

First-Year DCs Set High Standard For Knowles

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Given the last several years of uncertainty on the defensive side of the ball for Ohio State, expectations are high for new defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and what he might bring to the table.

The Buckeyes are coming off a season in which they allowed 22.8 points and 372.9 yards per game, which ranked 38th and 59th in the country, respectively. It's been a two-year stretch – and three out of four years going back to 2018 – that the defense has not been up to snuff for what is expected at Ohio State, but with Knowles' pedigree and the success he found at Oklahoma State with his 4-2-5 scheme, which is being installed during spring practice, the thought is that he may bring about the return of the Silver Bullets.

With Knowles set for his first season as defensive coordinator, Buckeye Sports Bulletin is looking back at how Ohio State's defensive coordinators have performed in their first seasons, dating back to our publication's start in 1981. First up is former defensive coordinator Bob Tucker, who took over on defense following the 1981 season.

Bob Tucker

Tucker, who previously coached outside linebackers under Earle Bruce from 1979-81, took on inside linebacker duty for the 1982 season following the firing of the bulk of Ohio State's defensive staff. He was the lone survivor, while defensive coordinator Dennis Fryzel, defensive backfield coach Nick Saban and middle guard/tackles coach Steve Szabo were all let go following Ohio State's 31-28 win over Navy in the 1981 Liberty Bowl.

Though a formal defensive coordinator was not listed on Ohio State's media guide for the 1982 season, it was clear that Tucker was the leader of the defense as the only returning coach on that side of the ball. He took over a defense that had allowed just 21.1 points per game in the preceding season and returned eight starters, and Dom Capers (defensive backfield), Randy Hart (middle guard/tackles) and Fred Pagac (outside linebackers) were also added to the defensive coaching staff.

The result was an improved defense as the Buckeyes gave up only 17.3 points per game. Ohio State finished the season 9-3, dropping consecutive games against Stanford, Florida State and Wisconsin – all unranked – despite giving up just 21.0 points on average in those contests, including a 6-0 shutout loss to the Badgers.

Tucker stayed on as defensive coordinator for one more season before leaving to become the head coach at his alma mater, College of Wooster, where he coached for 10 seasons, eventually returning to Ohio State in an administrative role until 2008.

Gary Blackney

Following Tucker's departure, Gary Blackney was promoted to defensive coordinator for the 1985 season after just one year



SONNY BROCKWAY

TOUGH TASK — Jim Knowles will be tested in his first outing as defensive coordinator at Ohio State when the Buckeyes take on Notre Dame to open the 2022 campaign on Sept. 3. With a strong season, he'd become the seventh OSU DC since 1982 to improve on his predecessor's final mark for points per game allowed in his first season at the helm.

on staff as the defensive backs coach. He inherited a strong defense from Tucker that featured linebackers Eric Kumerow and Chris Spielman, as well as all four starters in the secondary – cornerbacks Greg Rogan and William White, rover Sonny Gordon and safety Terry White.

William White led the secondary with six interceptions, while the team combined for 21 interceptions and held opponents to 17.7 points per game, just one more point per game than Tucker's final defense at Ohio State.

It was another 9-3 season for Bruce. The Buckeyes fell to Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan before downing No. 9 BYU in the Citrus Bowl, allowing just a touchdown in the 10-7 victory.

Blackney's defense showed further improvement in the next two seasons, allowing just 13.8 points per game in 1986 and 16.5 points per game in 1987, but he ended up a casualty of sorts of Bruce's firing following the 1987 season. It was reported in BSB on Jan. 16, 1988, that Blackney would remain on staff following Bruce's firing and John Cooper's subsequent hiring but that his role would be reduced.

He ended up coaching inside linebackers for the next two seasons and left to become the head coach at Bowling Green from 1991-2000. Blackney quit following the 2000 season, leading to the Falcons hiring an upstart wide receivers coach at Notre Dame – Urban Meyer.

Bill Young

Bill Young would serve as Cooper's defensive coordinator after assisting Cooper for eight seasons during stops at Tulsa (1980-84) and Arizona State (1985-87).

"I went to the little OSU – Oklahoma State University," joked the former defensive lineman, who was an outstanding senior for the Cowboys in 1967. "I'm really excited to be here. It's one of the schools you always dream of having the opportunity to coach at."

"I went through college at a time when Ohio State football was doing – and they still are – really super in football. And Woody Hayes was one of the guys you look at as a figure of what you want to be as a football coach."

"We're going to be aggressive, and we're going to run to the football," said Young on his defensive philosophy. "We're going to be fundamentally sound and do things that are necessary to win the game. Whatever it takes – that's John's philosophy. He's a real believer in being a teacher and teaching all aspects of the game."

