

Ryan Day Defends Parker Fleming Amid Special Teams Woes



Ohio State's special teams unit, led by coordinator Parker Fleming, has received its fair share of criticism this season, mainly for its consistent string of miscues on punt and kick coverage and returns. That scrutiny may have reached a new apex during the second quarter of the Buckeyes' 35-16 win over Rutgers on Saturday, when punter Jesse Mirco rolled out to his left and opted to run for the first down instead of punt, only to be tackled five yards short of the chains to give the Scarlet Knights the ball at the Ohio State 30-yard line.

It was a special teams blunder that was all-too common for head coach Ryan Day — dating even back to last year's contest against Rutgers — leading him to say on Tuesday that these types of plays simply cannot happen again.

"The ball should have been punted," Day said. "It never should have been run in that situation. Ultimately, I'm the head coach, so it comes back on me. But it needs to be communicated better, and it's unacceptable."

Despite the harsh words directed towards the special teams unit, Day still expressed a strong belief in Fleming's coaching abilities, while also proclaiming that his job remains secure.

"No, no, I think we're going to stay where we are right now," Day said when asked if we would make a coaching change in the middle of the season. "I'm there every day, I'm watching how things are taught. And we all need to be a part of it, as a coaching staff. If I felt there was something that was not being taught right or done right, then I certainly wouldn't intercede. But I'm in those meetings, I see what goes on. And so we just need to do a better job. But like anything, we'll continue to evaluate it and make sure that we're doing what's best for the players."

Day, who hired Fleming as special teams coordinator in February of 2021, said he has seen his third-year coach thrive as a teacher this season in practice, specifically citing his leadership skills and coaching acumen as two things that make him a valuable asset to the team.

"I watch Parker every day and I see the way he coaches," Day said. "And I think he's a great teacher and a great coach. I can just tell you that he works as hard as anybody in the building."

In addition to lauding Fleming's coaching skills, Day also said that the team's special teams miscues this season stem from a combination of things that do not entirely put the coordinator at fault. Day mentioned that communication between the special teams unit and the coaching staff has been especially lackluster this season, which is something that he says ultimately falls on the entire coaching staff, not just Fleming,

"We're all being evaluated every single time we're out there, and it's everybody that's involved in special teams," Day said. "It's not just the coordinator, although he's ultimately in charge, and I'm ultimately in charge. So you put it back on me. But clearly everybody who is in charge of special teams, because there's a lot of coaches that are involved with that in the meetings, can all do a better job. So we'll just keep pushing to make it better. But we know what the expectation is."

Through nine games, Ohio State ranks 79th in the nation in net punting at 38.24 yards per attempt, 70th in kickoff returns (19.73), 46th in kickoff return defense (18.08), 107th in punt returns (4.13) and 121st in punt return defense (15.22).