

Fickell All In At Cincinnati After Long OSU Run

By TIM MOODY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Luke Fickell grew up in Columbus. He went to high school in Columbus. He played college football in Columbus. Then he coached in Columbus for the better part of two decades.

After all of that, Fickell decided to take the opportunity of a lifetime this year, moving down I-71 to become the head football coach at Cincinnati after a long and storied career with the Buckeyes.

The DeSales High School graduate played defensive line for Ohio State under John Cooper from 1992-96, capping his career with a school-record of 50 consecutive games started. The 50th came when the Buckeyes defeated Arizona State in the 1997 Rose Bowl.

After leaving Ohio State, Fickell spent the 1999 season as a graduate assistant in Columbus before joining the Akron coaching staff as the defensive line coach from 2000-01. In 2002, he returned to Ohio State as the special teams coordinator before moving up the ranks, ultimately being named the interim head coach for the 2011 season after Jim Tressel left the program.

From there, Fickell moved back to his position as defensive coordinator and linebackers coach under head coach Urban Meyer from 2012 through the 2016 season, at which point he decided it was the right time to lead his own program.

After his first few months at Cincinnati, Fickell sat down with BSB to discuss how he got his start in football, his career at Ohio State and the first steps to building his Bearcat program.

BSB: What was growing up in Columbus like for you? Any early memories of Ohio State football?

Fickell: "To be honest I was a wrestling guy myself, so a lot of the stuff I was over there (at Ohio State) for was wrestling as a



TIM MOODY

BUILDING HIS PROGRAM – Former Ohio State defensive coordinator – and one-time interim head coach – Luke Fickell opted to leave Columbus to take over as Cincinnati's head coach this offseason.

young kid until (former OSU lineman) John Hicks became a part of my life, became a good friend of my dad's and coached us in little league football and took us to an Ohio State-Michigan game when I was probably 10.

"Other than that I was a little kid going to a game because my grandfather was a cop or a police chief and they would sell the concession stand or something. But I didn't have a whole lot of recollection until then of really, truly being involved in it and a fan of it."

BSB: Wrestling was your favorite sport growing up?

Fickell: "Yeah. So I was more at the wrestling camps at Ohio State or wherever. Chris

Ford, the old wrestling coach, and things like that over there that I was a little bit more connected to."

BSB: How good were you as a wrestler in high school?

Fickell: "I don't know, not bad I guess. It was something I had done a long time in my life. Obviously you like things you're more successful at so I had some good success with it."

BSB: Did you consider wrestling in college?

Fickell: "Yeah. That was a big part of even a decision, it was something I wanted to have an option to do."

BSB: As a 9 or 10-year-old kid, what was that like having John Hicks as your coach?

LUKE FICKELL

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Fickell: "It was nuts. He showed up on our doorstep. His car broke down in front of our house in Westerville, Ohio, in a snowstorm, and I let him in and my dad and him became really good friends from there on out. Just by random chance, his car broke down right in front of our house. Dad helped him out and next thing you know next year he's coaching our little league football team, and they were great friends from there on out."

BSB: Were you close with John the rest of his life?

Fickell: "He was always somebody that was close – obviously being in Columbus, Ohio, and then being a part of Ohio State, he was around a bit more. But I mean he coached us for three years in football and was a part of helping us out in baseball. Everything. He just became a really, really good friend of the family."

BSB: Growing up as a wrestler, when did you really start taking football seriously?

Fickell: "I started wrestling when I was probably 5 or 6 years old. Then you start playing football when you're in third grade and it becomes something that you love to do and you're excited about doing but not until probably high school, probably sophomore year that you started to say, 'Maybe football is the other way to go for me.' You start having some success in that and having opportunities that it became something that was more of a passion of yours as well."

BSB: What was your recruitment like?