While Young had high hopes, the defense – and the team as a whole – suffered a significant setback in his first season, going from 16.5 points per game in 1987 to 25.7 in 1988, which ranked 68th in the country. Cooper said before the season that he felt the team was thin on defense, and that was reflected with just five returning starters on defense.

"We don't have a great deal of depth or experience in some areas," Cooper admitted. "We will have to make up for that with team tackling, hustle and effort. Our defense is going to have to make things happen."

Unfortunately for Ohio State, that was not the case, as the Buckeyes gave up at least 30 points in six games en route to a 4-6-1 finish, its fewest wins in a season since a 3-5-1 record in 1959.

Though Young had a challenging first season as defensive coordinator, he was

able to whip things into shape over the next seven seasons, of which the high point was allowing just 13.2 points per game in 1992, fourth-best in the country.

Following the 1995 season, Young accepted the defensive coordinator job at Oklahoma under head coach John Blake.

Fred Pagac

Once Young was off to Oklahoma, the door opened for Pagac, who had been on the staff in various roles dating back to 1978. He began as a graduate assistant before working his way up to linebackers coach in 1982, where he remained until his promotion to defensive coordinator before the 1996 season.

As chronicled in the April 27, 1996, issue of BSB by Jeff Rapp, Pagac was known for his "incessant bark."

"The fiery first-year defensive coordinator likes to use his lungs to amplify his point and sometimes raises more than the decibel level," Rapp wrote. "Poor decisions are annoying but can be rectified, Pagac asserts, and usually don't warrant a kind of hut-ho response."

"A lack of effort or apparent desire, however, is so mind-boggling to Pagac that his eyes often widen greatly and an occasional spittle of chewing dip shoots from his feared mouth when addressing the problem."

"Pagac even tends to point the bill of his coaching cap to the back, further illustrating the unmatched intensity in his face, just in case the offending player isn't already skitting in his presence."

The intensity paid off, as not only did Pagac continue Young's strong run of defenses at Ohio State, but he improved on it, going from 16.9 points per game in 1995 to 10.9

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

in 1996, second best behind North Carolina (10.0 ppg). He had 10 returning starters to work with, including linebacker Greg Bellisari, cornerback Shawn Springs and defensive end Mike Vrabel.

Pagac's defense pitched three shutouts that season, including a 72-0 thrashing of Pitt and big wins over Minnesota (45-0) and Illinois (48-0). The team's lone loss came at home to No. 21 Michigan, when the Buckeyes fell despite only giving up 13 points. The season was capped off with a 20-17 win over No. 2 Arizona State in the Rose Bowl.

After three more seasons as defensive coordinator, Pagac experienced a rare transition compared to his peers on this list – he received an internal promotion, acquiring the title of assistant head coach under Cooper.

"His duties won't change a whole lot," Cooper said. "If I'm not here, obviously he would be the guy to run the daily operations of the program. Fred's done a great job and been very loyal to this program and been very loyal to me. I just felt like it was a natural (move) to promote him to assistant head coach."

Jon Tenuta

With Pagac relinquishing his defensive coordinator duties, the job fell in 2000 to Jon Tenuta, who had coached the secondary for the previous four seasons.

"It's a great honor to be here at Ohio State, period," said Tenuta, who had seven years of experience as a coordinator between his previous stops at Marshall, Kansas State and SMU. "I look at this as a great honor for me personally, and I am pleased."

"I'm sure Fred and I will continue to argue everything out with the defense. It will be just like we've done things for four years now."

The defense showed great strides with Tenuta running the show, going from 23.9 points per game in 1999 to 18.5 in 2000, which ranked 14th in the country. The Buckeyes allowed just 319.4 yards per game (24th) and had 19 interceptions, led by defensive back David Mitchell with five picks.

Despite the defensive improvement, Ohio State went just 8-4 on the season, leading to Cooper's ouster. Tenuta opted not to stick around, accepting a dual defensive coordinator/defensive backs coaching role at North Carolina and establishing himself as a one-and-done defensive coordinator with the Buckeyes.

While Tenuta could have set himself up well at Ohio State given his first outing as defensive coordinator and potentially lobbied for a spot on Jim Tressel's staff, his departure set the stage for one of college football's better minds to join the Buckeyes.

Mark Dantonio

Along with offensive coordinator Jim Bollman, Tressel's biggest splash on his inaugural staff was Mark Dantonio, who had served as a graduate assistant at Ohio State from 1983-84 and coached under Tressel at Youngstown State from 1986-90. Tressel pulled Dantonio away from Michigan State, where he had been the Spartans' defensive backs coach for six seasons, to become Ohio State's defensive coordinator.

