

Film Study: Ohio State Adjusted To Beat Spartans Defense

For the first time all season, Ohio State's offense was met with real defensive resistance, not just for one quarter, but for all four in its 34-10 win over Michigan State in front of a sold out home crowd. While Ohio State's offense struggling early was a bit jarring given the heights it has already reached this season, it really shouldn't have been surprising, and the film reflects that. Michigan State's defense is a legitimate top five unit, and the front seven is as good as Ohio State will face this season.

That front seven flexed its ability early in the game, getting to Justin Fields early and often and really clogging up the Buckeye offense.

This completion, while ugly on its face, is a result of that pressure, Josh Alabi is beaten badly by Jacob Panasiuk, forcing Fields out of the pocket. In the process of this, Fields is unable to hit Luke Farrell on the seam like the play calls for. He still has the tight end open outside of the pocket, but the play has broken down a bit, and Fields is out of rhythm. With more pressure coming, he just panics and sails it over Farrell's head. If the protection is better, this is likely a massive play, and maybe a touchdown, but Michigan State's defensive line makes a big play and forces Fields out of rhythm.

Ohio State has basically the exact same problem on the next play, though Fields is unable to escape the pressure.

Alabi is once again beaten badly, though this time its the result of a well disguised blitz. Antjuan Simmons pulls him in, and Joe Bachie slips right past on the outside for a free path towards Fields. On a longer developing play like this, Fields never has a chance with so little protection. Alabi wasn't in an easy spot by any means, but his struggles early really hurt Ohio State's offensive ability.

In an attempt to beat the heavy pass rush, Ohio State tried to go horizontal, and again found very little success on back to back plays to the boundaries.

Both of these plays were doomed from the start. Michigan State is in cover 2 on the first, and the linebackers immediately read the screen to Hill, because at this point, the handoff fake to Dobbins really wasn't much of a threat. The Spartans come out in cover 3 on the second play, and while this one wasn't as doomed because of scheme, it still had a very small chance of working because Josiah Scott sniffed it out from the start. Those horizontal plays really aren't going to work if there's no vertical or run threat, and Ohio State had neither early in the game.

By the fourth drive, however, Ohio State had adjusted. The main change was at tackle, where Alabi was subbed out for Branden Bowen.

The offense immediately kicked back into gear, even though this drive was halted by a few bad penalties. With extra time, Fields was able to pick apart at Michigan State's zones, and actually read what the defense was showing him rather than running for his life. He does just that here, hitting an intermediate out to Garrett Wilson that was open pretty much all night because of the scheme the Spartans were running. It took about 12 minutes for the Buckeyes to find weakness and break the

Spartan defense.

By the time the offense took the field again, they had reached full power.

This is a pretty simple run inside the tackle with a bubble screen tag to hold the linebackers, and because the blocking is solid, JK Dobbins is able to pick up solid yardage. A lot of this play can and should be credited to Thayer Munford, who completely clears his man out of the play to open up this hole, but Austin Mack shouldn't be overlooked. He's cracking down to pick up a linebacker or safety and he does a perfect job of it. His block turns a five yard gain into a first down, and there really aren't a ton of receivers out there willing to make a play like this.

A play later, Ohio State uses their newfound success on RPOs to create a massive play.

Because the Buckeyes just had success on an RPO handoff, and because of Justin Fields' ability to scramble, Michigan State's cover 3 is easily exploited by two separate run fakes. The first is the play fake to Dobbins, which pulls every single intermediate zone in. While those defenders are distracted, Austin Mack and K.J. Hill clear out the secondary, setting up Binjimen Victor for a corner route.

The second fake is from Fields. Fields rolls out to show run, and Victor cuts in, making the boundary corner think that Fields is running. As soon as the defense starts to close in on Fields, Victor drops into a no man's land behind the intermediate coverage but in front of the three deep zones, and from there he just has to make a play. He does just that, and Ohio State puts up one of the most well designed touchdowns you'll see all season long.

While that Victor touchdown was a result of design, Fields' touchdown pass to Luke Farrell on the next drive was reflective of the personnel change the Buckeyes made up front.

Fields has ample time in the pocket to make a play here, as opposed to the split second he had in the first quarter, and it makes a world of difference. He has the time to actually read Michigan State's defense, identify another zone, and recognize that Luke Farrell is running directly into a soft spot in that zone. He hits Farrell quickly, and Farrell makes a great play. This is a good play call for the situation, but this touchdown happens because of blocking above all else.

The line flashed again on the next drive, springing JK Dobbins for a 67-yard touchdown run, but the play prior to his big score may have actually been the better blocked of the two.

Starting up front, Thayer Munford again kicks the play off by erasing a defensive end, creating room for Jonah Jackson to pull outside while Jake Hausmann picks up a nice block on a linebacker. Jackson seals that linebacker, while Josh Myers and Wyatt Davis both do a great job of getting to the second level quickly. While the line is great here, the recognition again should go to Austin Mack. He executes a flawless pin and pull block, baiting the safety into overplaying him and opening up a hole inside for Dobbins to run through.

A play later, and JK Dobbins is gone.

The star here is Myers. With Hausmann again in to block (and doing a great job of sealing off a linebacker), Myers is schemed to block second level, as is Munford, because the read man is Panasiuk. Fields makes the right read, and with Myers paving the way, Michigan State has no chance to get to Dobbins and his newfound breakaway speed. This was six points from the second Fields makes the right

read.

After a third quarter that saw Ohio State run the ball, burn the clock, and grind Michigan State's defense down as best as it possible could, the Buckeyes decided to play the hits and put the game away.

As mentioned earlier on the Garrett Wilson reception, Michigan State essentially gave Ohio State this exact route all day long. The Spartans didn't want to be beaten deep or underneath, and to do that, they surrendered the intermediate borders. Ohio State really didn't need to attack it a ton because of how good Dobbins was, but did so here because there was no real reason not to. The Spartans show a deep cover 3 with no outside zone, and the Buckeyes use K.J. Hill and Luke Farrell on clearout routes to keep every zone firmly in the middle. After a split second look down the middle from Fields to freeze the corner, he hits a wide open Victor on a stop route.

This is pretty much the story of the game. Ohio State knew exactly where Michigan State's weaknesses were, because Michigan State really didn't make any attempt to hide it. The Spartan game plan was to blitz so much that the weaknesses didn't matter. For a quarter, it worked. Justin Fields was flustered, and the offense stagnated.

After that first quarter, however, the Buckeyes adjusted and the talent took over. A personnel change, a move to more quick RPO hits, and the depth and stamina of the offensive line gave Ohio State control of the last three quarters, and from that point it was pretty obvious that Michigan State had no real hope of keeping up. Ohio State didn't put up massive stats, but it broke down one of the best lines in the country and ran over a very, very good defense.

Play design, scheme, and in-game adjustments are great. Ohio State has all three in bunches, and that'll be a big deal at some point in the season. However, as Ohio State works through the meat of the Big Ten schedule, nothing is going to matter more than the big boys up front. As long as they play up to their potential, Ohio State is unstoppable. In the first quarter, they didn't, and the offense floundered. With each starter in the game in the final three quarters, it was obvious that Ohio State doesn't just have a great offensive line: it may have the best in the country.