Fickell: "It was so much different back then. But it was you got recruited your senior year. You played a little bit your senior year and that's when you started to get your offers. I got a lot of recognition, probably more because of the wrestling. People saw you as a wrestler and saw you as an athlete, had a little bit more attention in the wrestling side of things. And then it kind of grew in the football side of things going into your senior year."

BSB: How different is the way you recruit now as a coach to the way you were recruited as a high school prospect?

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Fickell: "Really the core to it is no different, it's about relationships. It takes time to build relationships, and it takes honesty to build relationships. But the ways of doing it are so much different now. From social media, all you had back then was a phone call and face-to-face. But now there's so much more from social media to different ways to get to communicate with guys to FaceTiming them.

"But it hasn't changed in the sense that it's still about relationships. It's still about finding out what's important to the kid and who's important in his life. I think back then it was much more just the parents whereas now it's probably a lot stronger with the high school coach and the people of the community that give you other opportunities."

BSB: How seriously did you consider schools other than Ohio State?

Fickell: "Unfortunately I did. I thought I wanted to get away from home. That was one of those things where, 'Hey, I've been here my whole life, I want to get away.' And it had to be something that was – not away, away – wrestling was something that had to be an option for me. I wasn't going to go someplace that I didn't have an opportunity to at least be able to wrestle. A lot of the Southern schools didn't have wrestling, so that was never something that was a true reality for me.

"But it really came down to the Midwestern schools. It was Ohio State, Notre Dame or Michigan. You can throw Penn State maybe in there a little bit later, but they weren't early on into the mix. It really came down to the best feel and the best fit, and from visiting Ohio State and really it was the kind of kids that were there and the people that were there. More so the players that I got the best feel for."

BSB: You played on some Ohio State teams that came up just short of their ultimate goal. How good were some of those teams – like the 1996 Buckeyes?

Fickell: "Ninety-six was as good of a football team as I've been around. I coached better football teams than we had in 2002. Truly talent wise and things like that wise, but 2002 we obviously won it all. Ninety-six is as talented of a football team as I've ever been around. We had some great teams, we had some great players. It was incredible success that we had. Obviously everybody would say we never beat Michigan, didn't do a great job with that one. But really the reality is there were some great teams there."

BSB: What was John Cooper like as a coach?

Fickell: "Great man. Great guy. Still close to me today as a guy that's one of those guys that you rely on and lean on and call and communicate with still. He was a great guy. He was different in some ways in how he led and the things that he did than some of the other guys that I've been around, but nonetheless he's a Hall of Famer and did an unbelievable job."

BSB: If the 1996 Michigan game had a different result, do you think Cooper's career at Ohio State could have gone differently?

Fickell: "Oh yeah. I don't know that his career would have went much different. Obviously he would have a national championship under his belt. I think it would be more the perception of John Cooper would be different because there's a fine line between perception and reality. And the perception of John Cooper is he wasn't really great because he didn't beat Michigan and he didn't win a national championship when in reality he was great, he did some incredible things and he's a great man.

"So I think the biggest difference would be just a little bit of the perception of him

inside this state, in Columbus, Ohio, but nonetheless everybody says Shawn Springs slipping (to allow a Michigan touchdown in the 13-9 Wolverine victory). Nobody remembers that they held the ball for 7½ minutes and kept it away from our offense in the last drive that if we could have gotten a stop it would have given the offense another chance. It wasn't that Shawn Springs just slipped."

BSB: You had a torn pectoral heading into the Rose Bowl that year. Was there a time when you thought you might not be able to play in the game?

Fickell: "I did it two or three days before the game, two days before the game. So yes, we didn't know. But (defensive coordinator) Fred Pagac ... and those guys and Coach Coop really kind of put it on me. They had enough respect and trusted me enough to say, 'Hey, you're going to start the 50th game of your career. So you're going to go ahead and start and you've got to tell us what it is that you can do. And if you don't feel like you can help the team and do what you need to do to be successful in this game then I'm going to trust that you'll tell us after a play or two.' So I said, 'OK, I will, I'll be honest with you and if I can't do it I'm not going to put our team in jeopardy.' So they bandage you up and put you in a harness so you couldn't move your arm a ton but gave us the opportunity, and I played probably 95 percent of the game."