In the Feb. 3, 2001, issue of BSB, Rapp wrote, "Dantonio will take over a defense that had been under the supervision of both

Name	First Season	Net Change In PPG
Bob Tucker	1982	-3.8
Gary Blackney	1985	+1.0
Bill Young	1988	+9.2
Fred Pagac	1996	-6.0
Jon Tenuta	2000	-5.4
Mark Dantonio	2001	+1.8
Mark Snyder	2004	-2.1
Jim Heacock	2005	-3.0
Luke Fickell	2012	+1.8
Greg Schiano	2017	+3.5
Jeff Hafley, Greg Mattison	2019	-11.8
Kerry Coombs	2020	+12.1

assistant head coach Fred Pagac and defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta. Their tenure, which dated to the 1996 season, produced units that were nationally ranked in several categories and were anchored by future pros such as Andy Katzenmoyer, Shawn Springs, Antoine Winfield, Damon Moore and Na'il Diggs."

Dantonio didn't shy away from the recent history.

"They've been excellent here," Dantonio said. "In the past couple years, they've really stopped the run, and in '98 they were tremendous. They've got good players here – or we've got good players here – and the coaches here, Coach Pagac and his staff, have done a great job. The cupboards definitely are not bare here."

Dantonio inherited a defense returning six starters while losing cornerbacks Nate Clements and Mitchell, but Dantonio expected to play an attacking style once again.

"We played a lot of press coverage with the corners up. We've had a lot of good corners (at MSU)," Dantonio said. "Our safeties have usually been two of our leading tacklers every year. (Free safety) Richard Newsome led the conference in tackles per game last year."

Later, in the Sept. 8, 2001, issue of BSB, Steve Helwagen wrote that Dantonio was opting to stick with what had worked at Ohio State: a base 4-3 defense.

"Where I've been, we've pressured people, and I know Ohio State has pressured people," Dantonio said. "I think in this day and age we have to be able to affect the quarterback."

"Depending on how well we are able to affect the quarterback with our front, people will dictate how much we have to do in addition to that."

"We want to be sound and not give up the big play and make them earn everything they get. At the same time, we want to make the big play and come up with turnovers."

Dantonio's first-year defense gave up more points per game than Tenuta's – 20.3 in 2001 compared to 18.5 in 2000 – but still intercepted 21 passes and held opposing offenses to 20 or fewer points in eight games. The offense struggled, meanwhile, leading to a 7-5 record for the Buckeyes in Tressel's first season. Even in Ohio State's losses, Dantonio's defense gave up only 25.4 points per game while the offense mustered just 20.0.

The foundation Dantonio established in

his first season as defensive coordinator set the stage for Ohio State's title run in 2002, in which his defense allowed just 13.1 points per game, leading the Buckeyes to a perfect 14-0 record.

Dantonio left after the 2003 season to take the head coaching position at Cincinnati, where he remained for three seasons before taking the lead job at Michigan State. He coached the Spartans for 13 seasons, retiring following the 2019 campaign.

Mark Snyder

Dantonio's departure led to linebackers coach Mark Snyder receiving a promotion to defensive coordinator in 2004. Snyder had spent the previous three years on staff.

"We will continue to be an attacking type of defense that runs to the ball and puts pressure on whatever type of offense we are playing," he said. "We will emphasize speed, sure tackling and playing with emotion."

Snyder, in his only season as defensive coordinator, stuck to the status quo set by Dantonio and his predecessors and turned in a top-20 defense for Ohio State. The Buckeyes gave up just 18.2 points per game, led by linebackers Bobby Carpenter and A.J. Hawk and standout cornerback Ashton Youboty.

Snyder likely would have continued in his role given his success but elected to return to his alma mater, Marshall, to become the school's head football coach after the season concluded.

Jim Heacock

Defensive line coach Jim Heacock then took over Snyder's role, having served nine years on the staff across Cooper and Tressel's tenures. He had no shortage of returning starters to utilize, including linebackers Carpenter, Mike D'Andrea, Hawk and Anthony Schlegel; defensive linemen Quinn Pitcock and Marcus Green; and defensive backs Tyler Everett, Nate Salley, Donté Whitner and Youboty.

"First-year defensive coordinator Jim Heacock has a deep, talented, experienced and physical collection of athletes in his lineup," read the team's 2005 media guide. "And forget the age-old notion that Big Ten teams lack speed. These guys can run."

