

Radio Show Recap: Kevin Wilson, Alex Grinch Discuss Changes That Led To Ohio State's Win Over Michigan, Momentum Into Northwestern



An up-and-down regular season for Ohio State culminated with its latest twist last Saturday when the Buckeyes bounced Michigan out of Ohio Stadium in a 62-39 rout for the Big Ten East Division title. On both sides of the ball, the No. 6 Buckeyes (11-1, 8-1) made necessary adjustments and tightened units to wax the No. 7 Wolverines (10-2, 8-1) and enter the Big Ten Championship Game against Northwestern with some steam.

Ahead of Saturday's clash at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, an 8 p.m. kickoff on FOX, will OSU be able to keep its momentum brewing vs. the No. 21 Wildcats (8-4, 8-1)? After head coach Urban Meyer spoke Thursday on his radio show with 97.1 The Fan, he gave way to offensive coordinator/tight ends coach Kevin Wilson and co-defensive coordinator/safeties coach Alex Grinch, who broke down the improvements in The Game and how those adjustments factor into the conference title clash.

Kevin Wilson

- After a shaky game against Maryland on Nov. 17 when Ohio State escaped with its 52-51 overtime win, the offensive line bounced back vs. Michigan without a single sack allowed. Wilson pointed to the tone set by offensive line coach Greg Studrawa, carried through players like senior right tackle Isaiah Prince.
 - "They've been practicing pretty well down the stretch," Wilson said of the offensive line. "The wear and tear it takes on the body, to me, the job that Coach Studrawa does with those guys and motivating them — Isaiah Prince gets a phenomenal amount of practice reps. I think he had 104 plays on tape against Maryland. He's out there Tuesday practicing and it's inside (run) drill, and it's tough. There's other positions that guys have a hard time coming back and being good practice players. I think our line's gotten better because they're doing

a good job of practicing. We had a nice tone in practice. That's a credit to Coach Stud and a credit to his kids to buy in to the preparation, without wearing the body down, how to prepare and come out and practice well to give yourself a chance to play well. They've practiced very, very well down the stretch."

- Wilson's own position group is also deserving of credit for Ohio State's protection of Dwayne Haskins, namely on the sophomore quarterback's 31-yard touchdown pass to fifth-year senior wide receiver Johnnie Dixon in the second quarter against Michigan to go up 21-6 with 3:18 left before halftime. Junior tight end Rashod Berry's blocking on the left edge vs. Luiji Vilain set up the score.
 - "I think that group's gotten better," Wilson said of the tight ends. "It's still a work in progress and developing as we go. But like the other day, we throw a touchdown pass to Johnnie Dixon wide open. Rashod Berry's 1-on-1 blocking the defensive end by himself in a max protection and we're double-teaming the three-techniques (defensive tackles) to make it solid. So here's a very good pass rusher and a tight end pass blocking him on a play that takes four to four-and-a-half seconds to launch. Right behind him, on the pull-up, he's got one down, so those guys have gotten better. I think because we don't run the quarterback a lot, the tight end makes that line kind of complete. At the end of the day, it's been a positive part for our offense."
- Northwestern's red-zone defense, despite its middle-of-the-pack ranking in the Big Ten as the seventh-best unit, has given up 16 touchdowns on 35 chances inside the 20-yard line. Wilson noted that "this is going to be as tough or tougher" than Michigan and added that "you don't win championships by showing up."
 - "Their defensive coordinator, much like (Michigan defensive coordinator Don Brown), Mike Hankwitz has been up there for a long time," Wilson said. "He's a veteran, veteran coach. It's a little different style, not as aggressive as the team we just played. They play a little bit of more of an umbrella and they just snap it again. It's zone coverage instead of man coverage. They make you work. They make you earn it. I think they've given up 49 runs of over 10 yards. Statistically, they're in the upper half of the Big Ten. Their MIKE 'backer, (sophomore) Paddy Fisher, is a tremendous player. They're stout up front. Their defensive ends (are) very, very strong. Really good at cutting the tackle well. Pat's a defensive guy, the head coach. He has a defensive mentality, toughness with the team. Their football team, earlier in the year, didn't start that great. ... They play that bend-but-don't-break (defense). They're the best or second-best in the conference in touchdowns in the red zone. I think people have scored touchdowns 45 percent of the time. Last week, Illinois had the ball five times inside the 20-yard line. Got one touchdown, three field goals and a turnover, and that's the difference in the ballgame. It's going to be a challenge."

Alex Grinch

- Asked about Northwestern's revamped offense, Grinch referenced Clayton Thorson as the Wildcat that makes the unit go. Grinch pointed to Thorson, a fifth-year senior quarterback, as the biggest test for Ohio State's defense.
 - "They're a talented group, they do a great job and it starts with the quarterback," Grinch said of Thorson. "When you get a guy that can throw the ball downfield, big arm, does a nice extending plays, really extends plays to throw, not a guy that's going to scramble for a bunch of yards. But again, we talked about before is you defend the first play well and then,

all of a sudden, you buy yourself kind of a second in first down because you've got to stay in coverage but do a good job of staying after him. So it'll be a real challenge for us. They're able to get the chunk plays in the pass game if they're able to establish the run, so we've got to be sound in both."

- Ohio State's defense bounced back from its dreadful outing at Maryland with a sound performance against Michigan, starting with tackling. Grinch broke down how he and his fellow defensive coaches approached the Buckeyes' film from the Terrapins, studying the woeful effort and turning it into a handling of the Wolverines.
 - "That's a big piece of it," Grinch said of tackling. "There's a couple different options. NO. 1 is get the ball on the ground. Obviously, that's ideal. If you get two hands on it, even better. We did that the past weekend a couple of times, too. The second phase would be to get one hand on it and see that thing bounced around at the end of the play. The third option is get the ball carried to the ground. So the thing we described on film was the ball's on the ground or the carrier's on the ground. So when you're attacking the football, you've got to make the decision — it's a one-second decision, at times — is you're basically saying, 'Am I breaking on a ball? Breaking on man?' Breaking on the ball implies that I get a hand of the football. As you mention, we're breaking on a man saying, 'OK, the man is now in possession of (the ball). Now, I've got to get myself under control to make a tackle.' So those are some of the things that we talk about. The more times you get hands on balls, obviously, the better."
- An imperative piece to Ohio State's improved tackling stemmed from schematic shifts in coverage. Grinch said junior Jordan Fuller, sophomore Brendon White and redshirt freshman Shaun Wade flourished at safety after the secondary — traditionally a man-coverage approach — mixed in more zone-coverage looks.
 - "The option to play man coverage puts you in situations where a lot of times, you're kind of falling into a tackle at times," Grinch said. "But when you mix up zone, you have the opportunity to kind of break on the ball when it's in air. Not break to a specific man, but more to an area that the ball is traveling to and obviously there's a point of contact that would-be receiver is attempting to break to the same spot. So that physical play certainly helps. Taking an opportunity, too, when we do play zone coverage, guys are safeties making plays on the ball. Brendon White and then you mention Shaun Wade in the other coverages, those are important clips and it gives the offense pause. The next time they call a specific pass route, they understand that it's not just man — you are going to see some zone and not really falling for a ball carrier if you're first one at the point of attack."

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