BSB: From the time you arrived at Ohio State as a player to your final year as a coach in Columbus, how much has the program changed?

Fickell: "I think it has grown. The world has changed and everything becomes so much smaller. The expectations from when I walked in the door there in 1992 is no different than that group of guys that's going to walk in the door early in June here and that's to win it all. That's a great thing, the support and everything like that is no different.

"Obviously facilities and those things. Honestly the culture is no different. There's different leadership styles but still really the same type of kid is going to be attracted there, whether he's from Texas, Florida, California or Ohio. The things that have changed are the different leaders, and then the facilities have changed incredibly."

BSB: Do you have a favorite Ohio State football tradition?

Fickell: "I don't know. The rivalry has got to be still the greatest, whether you were 1-3 as a player in it, which sucked. But that rivalry and what it means and the excitement behind it is to me the greatest tradition and the thing that makes people so passionate about the place."

BSB: What'd you do with your first pair of gold pants?

Fickell: "I gave them to my mother."

BSB: The rest since then?

Fickell: "Gave them to my wife. So that tells you I only had one as a player and then 13 as a coach I think. So my wife – I gave them to my mother first because I figured I'd get a few more and unfortunately that didn't happen."

BSB: What was your transition into coaching like after your playing career ended?

Fickell: "I never had intentions of being a coach. Football ended sooner than I wanted it to. I blew my knee out and the opportunities to continue to play were very limited. That's when I started to realize the people that had such an impact on my life beside just my family, whether it was a wrestling coach or a football coach.

"And then I remember Fred Pagac always telling me that he never once felt like he

went to work a day in his life. And my dad always told me to find something that you love to do because if you're passionate about something you'll have success in it. Those are the kind of things that stuck in my mind, and that's all of a sudden when I say that, this is what I think I want to do."

BSB: In some capacity you coached under Cooper, Jim Tressel and Urban Meyer. How do those three compare and contrast?

BSB: "Well, very different in their leadership styles. All three Hall of Fame coaches. But very different leadership styles. Coop is much more – he's a recruiting guy and he allowed his coaches to coach and he knew that he needed different people to be able to do things, it wasn't like he needed clones to be like him.

"Jim Tressel was just a different leadership style, very positive, upbeat. Everybody was pretty much the same. He treated them all the same – very fair, very real, and his leadership style was all about consistency.

"And then Coach Meyer was much different. He was much more of on-edge and very aggressive, and ultimately all three of them got guys to believe in and buy into the way they do things and that's why they're very successful."

BSB: Are you taking aspects from each coach into your career as a head coach now?

Fickell: "Part of all three of them, yup. That's who you are. The environments that you've been in, the situations that you've grown from help shape who you are and who you will be as a leader, and every single one of those guys has a part that I've learned from."

BSB: What was it like in 2011 when

you first found out you would be the coach for part of a season and then for the full season?

Fickell: "Initially we were going to be I think two games or three games and then Memorial Day when it all kind of came down. It was a shock, obviously everybody was in shock. The program was in shock. The players were in shock. The coaches were in every bit of shock as anybody. It was just a unique situation. There was nothing I could say was exciting or fun about it just because of the turmoil and the situation and how it all went about. But nonetheless it was the greatest learning experience, eight months of my life."

BSB: What was the biggest challenge you faced that year?

Fickell: "I think the ability to keep people all going in the same direction with so much uncertainty and so much turmoil, the reality, the human elements that all settle in. As I realize, I think 18- to 22-year-olds handle things a hell of a lot better than 45- and 50-year-olds. Just because they're more resilient, they're not set in their ways nearly as much. So in order to get everybody kind of aligned and headed in the right direction I think was probably the most difficult thing."