The defense capitalized on the returning production, finishing among the nation's best in most categories, including points per game (15.3, fifth), yards per game (247.6, fifth) and rushing defense (73.4 yards per

game, first). Hawk led the team with 121 tackles. Ohio State finished 10-2 that season, dropping games to No. 2 Texas and No. 16 Penn State by a total of 10 points.

Heacock continued a strong run of defenses over the next several years, never ranking worse than sixth in points per game allowed until the 2011 season, in which Ohio State's defense allowed 21.0 points per game, finishing the season 6-7 under head coach Luke Fickell. Following the conclusion of the 2011 season, Heacock was not retained by Meyer and retired from coaching.

Luke Fickell

Fickell remained on staff once Meyer was on board, returning to the defensive coordinator position which he had co-coordinated with Heacock since 2005. Meyer also hired former North Carolina defensive coordinator Everett Withers to co-coordinate with Fickell.

Coming off a challenging season, Ohio State had plenty to be hopeful for going into 2012. The Buckeyes returned several starters on defense, including defensive linemen John Simon and Johnathan Hankins, linebackers Ryan Shazier and Etienne Sabino, and defensive backs Bradley Roby and C.J. Barnett.

Fickell and Withers' defense held opponents to 22.8 points and 359.6 yards per game, which ranked 31st and 34th, respectively. Though not up to the normal expectations at Ohio State, it was enough to help lead the Buckeyes to a 12-0 record.

Fickell worked with Withers from 2012-14 and later was given co-coordinator titles with Chris Ash from 2014-16 and Greg Schiano from 2016-17. After giving up around 22 points per game in his first three seasons as defensive coordinator under Meyer, Fickell pulled everything together following Ohio State's national championship in 2014 and led the Buckeyes to a top-three defense over the next two seasons.

His run as defensive coordinator at Ohio State led to him getting a shot as head coach with Cincinnati. Fickell led the Bearcats to their first appearance (and first appearance for a Group of Five school) in the College Football Playoff in 2021.

Greg Schiano

Schiano had spent the 2016 season co-coordinating along with Fickell, and Fickell's departure to Cincinnati left Schiano as the obvious candidate to maintain control of the defense. He was named the team's sole defensive coordinator heading into the 2017 season.

In the August 2017 issue of BSB, Schiano expressed confidence in his group despite a number of key departures, including several first-round NFL draft picks in cornerbacks Marshon Lattimore and Gareon Conley and safety Malik Hooker.

"We have a chance to be exceptional," Schiano said. "What's given them a chance is they've worked incredibly hard to get to this point. But I've told them all that just gives us a chance, and I don't just mean work with (strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marrotti). They've worked hard in the classroom, learning the defense, learning the subtleties of it, and now we have to go out there and execute it over and over again."

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Buckeye DCs Have Varied First-Year Success

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The result was the defense that took a slight step back but by no means performed poorly. The Buckeyes still ranked 15th in points per game (19.0) and were ninth in total defense at 300.9 yards per game.

After just one season with Schiano as the lone defensive coordinator, it was decided that Alex Grinch would be brought in from Washington State to co-coordinate along with Schiano, allowing him to operate with a broader set of responsibilities over the defense.

"With the addition of our 10th coach, it allows me to (have more oversight of the defense)," Schiano said. "I can kind of fill in where they need a little help. If you take it that one of the linebackers does a different job than the other two, I can help there. I can help whatever position is needed."

None of the staffing changes helped to improve the defense, which fell to 51st in points per game (25.5) and 72nd in total defense (403.4 yards per game). The Buckeyes gave up 30 points in five games, including in a loss to Purdue, 49-20, and nail-biters over Nebraska (36-31) and Maryland (52-51).

The poor defensive performance led to Schiano's firing and Grinch taking the defensive coordinator job at Oklahoma. Meyer, the head coach who had hired both, would step down following the season's conclusion.

Jeff Hafley, Greg Mattison

Grinch and Schiano were out, meaning that Ryan Day began his first season as head coach with a clean slate. He opted to poach Greg Mattison from Michigan and hired Jeff Hafley from the San Francisco 49ers, where he and Day had worked in years prior, and gave them co-defensive coordinator titles. Hafley's work with secondaries was renowned, and Mattison looked to bring an edge to the defense.

"His expertise in the back end, he's as good a secondary coach as I've ever seen, and I know the players would say that," Mattison said, while cornerback Jeff Okudah said Hafley's knowledge and enthusiasm were contagious.

"Things the offense does and things that would pass through last year, guys are stepping up and identifying like splits or formations and everyone's player condition is just flying through the roof so we're playing faster," Okudah said.

In the April 20, 2019, issue of BSB, Mattison explained that he was hired at least partially for his experience running aggressive units.

