

Buckeyes Get First Use Of Helmet Communication Against Akron



When the alleged Michigan sign-stealing operation was first revealed in October of 2023 by various media outlets, few pundits probably could have predicted that it would spawn a streamlined play-calling system so quickly in college football, but in the opening game against Akron, there was Chip Kelly sitting in the press box delivering his play calls into Will Howard's helmet.

The helmet communication system, which was first implemented into college football during the 2023 off-season, was new for all the college football teams in Week 1. For the Buckeyes in their 52-6 win over Akron, it was so far, so good.

'We've been working with it since the spring, so it's not really a new thing that we have had to deal with,' Howard said. 'Obviously this year it's new, but we've been doing it for pretty much all of the time I've been here, so it is new, but for it being the first game, I think we did pretty well with it.'

The play-calling system is in one player's helmet on each side of the ball. On offense for Ohio State, that is the quarterback, Howard. The play-caller, in the offense's case, Kelly, voices the play call to Howard, who communicates that call to the rest of the team. If it sounds pretty simple, that's because it is, as the quarterback and play-caller get more used to the system is when things can become more complex, according to head coach Ryan Day.

'When you're Will and the quarterbacks and you can hear the voice in a helmet, you realize that's a different thing,' Day said in his press conference on Tuesday. 'To have a voice in your head while you're on the field is something to get used to, so we've worked hard on that in practice to get used to that.'

'That is a good sign when a play is called and everyone knows exactly what it is,' he said. 'The good news now is he can tell him the play call, he can give him little bits of information here and there. You can make sure that he understands the situation, he understands the down and distance or maybe give a tip to one of the guys in the huddle, so it's something new but so far it's been good.'

Play calling in general for Howard can get a lot more complicated by the type of play call from Kelly.

“We have some plays in our system where we’ll give them two or three plays at a time and then he selects what the best play is,” Kelly said. “In all of our checks I thought he did a really good job of that.”

On the defensive side of the ball, typical quarterback of the defense, Mike linebacker Cody Simon, who usually receives the play from defensive coordinator Jim Knowles, was out with injury, meaning linebacker Sonny Styles had to step up to become the leader of the defense. For someone who hadn’t played the linebacker position during an actual game before, let alone the Mike linebacker spot, Day was impressed.

“I thought Sonny, moving positions here, within a week and a half of playing the season, he handled that very well,” Day said. “I thought his communication was good. He got everybody on the same page and so that was good.”

In past years, on the offensive side of the ball, it would’ve been Day in his quarterback’s helmet as the play-caller, but after the hiring of Kelly as offensive coordinator and play-caller, Day has moved to more of a ‘CEO’ role. Day isn’t fully removed from the process though, instead, he provides consistent suggestions or tips to his coordinators.

“The best way to describe it is just imagine Jim’s calling, or Chip’s calling it, I’m kind of there having a conversation,” Day said.

“Not getting in the way of what’s being called, but just making sure to understand the situation, the down and distance, time, things we’re seeing down the field, maybe someone’s got big eyes... we’ve got to get these guys going, maybe there’s a little lull, whatever those things are, you’re just trying to communicate that to both sides.”

For Kelly, the conversations with Day in between possessions were very reassuring to his thoughts as the play-caller.

“He was great, there were a couple of suggestions that he ran up to the booth, ‘Hey, let’s get to this,’ and like ‘Okay, I was maybe between one or two, but I felt really good when he felt really good about it,” Kelly said “The communication in between (possessions is about) what they’re doing, what we think they’re doing, changing speeds, changing tempos, some of those things, I thought he did a really good job. He’s involved with the defense, with Jim and he’s involved with the special teams guys too.”

With all of the benefits for Day and Kelly that might come with the helmet communication system, it all comes down to the comfort level of the guy giving his teammates the calls, and after one week, Howard seems to be a huge fan.

“I think we’re able to have a little dialogue on the headset and it’s really beneficial for us,” Howard said. “We can continue to move on and keep using it in a new way going forward.”