

Engels' Angle: Ohio State's Offensive Line Must Come Through If Bucks Want Beatdown Of Wolverines



In a season full of mostly ups for Ohio State so far this season, perhaps the only difficult moment for the Buckeyes this season — outside of maybe Will Howard sliding with zero seconds on the clock against Oregon — has been injuries, which have mostly occurred on their offensive line.

Somewhat remarkably, Ohio State did not experience any significant, season-ending injuries last year, but this season has been a completely different story. In a span of just over a month, two of the Buckeyes' best and most valuable offensive linemen went down with season-ending ailments, first left tackle Josh Simmons with a left knee injury during the Oregon game, and then center Seth McLaughlin with a torn Achilles just before the Buckeyes' Nov. 23 game against Indiana.

If you were to ask a Buckeyes' fan before the Oregon to name the two players you couldn't afford to lose due to injury, both Simmons and McLaughlin would be high on that list, as they were two key stalwarts on an Ohio State front five this season that was experiencing a resurgence after a less-than-stellar 2023 campaign.

When the dust settled on the injuries, Justin Frye's unit was working with an offensive line consisting of left tackle Donovan Jackson, left guard Austin Siereveld, center Carson Hinzman, left guard Tegra Tshabola and left tackle Josh Fryar, a unique combination that no one was really expecting when the season began three months ago.

But even with this uncertainty at the end of what many people believe is a championship-or-bust season, the Buckeyes' big uglies have persevered.

Make no mistake, the offensive line took a bit of a step back against Indiana — with them opening up less holes than previously for TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins and committing a few costly

penalties- but the new group was able to protect Will Howard for most of the day, allowing just one sack on the stat packs, one which came on an intentional grounding call on the Buckeyes' quarterback.

In all, it was a solid day for the Buckeyes' new-look front five, making it a pretty interesting story given how much the unit has changed over the last few weeks and also how much criticism they've faced over the last few years.

"I'm so proud of those guys," Will Howard said of his offensive line after the Indiana game. "For (Hinzman) and Austin to step into new roles. Austin was playing right guard early in the season and now he's playing left guard. For those guys to be able to step in like they did, I was just so proud of them."

But cute stories aside, this line will need to take another sizable leap forward if they are to achieve the elusive goal of not only beating Michigan, but stem rolling them into irrelevance, something we all know Ryan Day and his program desperately want to do on Saturday.

Believe me, I'm not picking a Michigan upset win, but I do believe the only — and I mean only — shot the Wolverines have of pulling off a shocking and potentially program-altering upset over the Buckeyes is if their elite defensive line can wreak havoc on what is — let's face it — a makeshift Buckeyes' offensive line.

The Wolverines' offense is inept and everyone knows that, but defensive coordinator Wink Martindale's defensive front is the absolute strength of the team, led by future top-five NFL draft pick Mason Graham (38 tackles, 3 ½ sacks) on the inside as well as intimidating defensive ends Josiah Stewart (32 tackles, 8 ½ sacks) and Derrick Moore (19 tackles, two sacks) off the edge. That trio has helped the Wolverines rank fourth in the nation in rushing defense (94.0), a ranking that shot right up after they allowed just 10 — yes 10 — rushing yards against Northwestern.

With Michigan's front playing its absolute best ball at the most important time — they also had six sacks on the Wildcats — it's time for the Buckeyes' offensive line to buckle their chin straps and become that physical front that they had hoped to become in previous years against Michigan.

Frye's unit does not need to be perfect — the talent gap between the two programs is pretty large right now that they could likely afford a few mishaps — but what it can't afford is a full-blown disaster, where they allow Graham and Co. to disrupt the game and force pressure on Howard, which could lead to unwanted turnovers and give the Wolverines some added confidence.

The Buckeyes' offensive line has made strides and overcome the odds all season, but as those inside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center have been preaching this week, none of that matters come Saturday.

If Ohio State is to finally exorcise those demons and do it in convincing fashion, the new-look front will need to grind it out and fight for a strong performance.