"He definitely wanted us to be able to play the kind of defense that he's seen me be associated with," Mattison said of why Day hired him. "It's pretty evident with Larry (Johnson) that it always started up front. You want to be a very physical team against the run and you want to be a pressure team,

whether it's pressure with a four-man rush or it's pressure with blitzing, or whatever. But you want to not let quarterbacks sit back there and feel pretty good about themselves."

The defense showed immediate improvement under Hafley and Mattison's tutelage, allowing over 11 fewer points per game (13.7 in 2019, 25.5 in 2018) and establishing a defense full of superstars for Ohio State.

Defensive end Chase Young went off for 16½ sacks despite missing two games, while the Buckeyes' secondary shone with defensive backs Damon Arnette, Jordan Fuller, Okudah and Shaun Wade allowing only 156.0 passing yards per game, the best mark in the country.

The defense (as well as a not-too-shabby offense with Day and quarterback Justin Fields) helped lead the Buckeyes to the College Football Playoffs, where they fell to Clemson in the semifinals. Hafley's audition as defensive coordinator was strong enough that he immediately received interest from schools to become a head coach, and he left after one season to take the reins at Boston College, where he is headed into his third season.

Kerry Coombs

Hafley departed from Ohio State in December 2019, but the defensive coordinator position – whether Mattison would become the sole coordinator or if someone else would be given the co-title – remained in limbo until former staffer Kerry Coombs' return was announced on Jan. 20, 2020.

Coombs had served as cornerbacks coach at Ohio State from 2012-17 before heading to the pros and joining Vrabel at Tennessee. In the Feb. 1, 2020, issue of BSB, Day said Coombs was the one coach they had hoped to bring back.

"He is an excellent coach, and he has had two outstanding seasons in the NFL on Mike Vrabel's staff with the Tennessee Titans," he said.

Coombs – and Mattison, at least for one season – faced an uphill battle trying to keep the defense playing at the level it did in 2019.

"We've got a lot of work to do, but the kids have been playing extremely hard," Coombs said. "They are working and learning. It is a work in progress. I believe they're going to get there."

With the loss of several starters, including Arnette, Fuller, Okudah and Young, as well as the pandemic throwing the season in limbo until a start was eventually set for

late October – not to mention Coombs' lack of coordinating experience – things never came together for Ohio State's defense in 2020.

The Buckeyes cratered to 122nd in passing defense as one of just six teams to give up more than 300 passing yards per game. They were 59th in yards per game (401.6) and gave up 25.8 points per game, an increase of over 12 points per game from 2019. While Ohio State gave up only 97.6 rushing yards per game, sixth in the country, it didn't matter – teams loved throwing against the Buckeyes to the tune of 39.5 attempts per game, tied for the most among 127 teams that season.

Despite the defense, Ohio State still made a run to the College Football Playoffs, defeating Clemson before falling to Alabama in the national championship game. Perhaps due to the circumstances of the season and the challenges faced by Coombs, or simply because the Buckeyes still made a run to the title game, Coombs was given an additional year as defensive coordinator this past season.

It didn't last long, as he was demoted following Ohio State's week-two loss to Oregon, and he was not retained following the season, setting the stage for Day to hire Knowles.

Although there are perhaps too many unique instances above to pull any lessons for Knowles, the one common factor for a successful first-year defensive coordinator is returning starters, of whom the Buckeyes have plenty.

Defensive backs Cameron Brown, Denzel Burke, Ronnie Hickman and Josh Proctor; defensive end Zach Harrison; tackles Jeron Cage and Taron Vincent; and linebackers Steele Chambers, Tommy Eichenberg and Cody Simon all started at one point or another last season, giving Knowles plenty of talent to work with as he takes on a new challenge at Ohio State.

"When anyone thinks of the best in college football, they think of Ohio State," Knowles said. "That goes for people in the coaching profession too. You want to be the best, you want to be at the best, you want to compete against the best, you want to be at a place that's 100 percent supported by the university, the community and the alumni – a place with a rich tradition. When you put all of those things together, it's Ohio State. For someone who has worked his way up in the profession, it's really the culmination of a professional dream to get to Ohio State and to be with the best in the business."

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Knowles Takes Unique Approach To Tackling

By **PATRICK MAYHORN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Jim Knowles is no stranger to straying from mainstream thought when it comes to coaching football. Ohio State's new defensive coordinator, plucked away from Oklahoma State after constructing a top-10 unit in Stillwater, has built a career around challenging conventional thought and creating advantages with unique ideas.