BSB: Was there anything you did in 2011 that was a mistake that you can learn from now as a head coach?

Fickell: "Holy shit, there's a lot of things. I could write a book about the mistakes we made or I made. But I think the No. 1 mistake was trying to be somebody you weren't and that's hard as a leader. In the midst of how you go about it I thought I had to be like Jim Tressel, and in reality you can't be like Jim Tressel. Nobody can. But I thought that was what was

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Fickell 'Could Write A Book' On 2011 Mistakes

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best to give us an opportunity to be successful and not have a bunch of different changes on people, whether they were the players or the coaches. That was just the conscious decision that I made, and it was probably the one that is detrimental because you can't be consistent being somebody that you're not."

BSB: You had a 27-6 lead before losing to Nebraska in 2011. Was that a turning point for the season?

Fickell: "That will be the one you never, ever forget. That was truly, I don't know that we ever recovered from that. We were in pretty good shape, we were doing pretty well, we were coming on and we never, ever as a team recovered from that."

"And I can't exactly tell you, yes we can say that Braxton went out with a twisted ankle and they rattled off maybe 30 unanswered points (actually 28). All I can tell you is I walked and ran to the locker room afterwards and I couldn't talk, couldn't speak, barely could stand up. I just remember my best friend Mike Vrabel just kind of grabbing me at the coach's locker and just saying, 'Hey, this is when they need you the most, you've got to be at your best.' And I couldn't tell you what was really said or whatever, but that's one of those memories that you'll never forget and one of those things I could never thank him enough for grabbing you, picking you up."

BSB: In contrast to that, what were your thoughts while Braxton Miller's pass to Devin Smith at the end of the Wisconsin game was in the air?

Fickell: "Oh hell, I don't know. Just a crazy, crazy game. We had it won, then we had it lost, then we had it won again. That's when you just realize it's about players. When you've got guys like that that you've always got an opportunity to win no matter what the situation is. It's a funny game."

"If you look at it, I think they ended up being the Big Ten champs that year and they were I'd say the best team in the league. We not only beat them on the last second, we had them beat handily before and then they hit a big shot on us. It just happened to be we come back and Braxton hits Devin Smith for a freaky play. Those things are all kind of blurs."

BSB: In your first few months as the head coach at Cincinnati, how much do you look back at that 2011 season?

Fickell: "All the time. Again, we've got a book of things of mistakes that we made, that I made. Got them saved and just making sure that we learn from those experiences. If something comes up, I try to look back to say, 'OK now hold on, did we ever have one like that? Because if we did I'm sure I made the wrong choice in that situation.'"

"But you always reflect back on the things that for me weren't successful and try to figure out why, and that's an eight-month process that hopefully will last me 10 years as a head coach that I can't get all the things that happened in that eight months."

BSB: When did you start really seriously considering pursuing a head coaching job?

Fickell: "A year ago probably now. Legitimately, so it was the summer before

this that I legitimately put my thoughts down and built basically a base to running a program and how do we go about it. Not just from who you hire but to what would be your core values and what would be the things emphasized in your program and how you would implement them and all the different things that go into an entire program. Maybe one-eighth of what we've implemented now because it's not what's most important now, but did that through an entire summer because I knew that if I was going to do it it was something that was going to be important to me and I had to be prepared."

BSB: What made this year the right time and Cincinnati the right fit for you?

Fickell: "Again, my passion changed. Once I put that pen to paper and knew this was something I wanted to do – it didn't mean I took away from my team being a defensive coordinator and those things because I didn't allow it, but in all the off-season and any of the time we had breaks you started focusing on how you build your program and how you build your culture and with who you would want to do it."

"And then it just happened to be that six, seven months after you had that plan one of the places that you would have pinpointed as an incredible fit for you happened to be open. It's a fit for many reasons. I think you can be really successful here because of the community that it's in and because of the football that it's around. The relationships you have in the community and then being the right fit for the family. A place that we truly, truly feel like we could raise our kids and live for 10 years."

