

Game Notebook: Kienholz Takes Big Stage After Brown Injury



Going into this game, the main storyline was Devin Brown as the new starting quarterback. Kyle McCord started all 12 regular-season games this year for the Buckeyes, and while Brown had limited work - mostly running read options in the red zone - there was the question of how he would handle the spotlight as the starter for Ohio State.

Early in the game, Missouri brought a lot of pressure at him, forcing errant throws, scrambles and sacks, something that would be a theme throughout the entire game. On one of those sacks, Brown was hit and twisted down to the ground, a cleat getting caught on the turf at AT&T Stadium as he was falling, turning his left ankle.

After the play, he came up hobbling and attempted to stay in the game, though it didn't last long with him taking a big hit on another sack that ultimately would be the last time he saw the field before true freshman Lincoln Kienholz took over the game. Brown finished with just 20 yards passing, completing four out of six throws, leading the only Buckeye possession that would turn into points, which came on a Jayden Fielding field goal with 3:12 left in the first quarter.

"We play sort of a barbaric, contact, rough, rugged sport," Xavier Johnson said. "Sometimes that comes with the game. I wish (Brown) could have been out here and show what he was showing us at practice. The man that he was, the player that he was, the growth that he had this month off. My heart aches for him, but there's no doubt in my mind that Devin is going to be a great quarterback."

While Kienholz ended up throwing 17 passes in the game, it didn't seem like there was much trust in what the freshman was able to do with his arm since he had not had much game time to get acclimated before being thrown into a bowl game in a top-10 matchup.

Johnson, a sixth-year wide receiver who caught Kienholz' first completion of the game, said they believed in the young quarterback but became one-dimensional because they needed to get some

offense going.

“Did we have any doubt in Lincoln, or any doubt in his talents? No,” Johnson said after the game. “But in order to try to get some momentum going, we kind of were one-dimensional. I’m proud of Lincoln for the way he fought and the way he stepped up on a big stage and he didn’t bat an eye. There was a lot of pressure.”

Kienholz said he felt he was prepared for the game and it didn’t move too fast for him.

“It wasn’t really that fast, honestly, because I go against the best defense every day in practice,” he said. “I think the Mizzou coaches were trying to speed me up, give me some zero looks, but other than that it was just another game. The big thing for me is you just have to slow down, focus on my mechanics and trust my eyes.”

Kienholz didn’t crumble under the pressure, but he didn’t play particularly well either. He completed only six of his 17 passes, throwing for 86 yards, and he failed to put any points on the board, though he didn’t have much time to throw the whole night since the defense brought so much pressure.

“Lincoln got put into a tough spot there to say the least,” head coach Ryan Day said. “I thought he battled his tail off. Clearly, we didn’t help him up front, didn’t run the ball well enough. It’s hard to get much of an evaluation coming out of the game when you can’t get any balance. I felt like we could have helped him in certain areas, and we didn’t.”

New Look Offensive Line Breaks Down

At the beginning of the game, the offensive line had a surprising change with Matt Jones at center and Enokk Vimahi sliding in at right guard. Freshman Carson Hinzman had started every game at center for the Buckeyes, but he was on the sideline in Arlington.

“I don’t want to get too much into it, but Carson was having a tough time the past couple weeks in practice, and we felt like this was the right thing to do at the time,” Day said. “It’s not that Carson won’t ever play here again, but based on the last couple weeks of play, the decision was made that Matt gave us the best chance at center.”

The new look offensive line struggled the entire game, putting together one of the worst performances of any Ohio State line in recent memory. Missouri was bringing pressure all game, and it was something the unit couldn’t handle.

“They were doing a great job bringing a lot of pressure from all over the place,” Johnson said. “It ended up kind of giving us some trouble. We were trying to get some plays up, and the lack of time – every time you don’t have time to throw the ball, or something doesn’t have time to develop, that’s an issue.”

The Tigers were creative with the ways they were going after the quarterback, and it worked all night. They finished the game with four sacks, 10 tackles for a loss and eight quarterback hurries, forcing two fumbles along the way.

Day was candid about the offensive line and the impact that had on the offensive performance as a whole.

“There was some zero pressure that came, and they were aggressive on (Kienholz),” Day said. “But in the run game, we have a young kid and you have to be able to run the football and take some pressure off of him, and we didn’t do that well enough in order to win the game.”

Sawyer Ties OSU Bowl Record

In the latter half of Ohio State’s regular season, defensive end Jack Sawyer started to get into the backfield much more often than he was early on in the year, and he continued to show that dominance in the Cotton Bowl against Missouri.

The defense as a whole played a strong game for three quarters of football, and Sawyer led the charge, holding an offense that averaged 34.1 points per game to zero points in 45 minutes of action, which was the first time that had happened to Tigers head coach Eliah Drinkwitz since he arrived at Missouri.

“The defense played plenty good enough,” Day said. “They played their tails off and ran out of gas a little bit down the stretch, but to give up 14 points and 331 yards – they played great, good enough to win. We just couldn’t put it together on offense, and that’s the story of the game.”

Sawyer finished the game with four tackles, three of them sacks, tying an Ohio State record for a bowl game, and setting a career high for himself in the process. After the Buckeyes took a 3-0 lead into the half, he opened the second half with a 9-yard sack on the first play.

Even though Sawyer played well, he was still focused only on the outcome of the game after it came to an end and didn’t have anything to say about tying the Ohio State record for sacks in a bowl game.

“I’m not even really thinking about that right now,” Sawyer said. “I’m just upset about the game. I wanted to send the seniors out the right way, and we put so much work into it. It’s tough when you don’t get the outcome you want.”

Sawyer could leave for the NFL if he wants to after this season, and he likely raised his draft stock some with the performance he had, but he has indicated that he is likely to return to Ohio State because he doesn’t want his collegiate career to end with two straight losses.

“I think a lot of us all are on the same page about how we don’t want to end our Ohio State careers like this with two tough losses,” Sawyer said. “We all love it here. We love Coach Day. We love the staff. Sometimes unfortunate things happen, and you don’t get the outcome you want, and I think that’s going to play a big factor in our decisions.”