Faced with a talent deficit as the defensive coordinator at Duke in the early 2010s, Knowles constructed a dynamic 4-2-5 defense with multiple hybrid positions to provide better answers for spread offenses while forcing opposing coordinators to contend with skill sets and schematic looks they wouldn't see anywhere else.

Having constructed a consistent top-25 group in Durham, Knowles jumped to Oklahoma State in 2018 and worked to flesh out a similarly versatile system, leaning even more into those hybrid positions and eventually creating one of the nation's most disruptive and havoc-heavy defenses by eschewing traditional thought on positional archetypes and roles. The Cowboys worked linemen into coverage to confuse blockers and create clear shots to the passer for linebackers while shaping the secondary around defensive backs who had the ability to make tackles they aren't typically supposed to make.

In speaking to media at the opening of his first spring practice as a Buckeye, Knowles turned heads again, bucking the conventional wisdom when asked about his plans for balancing tackling practice – which of course entails bringing players to the ground, sometimes at full speed – with keeping his group healthy.

His gathered audience jolted to attention when he answered with a swift departure from football orthodoxy.

"You don't have to practice bringing guys to the ground," Knowles said, before stiffening his stance further. "You can't. We're

trying to save bodies. The number of blows that a guy takes is really important to us."

Make no mistake, Ohio State is still practicing its tackling – perhaps more than any other defensive fundamental – as it works to rebuild a defense that has faced constant struggles with bringing ball carriers to the ground in three of the last four seasons. But the work done under Knowles' guidance and according to his master plan is truly fundamental, centered not around the pop of pads but around establishing repeatable habits for smart tackling without putting at risk the players, college football's most limited resource.

Tim Walton's cornerbacks work to stick to the side of a ball carrier in motion, hoping to knock loose the football with a well-placed jab as the first stage of their "thud pace" tackle, meaning that contact is made (preferably at or close to the rear hip of the ball carrier) but the ball carrier is never taken to the ground.

Safeties work with their new director, Perry Eliano, on pursuit angles, darting to the midsection of a standing tackling dummy, chopping their feet before exploding through contact with arms wrapped tightly around the dummy and their heads behind the contact, not in front of it.

Knowles' group, a batch of linebackers he hopes can reclaim the "Silver Bullets" moniker that Ohio State has struggled to embody recently, takes an even closer look at head placement. A team staffer rolls out a thick foam ring, which looks to be just under 4 feet tall (to encourage good leverage and proper tackling height), angled to simulate a ball carrier running to the outside opposite a linebacker set in his traditional position. The linebackers have to track the angle and bring the donut down with a wrap-up tackle, leading with their shoulder and shooting their lead arm into the center of the ring while keeping their heads out of the tackle and behind the ring, rolling to the ground through the contact.

The Buckeyes aren't practicing full-con-

tact tackles on human bodies, but the technique behind Knowles' approach to tackling doesn't need human bodies to be taught. His core tenets – group positioning, proper angles, hip tracking, driving feet and rolling through contact – apply all the same to Ohio State's extensive collection of coaching gadgets. In fact, Ohio State's cerebral new coordinator needed just the nearest object to explain his philosophy to a gaggle of reporters in March.

"The bottom line is that you don't have to practice bringing guys to the ground – it's all about positioning," Knowles said. "Tackling is technique and timing. What I'm looking for out there is what I call 'owning your hip.' You can do this all year long, you don't need pads on, you just need to own your hip."

Seated at a table behind a microphone on a short stand, Knowles rose to provide an example.

"If this microphone is the runner, I have to have one guy at its side – in a good position – and he has to tag (coaching slang for hit) the hip. And then I need another guy in front of him, with his rear leg up (the rear leg is on the same side of the body as the leading shoulder, and to have it up just means to have it in front of the other), and he's got to tag the hip. You can do that all over the field, you don't ever really have to tackle somebody in practice. It matters if you're in the right position. I teach them that it's OK to miss tackles if you're in the right position."

Comfortable as Knowles is in defining his ideal tackle, the new approach to bringing down ball carriers in Columbus does still merit a deeper look both at the technique Ohio State fans can expect to see this season and at what makes that technique successful.

What Makes For An Ideal Tackle?

The approach Knowles brings to Columbus has many names, but the most common moniker is "rugby style" or "hawk." The

former comes – as one might guess – from rugby, where defenders have no helmets and have learned to tackle with leverage and physics, leading with their shoulders and rolling through tackles to avoid sustaining head injuries.

The latter is simply the football adaptation of that approach, named for the Seattle Seahawks, who started deploying rugby style tackling under the direction of head coach Pete Carroll and helped to popularize the approach in the American game.

