jesse Mirco to help guide them through an adverse season on special teams. However, Ruggles' career wrapped up following his missed game-winning 50-yard field goal attempt in the Peach Bowl against Georgia, leaving a void at the starting place-kicker spot.

There are several players in the running for Ruggles' spot, including transfers Parker Lewis (USC) and Casey Magyar from Kent State, as well as incumbent kickoff specialist Jayden Fielding. Lewis joins the Buckeyes with the most place-kicking experience — connecting on 26 of 35 field goal attempts in his

two seasons as a Trojan, while also registering a 97.7 percent success rate on extra points. Magyar and Fielding provide little in the way of experience, with Magyar registering just one made extra point with Kent State and Fielding going without a field goal or extra point attempt during his first season with the Buckeyes.

"We've got some talented guys (at kicker)," Fleming said. "We have some guys that have experience at other places, we have some guys that played here. The truth is, our job as a coaching staff and as a team are to find the best players at every position, not matter what the circumstances are. We have some guys that have a leg up on each other for some experience perspective, but the best guy will kick and that's what we're trying to find out this spring."

Ohio State also has a competition brewing at long snapper after Robinson finished his Ohio State career after a seven-year run in college football — five of which coming in the scarlet and gray. After Robinson went down with a season-ending injury during the Buckeyes win over Iowa on Oct. 22, Fleming turned to Mason Arnold to handle long snapping duties, but Arnold ultimately struggled and opted to transfer to Michigan State at season's end. The Buckeyes landed the services of former Arizona State long snapper John Ferlmann through the transfer portal, while redshirt freshman walk-on Max Lomonico serves as his competition at the position.

Ohio State is also searching for consistency in the return game, as the Buckeyes utilized a revolving door of returners last season. Although Emeka Egbuka entered last season as the likely answer at kick and punt returner, Ohio State opted to prioritize his health at wide receiver, while largely relying on linebacker/running back Chip Trayanum and wide receiver Xavier Johnson to return kicks. Johnson led the way with 12 returns for 269 yards, while Trayanum returned three kicks for 29 yards.

Mirco is essentially the only surefire starter at his position and is looking to build off of a season in which he was an All-Big Ten Honorable Mention at punter. Mirco boasted an average of 45.4 yards per punt while producing a long of 77 yards — coming during a windy battle with Northwestern on Nov. 5.

With several units in need of fine tuning, Fleming noted the overall goal in special teams is growth while the Buckeyes try to find pressing answers for starters.

"If you look at specifically kickers and punters, they played well," Fleming said. "There's a fine line between those young players that you need to be great players for you down the line, that might not be ready to go win big-time games for you, and you have to piece and put guys in the right spots to develop them the right way but also go dominate and win games."

"We had some growth there, which is a big part of what the special teams around here have become. It's not just any individual play, there's a big picture here," he continued. "If the guys get better from week-to-week and you play well in the big games, that's what you need."