

Knowles Enjoying Progress From DBs



Of all the things that went wrong for Ohio State's defense in its final two games against Michigan and Georgia, the most memorable lapses seemed to come from the back end.

Whether players were missing tackles that could have prevented 75-yard touchdown runs from Michigan running back Donovan Edwards or slipping in deep coverage to allow the Bulldogs back into a College Football Playoff game, OSU's secondary didn't get the job done at its most pivotal points.

Entering year two with his scheme at Ohio State, defensive coordinator Jim Knowles pointed straight to those same defensive backs when asked if the teams' defenders are playing faster now that they know the system.

"We're getting our hands on more balls, we're competing," Knowles said. "This is a great offense, and we did not do a great job in those matchup games that we needed to. In order to get better, we have to win against our offense. We have to compete, we have to fight."

One of the biggest keys to improvement could be transfer portal acquisitions, and Knowles lit up when asked about former Ole Miss cornerback Davison Igbinosun Tuesday.

His length stands out in Ohio State's cornerback room, standing 6-2 with long arms. His physicality and athleticism combined with that wingspan have allowed him to challenge a lot of passes in practice.

"He's looking fantastic," Knowles said. "He gets his hands on a lot of balls. He competes. He's got a mental toughness to him. I'm very pleased to have him here."

The other transfer looking to make an impact this season is former Syracuse defensive back Ja'Had Carter, who factors heavily into the conversation at nickel safety but could play any of the three safety spots for the team, per Knowles.

"He's playing nickel right now and doing great," Knowles said. "I think he is going to have a continued role at all three safety positions when it ultimately comes down to being game ready. He's extremely

coachable, like if he makes a mistake, you can get him on the sideline in practice and he goes out and fixes it the next play. Not all guys can do that.”

Knowles also said he enjoys redshirt junior Cam Martinez’s work at the nickel spot, in particular his feet.

Of course, schematic adjustments could be on the way too. One possibility that’s been floated is mixing in cornerbacks with safeties at the nickel spot, giving the defense more pure cover guys in its matchups. Possible candidates include second-year players Jyair Brown and Ryan Turner.

“We look at what that guy has to do in terms of how it fits to our opponents and everything that that position has to do, and we think a corner can do it,” Knowles said. “It’s not a place where you have to be a hard, tough run defender and we can involve our corners there more, and we think that will give us more depth as the season goes on.”

As far as returning talent goes, one player that caught a lot of praise from Knowles Tuesday was graduate safety Josh Proctor.

After getting usurped by Lathan Ransom at the “bandit,” or boundary safety position last season, Proctor has one more chance to show the potential coaches raved about during 2019 fall camp and that he displayed in a few games to start 2021 before losing the rest of the campaign with an injury. He has 65 tackles and two interceptions in his Ohio State career.

It’ll be at “adjuster,” the team’s free safety position, however. That’s where Knowles sees Proctor capitalizing on his strengths in a better way.

“I’m seeing a focus, a determination,” Knowles said. “Josh is a really great kid to be around. He’s become extremely serious this spring. He knows it’s his chance, he’s running out of time. We can point out the things that have happened in the past, we can teach from it, and he’s got to do it in practice. That’s the only time he can do it. And he is. Just watching how he pursues the ball, the angles, those are valuable reps.”

One name that Knowles also brought up unprompted is sophomore Sonny Styles, the former five star who reclassified to come to Ohio State a year early and played meaningful snaps against Georgia.

“I think we’ll be much better there this year,” Knowles said of the safeties.

Among many storylines for Ohio State this spring, how it betters itself in the secondary could be one of the more important for its success this fall.