"We are a shoulder-leverage tackling team," Carroll says in a now widely shared teaching tape. "We've found that we can practice and drill our tackling without pads or a helmet. We can train and develop our safe tackling system in shorts and T-shirts, and it's a system that we believe can work on all levels, during all phases of the year – in season, offseason, and spring football."

"How we teach this system of tackling was inspired by those who play rugby around the world. Rugby players have taken the head out of the game and truly exemplified shoulder tackling."

The names can be used interchangeably, but for the sake of clarity, Knowles' teaching can be described in the shorthand as rugby style.

"I'm into rugby-style tackling, for sure," Knowles said. "The standard approach, again, if this (microphone) is the ball carrier, what we all taught going back to Woody Hayes is that you put your head across the bow when you're making a tackle. We don't use the head anymore, so you don't teach that. Now you teach near leg, near shoulder, profile tackling because you're keeping your head out of it. If you're keeping your head out of it, that's naturally – as the runner gets away from you – going to turn into a rolling tackle. Everything we do is really based on those principles, keeping your head out of the tackle. It all turns into rugby tackling, it really does."

"We are not harping on those major contact collisions in practice," he continued, with a clap to illustrate, "even when we get pads on. We're not. Football is a physical game, it's going to happen, but we're teaching angles and keeping your head out of it and that leads into the rugby approach."

As Knowles details, the major difference between much of tackling consensus and rugby style is in head placement. Defenders were taught for decades to lead with the head across the ball carrier's body (or across the bow, as Knowles says) on profile tackles (coming from the side), using the head to halt the runner while connecting with the back shoulder and wrapping up through that contact, creating the largest possible collision. For straight-on tackles, defenders were instructed to use the top of the helmet as a spear prior to targeting rules, which shifted into heads-up, face-mask-into-sternum tackling after targeting rules came into play.

This is not how Ohio State wants to tackle. Knowles wants his group leading with a shoulder into the ball carrier's hip, with their head behind the runner's body on profile tackles and to the side in straight-on encounters.

Hitting at the hip gives the defender a

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leverage advantage and an easily identified, repeatable target. The defender's shoulder is always used to lead, as is the corresponding leg – near leg up, in Knowles' terminology. Because the brunt of the tackle's force is going into one side of a player's body (without the head and neck there to absorb the force), the other side will naturally wrap around the back end of the ball carrier and convert into a roll, drawing the impact in and redirecting it into pulling the offensive player down.

Working in tandem with that, Knowles preaches positioning and group tackling. He always wants one player making contact at the hip from the side, with another nearby to clean up if that first tackler misses – allowing his defenders to play fast and loose, without worries that a missed tackle will surrender a huge chunk of yardage. That's the Knowles system, in both its micro (hip targeting, near leg and shoulder leading) and macro (multiple tacklers in good position because they focus on taking the correct angles) scale. It can all be taught individually and built into a complete approach without ever needing to tackle to the ground in practice.

"(With this approach,) when you're looking at it as a fan or a guy who reports on it and you see a guy fly by and miss but he's on the right angle, you're not going to pay much attention to it because there's going to be another guy right there," Knowles said. "You're not going to miss badly because there's going to be another guy in a position to make a tackle. The ones that stand out are when a guy loses leverage, the ball cuts back, there's nobody else there on the defense and it looks bad. It's all about timing, technique and angles.

"We're on them all the time about tagging hips and being in a position with the near leg up – and you have to mentally tackle, even when you aren't in. The adjustment starts in your mind and then goes into your body. When you do that repeatedly (it becomes ingrained). If you look at the teams I've had in the past, we were great tacklers, but we never tackled in practice. We worked and harped all the time on positioning on the field and body positioning. It's an 11-man game. If they're going to miss, (I want them to do it) aggressively and on the proper side of the runner."

For Knowles, teaching this style of tackling isn't just about developing good habits and confident players in an easy-to-understand system – it's personal. In 2008, Knowles lost longtime friend and former Cornell teammate Tom McHale at just 45 years old to what was recorded as an accidental drug overdose. McHale's wife, Lisa – with whom Knowles is still close – donated his brain to Boston University's School of Medicine, which identified chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE.

"I really made a change a few years back when one of my best friends at Cornell, a guy named Tom McHale, became one of the first to donate his brain to concussion research," Knowles divulged as he explained his plans for Ohio State's tackling. "It made me change everything that I do – I think the whole sport has changed."

As Knowles learned more about the damage that established football techniques could wreak on a brain, he dedicated himself to changing how he taught.

