

Throwback Film Study: Ohio State-Penn State 2015



With the return of football up in the air, now serves as a perfect time for reflection on the history of football, and the strategic evolution of the game. To do that, the film study will be spending the offseason looking back at classic Ohio State games. Today's film study takes a look at the struggles of Ohio State's 2015 offense, through a 38-10 win over Penn State. Video is from this cut-up. Last week's film study can be found [here](#).

There are few college football storylines more misguided than the “struggling red zone offense” trope that has infected seemingly every team at least once, and made its way to Columbus twice in Urban Meyer’s final four seasons with the Buckeyes. It’s one of the most extreme football instances of missing the forest for the trees, yet still a mistake that’s extremely easy to make when attempting to diagnose a problem with a college football offense.

That’s largely due to the fact that the easiest stat to measure in football is points, and because of that, points are often used to define offensive success. This is especially true in defining modern offensive success, now that we’ve correctly identified just how silly stats like total offense are in a world where one offense is running 100 plays a game and another is still running 50. Because points are so crucial to the way that we judge offenses, the failure to score them, especially in short-yardage situations like within the 20-yard line, can be considered the defining problem for an offense.

While the inability to score points is obviously as fatal a flaw as you can have as an offense, chalking up red-zone struggles as the primary contributor to that inability is thinking far too small. If an offense can’t score in the red-zone, it isn’t because it has a red-zone problem, it’s because it has an offense problem. If the shortest part of the field is causing a team difficulty, that likely means that something larger has gone wrong in the offense.

Both times that Ohio State was afflicted with “red-zone troubles,” there was unquestionably a larger problem looming, first in 2015, and again in 2018. The latter is much easier to diagnose than the

former: Ohio State's 2018 rushing attack was predicated around having a run-threat at quarterback. Dwayne Haskins wasn't that, so the short-yardage game suffered as the offensive line struggled with defenses ignoring the quarterback on running plays, eliminating the numbers advantage that Meyer's run game relied on.

A switch to zone-blocking in 2019 alleviated that issue, and the Buckeyes were back to a well-rounded offense without any major flaws.

In 2015, the problems were quite a bit deeper, and more related to overall scheme and play calling. This era of Ohio State football is often considered to be one of too much chaos, and of not having the full coaching staff on the same page. Nowhere was that more apparent than on the offensive side of the ball in 2015, when, with a team filled with future NFL standouts, co-coordinators Tim Beck and Ed Warinner could never seem to get out of their own way.

The struggles that ultimately kept this team out of the College Football Playoff have been covered ad nauseam, but every person involved with that team seems to tell a different story. For some, Beck and Warinner were at fault, unable to agree on the direction of the offense. For others, the blame falls to wide receivers coach Zach Smith, who coached a unit that vastly under-performed relative to the talent in the room. Ultimately, it doesn't really matter. The man to blame isn't important, but what does have some value is understanding what exactly went wrong on that 2015 offense.

The best lens to do that through, strangely enough, is by looking at a game that Ohio State actually won, but a game that had just about every thing that was wrong with that offense on display, including the "red-zone quarterback" strategy that the Buckeyes deployed for about three weeks before moving to J.T. Barrett as a starter full-time.

On the whole, the largest problem that ailed this offense was a lack of a definitive identity. With every coach trying to run a different system, and two vastly different quarterbacks trading snaps in the middle of games, it's easy to understand why this offense was lacking in the identity department.

On the field, that frequently translated to what could be described as mismatched scheme/quarterback combinations. It often felt as though Ohio State was using Cardale Jones to run the offense that was designed for J.T. Barrett or Braxton Miller, rather than an offense that was designed around his strengths. That showed up right away in this game, as Jones was given two short throws on the first drive of the game, both of which he missed badly. Obviously a lot of this is on the quarterback, but these passes were spread throughout the game, whenever Jones came onto the field.

Later in the game, facing a third-and long, Jones again checks down, far short of the first-down line.

The worst of the bunch might be this, another check down on third-and-long, which goes right over Ezekiel Elliott's head. All of these plays fail for similar reasons. Each one sees Jones' throwing form compromised in the face of pressure that arrives almost as soon as the ball is snapped, and each one shows very little in the way of options for Jones to hit down the field in the allotted time he's given before the pressure arrives. On top of that, the pressure is coming from three or four guys on every single one of these plays, meaning that Penn State is able to further erase those downfield options.

Without a consistent threat of short-yardage gains on those underneath passes, as Jones was unable to hit them with any regularity, Penn State was also able to direct its linebackers to play the run first.

