

Buckeyes More Comfortable, Confident Entering Second Year Of Knowles' Defense



Following an up-and-down first season under Jim Knowles' unconventional 4-2-5 defensive system, many questions remain regarding just how effective the scheme can be for Ohio State in 2023.

While there is some existing uncertainty, Knowles expressed confidence in his defense after the first practice of fall camp on Thursday, specifically noting his players' increased familiarity and knowledge of the scheme heading into year two.

"I do see it clicking," Knowles said. "I see players in the right spots, players understanding more of the 'Why?' Why I call a certain thing. I expect our older guys to answer that. Not just what or where or how, but why? What's the purpose behind this call? And they're able to see that now."

Speaking in front of the media for the first time since the spring, Knowles acknowledged that his defense must "do better" in 2023 if they wish to avenge last season's lapses against Michigan and Georgia, where they relinquished a combined 1,063 yards and 87 points in the two losses against the Wolverines and Bulldogs. According to the Buckeyes' defensive play-caller, his team has taken significant steps to accomplishing that feat, as his players have shown marked improvement with their ability to react and converse with each other on the field.

"I see quality," Knowles said. "I see adjustments. I see fits. I hear, more than see, communication. Communication is the biggest thing, particularly with this generation, because they're on their phones all the time, and sometimes they text each other when they're sitting in the same room. So our job is to get them to talk to each other."

Knowles' belief in the Buckeyes' defense was echoed by the players on Thursday after practice, specifically from starting linebackers Tommy Eichenberg and Steele Chambers. Similarly to Knowles, Eichenberg noted that he and his teammates have made a concerted effort to better understand the complexities of the system away from the field in its second year of installation.

"I think it's just different on different levels," Eichenberg said. "First year was the first year, but (in the) second year, you try to learn even more about the defense. Really try to get into his brain and (understand) why he is calling something (and) how the whole defense works."

According to Chambers, this increasing familiarity with Knowles' scheme has allowed each player on the defense to play more freely and instinctively — a change that, in his eyes, was readily apparent in the team's first fall practice.

"I think people are just more confident," Chambers said. "People just know what they're doing and they're flying around a lot more. There's a lot less guessing. So that's good for the 'D.'"

The graduate linebacker also noted that the more free-flowing and purposeful nature of the defense was most notable in the secondary during Thursday's practice, who are looking to rebound from the several explosive plays they surrendered in the team's final two games of the 2022 season. Chambers said he was particularly impressed with the play of returning cornerbacks Jordan Hancock and Denzel Burke, who are both expected to start for Knowles this season.

"You drop in coverage and the next thing you know, the quarterback's eyes are looking all around," Chambers said. "That just means that guys in the back are just covering guys. It's like a blanket out there."

"Throughout all of practice, you just didn't really see a lot of balls completed," Chambers continued. "And that's just a testament to both (Hancock and Burke), all the work they put in the offseason."

While Knowles will presumably plan to make adjustments of his own as the season quickly approaches, he knows that the positive strides his defense is making at the start of fall camp is much more important, as it will go a long way in determining the success of Ohio State's 2023 campaign.

"The players having a year's worth of knowledge of the scheme (is more valuable)," Knowles said. "I haven't made a legal tackle since 1986, so they're the guys that are going to be making the plays."