BSB: Did you consult Kerry Coombs about Cincinnati before making the decision?

Fickell: "I talked to Kerry, there's no doubt. When I had the opportunity it was out of respect to him. I know that this is a place that's near and dear to his heart that he's one of the guys who I went to his house and visited with."

BSB: Were you hoping Kerry might come with you to Cincinnati to be on your staff?

Fickell: "There was an opportunity but again Kerry had to take a step back and do what was best for him, and if it wasn't the right thing and the best thing at the right time for him then it wouldn't be for us and our program either."

BSB: I know former Ohio State linebacker Marcus Freeman is on your staff – his office is right next door. If you could have one more former player on staff, who would it be?

Fickell: "We were going to have James Laurinaitis. He actually was going to be our quality control, and he was going to do it. But it ended up being at the last minute it just wasn't the right thing, wasn't the right time and the right thing for him."

"But any of the guys like him, him or Anthony Schlegel. Guys like that that are incredibly passionate about kids and young kids and growing men is what's important. Not the smartest guy in the world, but those guys that truly do it for the right things are the people that you want to be a part of. Those are two guys I knew would do it for the right reasons and aren't doing it for the right reasons because it's not the true passion of what they're doing and they're man enough to know they have an opportunity but know it's probably not right."

BSB: Who have you leaned on most for advice in these first few months?

Fickell: "I don't know that there's anybody in particular. I talk to probably (former OSU defensive coordinator and current Michigan State head coach) Mark Dantonio as much as anybody. But the ability to – I can call John Cooper who has been here and Jim Tressel and Coach Meyer at any point in time. But there's just some things you know deep down inside that you've got to make decisions and you've got to do them your way. Sometimes too many opinions can be the worst thing you can get."

BSB: What's your relationship with Urban Meyer like now?

Fickell: "It's good. Again, I don't know that when you first walk away that you want to be reaching back all the time just because you know darn well that you've got to do some things your own way and you've got to do some things on your own. But there's an incredible respect there that when there is a real situation that you've got an opportunity to reach out to somebody who's been doing it for a long time and at the highest level. But there is a competitive nature to that, too, that I want to make sure that we have."

BSB: After recruiting for Ohio State for so long, what's it like to sell a different school to some of the same kids you had been recruiting to Ohio state?

Fickell: "It's easy for me because this is what I believe in and it's my program, our program and we're developing it the way we want it and I really, truly feel like this is a place that we're going to be for 10 years to build a legacy. Anything that you're passionate about and you really truly deep down inside believe in is easy to sell because it's yours and you own it."

BSB: Do you think Cincinnati can go head to head with Ohio State for recruits?

Fickell: "Yes, and that's got to be a mentality that starts with our coaches. Because if they don't then we're going to play those teams and our kids are going to feel that same mentality. If our coaches don't think that we can compete with them, whether it's recruiting or on the field, then why the hell would we?"

BSB: Looking ahead to this season, is that week two game up at Michigan going to be special for you?

Fickell: "I can't put it ahead of anything else. I think it's going to be great for our program because it's a measuring stick to find out where we really are. But is it that much different? No. Is it the one team on the schedule that I know more about? Damn right it is."

"So it'll be something personal but I don't want to make this about personal. This is a new era, this is about what's best for our program and Cincinnati, and that means that we've got to treat every game as something that's special. And I won't let the kids in on the personal feelings that I have about that one because is that what it's really about or is it really about us having a measuring stick against a top-10 program to find out where we really are?"

BSB: How much thought have you given to week two in 2019, going back to Columbus to play Ohio State as a head coach for the first time?

Fickell: "I've been there. I was at University of Akron, I think our second year the opening game was at Ohio State. So I know it was a very unique situation. But I'm probably not too focused on where we are in 2019 as opposed to right now, but it will definitely be something that we can use as a measuring stick but also something to promote our program."

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