He sought out and learned the teach-



FILE PHOTO

FROM THE ASHES — Jim Knowles isn't the first Ohio State defensive coordinator to install rugby style tackling, as both Jeff Hafley and Chris Ash (above) preached the virtues of wrap-up, shoulder-leverage tackling styles for the sake of both safety and effectiveness during their time in Columbus. Ash has been one of its foremost supporters since 2014.

ing points of rugby tackling, in hopes of both making the game safer for his players and of preserving the sport he loves, even if it meant breaking from the norm. For Knowles, this isn't just a difference of opinion, it's an imperative shift.

"You really have to look at how you're doing things," Knowles said in 2015. "It's still a great game, right? But we need to preserve it, even if you have to do some drastic things. In order to protect this game, tackling like this is a necessity."

Rugby Tackling Not New At OSU

Although Knowles may be a trailblazer in his approach to practice, he's not the first Ohio State head coach to lead the Buckeyes into rugby style tackling. Defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley used a slightly modified system during his one season at Ohio State back in 2019 after learning it under then-defensive coordinator Robert Selah (who worked with Carroll in Seattle from 2011-13) when he worked for the 49ers, citing similar reasons to the ones Knowles shares.

"We're still teaching the components of the rugby-style tackling," Hafley said in March of 2019. "The whole key to tackling is trying to keep the head out for the safety of the game. There are other things that we've all learned and we've come together to talk about, but the main thing is to keep the head out of it for safety reasons."

Chris Ash, who worked as Ohio State's co-defensive coordinator in 2014 and 2015 next to Luke Fickell, was an even larger proponent. He had long adhered to the tackling fundamentals he was taught as a player in the 1990s, but he called a full-staff meeting ahead of his first season with the Buckeyes after watching Carroll's video upwards of 20 times in his estimation and ultimately con-

vinced the brain trust in Columbus to adopt Carroll's technique.

"The Pete Carroll video really got a lot of people to go back and evaluate what they're doing, but not a lot of people necessarily bought into it because it's different," Ash said in 2015. "If you get out of your comfort zone, people are willing to do that. We did, and it paid off. If you're a coach that's been doing the same thing for 30 years and felt like you've had success doing it, you might think, 'Why am I going to change what I'm doing?' I look at it differently. There's always a way to do stuff better. You've got to at least evaluate it.

"I start watching our film, and I'll be damned. Everything he's talking about is showing up on film and we're not even coaching it. We got together as a defensive staff. I said, 'We've got to watch this. We've got to talk about this. Something's not right here. We're all smart coaches and have been coaching for a long time, but what you're coaching, what I'm coaching, it's not happening on film. We've got to talk about this.' We had some serious conversations for a few weeks.

"I think it's hard for coaches to stand up and say, 'We were wrong. We were teaching it wrong.' And in 2014 we decided we were wrong and there are better ways to do it. Tackling is not the only fundamental in football that people continue to learn and do better, whether it's blow delivery, stances, steps – whatever. There are always ways to improve and do it better. I think what a lot of coaches need to do is have the guts to admit they are wrong and find ways to do things. Not everybody is willing to do that."

For Ash, the switch was life-changing. Ohio State took to the new style almost immediately and saw defensive improvement across the board, all the way to the 2014

national title. On top of that, Ash saw injury rates drop and felt that his teaching wasn't just more effective, it was creating a much safer game for his players.

"It eliminated some injuries," said Ash. "But it also was a lot more effective. And I can tell you honestly right now, as a coach, I could go show you our film and what we teach, what we coach, what we drill and guess what? It shows up on film. Not once, not twice, not by luck but by design. Our players have bought into it, and that alone, in my opinion, led to us having a lot of success, especially late in the season.

"I'm so glad I watched the video when I did, that we went through as a staff and did a self-evaluation when we did, because I feel, after 18 years of coaching, I teach something that actually shows up on tape and is safer for the players."

Just as it was under Ash and Hafley, Ohio State's goal under Knowles' guidance is defensive improvement. But the path to that improvement starts with the development of safe, repeatable fundamentals – all established in the details of rugby style tackling and taught without sacrificing the bodies of the Buckeyes.

"The thing I've noticed with Jim is that it's not a competition every day of who can win the drill. It's about teaching because he has his eyes on that first game in September," head coach Ryan Day said in March. "There will be a time when we want to go against each other, move the ball and compete, but I think that's the veteran coach in him. He understands the big picture. There's a method to the way he's installing, the way he's teaching.

"We had a practice before we left for spring break where he ran the same defense for the entire practice. It's unbelievable teaching to me. It's not about winning the drill, it's about getting better as a defense, learning and developing at a high level. I thought that was really impressive. I'm impressed with the way the guys have been playing, their energy and attention to detail."



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