That, paired with the lack of a running threat out of the quarterback spot, which Meyer's offense was predicated on for years, doomed the rushing attack as well. The defense knew that it didn't have to worry about Jones tucking and running, eliminating Ohio State's numbers advantage that usually comes from isolating and reading a defensive end. Linebackers didn't fear the play action, so every run with Jones in the game was almost completely doomed from the start.

Gadget plays yielded little success as well, and often seemed to be run just for the sake of running them, with little to no setup beforehand that would make the defense think that anything other than a handoff to Miller was coming. That creates the same problem as before, where, without a numbers advantage, a threat to run at QB, or a misdirection, the defense can just key in on one player. Unless the blocking is perfect, which it rarely was with this group, these sorts of plays are never going to work if the rest of the offense isn't already running smoothly, giving the defense something to think about. Calling a jet sweep or a direct snap when you can't pass or run regularly isn't clever, it's just giving the defense an easy stop in the backfield.

On the few cases that Ohio State did find success early in this game, it would usually follow up with the exact same play only a few snaps later, or, in the extreme case seen here, on the very next play. This pitch play to Elliott works the first time because the blocking is good, and because the play is going away from the teeth of the defense, where Penn State was dedicating the majority of its numbers. It works because Penn State isn't expecting it, meaning that calling it to the other side of the field on the next play requires a complete misunderstanding of why it worked the first time.

It isn't until Miller or Barrett takes the reins at quarterback that the actual strengths of the offense start to appear, and an identity begins to form. With Miller at QB here, even with absolutely no threat of a pass, Penn State is forced to respect more than one option at a time. Ohio State dials up the pitch play again, and even though Miller actually makes the wrong read, he still has the athleticism to make something happen outside of the design of the play. That was frequently the approach during Miller's tenure as a quarterback, and it was still working in 2015 when he took snaps as a proto-quarterback.

It's even more apparent with Barrett running the show. Suddenly, that jet sweep has teeth, because the defense can't just sell out to defend the motion man, knowing that the quarterback isn't a threat with his legs. Barrett forces the defense to respect two possible options, and when they don't defend him enough, he pulls the ball and makes a play on his own. This was still very much an option-driven offense, just as it had been for the first three years of the Meyer tenure, but with Jones at the helm, it could never follow that playbook, because it was never built for him. It was built for Miller, and fit Barrett even better, because he was so good at manipulating the defense.

Once he entered the game as a full-time quarterback rather than just a red-zone threat, the entire offense opened up. On this play, because Barrett has the legs to beat Penn State on a read-option keeper, the defensive end he's reading and the linebackers that are watching the backfield are forced to

wait for the handoff to react.

It was still limited because of a poorly designed passing attack, Barrett's limitations as a thrower (which we exacerbated by Beck's bizarre preferences for a throwing motion) and poorly coached receivers, but the rushing attack came to life when Barrett was in the game, because it could actually operate as intended with him at the helm. Jones was never going to work in this offense, which is why Ohio State changed it for the 2014 playoff run, shifting to a more vertical, zone run approach to take the option out of the attack and lean into what Jones was good at, while still creating holes for Elliott.

If the Buckeyes wanted to stick with that in 2015 and run with Jones as the quarterback, it absolutely could have worked, but it required a playbook that looked much more like Clemson's, and much less like Meyer's. Instead, Ohio State trotted out Jones and gave him the Barrett playbook. He was doomed to fail from the beginning, and it was through no fault of his own.

Ultimately, that was the failure that kept Ohio State from repeating as champions in 2015. The offense was seemingly always stuck in first-gear because the coaching staff had a fundamental misunderstanding of their personnel. With any sort of defined identity that matched the quarterback who was named the starter, this team blows through its schedule and wins another title, regardless of who that quarterback and identity is. Instead, in trying to do too much at once, Ohio State mismatched its personnel with its scheme, and didn't realize what had happened until the growth of the team was already stunted.

By the time Michigan State came to town, the Buckeyes hadn't spent enough time reworking the passing game to better cover a lackluster offensive line and a new starting quarterback that was lacking an elite arm, and the Spartans were able to halt the rushing attack enough that Ohio State couldn't grind out a win as it had done before. Against Michigan and Notre Dame, Ohio State showed what it could've been if it was operating at full capacity from the start, with Barrett in an offense that was designed specifically from him. It's a brutal lesson in the importance of having a coherent offensive ideology that matches not just the coaching staff, but the personnel on the field.

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