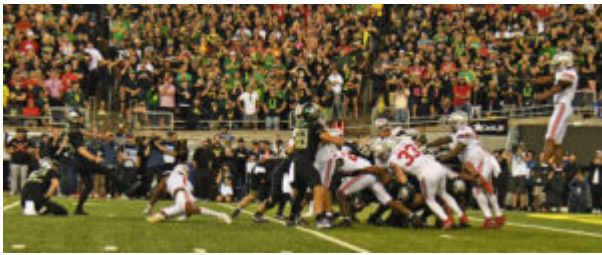


# Engels' Angle: Ohio State Must Learn To Win Close If They Want To Achieve Goals



Throughout the season, the three-word phrase “Leave No Doubt” has often been used by head coach Ryan Day as a mantra to describe how his team wants to play in 2024.

It first came to light at Big Ten Media Days this summer, when Day introduced to the world what exactly that phrase means, and how it represents the identity and mentality of this year’s Buckeye squad.

“Last year, what was it that prevented us from finishing off that last drive or getting off the field on defense, and why didn’t we do that?” Day said at Big Ten Media Days. “And it’s easy to say well it comes down to a play or two, but that’s not really the case. What we need to do is we need to leave no doubt. No doubt. Don’t leave it to one play. Don’t leave it to one call. Don’t leave it to one stop. Leave no doubt when you’re on the field.”

I do somewhat understand what Day is trying to say here. If I’m interpreting it correctly, he wants Ohio State to play with an intensity and focus that lasts all 40 minutes of each game and never wavers, so that when it comes down to the final minutes, Ohio State is in firm control rather than it having to make a few clutch plays down the stretch.

While I appreciate the first part of the “Leave No Doubt” phrase, I’m not quite sure if I agree with the second. Over the course of a long 12-game regular season and a now-also long postseason, Ohio State is bound to find itself in a close game that will come down to the last few seconds and require some late-game heroics and execution, and it seems “Leave No Doubt” is running away from that reality.

Not every game they play is going to be a blowout win, and that has been evident across the last three years.

In 2022, the Buckeyes were in a tight battle with Georgia in the College Football Playoff semifinal, trailing 42-41 with the ball in C.J. Stroud’s hands and a chance to win the game and advance to the national championship.

In 2023, Ohio State found itself in two close games that came down to the final plays, the first against Notre Dame when it had to go 65 yards in just 1:26 down 14-10 to leave South Bend, Ind., with a victory, and the second against Michigan last November when it was in a similar situation, down 30-24 with just 1:00 on the clock and 81 yards to go.

This season, after five straight blowout wins where Ohio State left no doubt, the Buckeyes found themselves needing just a field goal to win its Week 7 contest against Oregon, with the offense starting

at their own 25-yard line with 1:47 left to score.

In three of those four situations, the last-second Notre Dame win being the outlier, Day and the Buckeyes were on the losing side. And in each of the three losses against Georgia, Michigan and Oregon, the game ended in similar fashion, with the Buckeyes either mismanaging the clock or making crucial mistakes on the field — or both — to suffer a trio of gut-wrenching losses.

Ohio State under Day has had no problem taking care of business against inferior opponents, and that's certainly no easy feat. Just ask Urban Meyer, who lost a handful of games as heavy favorites on the road over the years.

But the Buckeyes have struggled to close out games and make that one final play against much more formidable foes over the years, and it's now become a recurring issue that has prevented them from taking that next step.

If Ohio State wants to finally achieve those three elusive goals — defeating Michigan, winning the Big Ten Championship and winning the national championship — it is going to need to learn how to get it done when the game is on the line and the whole country is watching, oftentimes waiting and rooting for it to fail.

And that only comes if the Buckeyes are able to make more winning plays down the stretch than their opponent and execute to the best of their ability. Against Georgia, they did not do that. Against Michigan, they did not do that. And now against Oregon, it was more of the same.

Ohio State has the talent and, in my opinion, the right coaching staff in place to win it all this year. But they can't assume that it will run away with every game, "leave no doubt," and cruise to more blowout wins en route to a title.

Whether they need to overcome some mental hurdles or just have their best players make the right plays down the stretch, the Buckeyes need to figure out how to beat a top five opponent in a close game, and the next opportunity to do that may be in two weeks against Penn State.