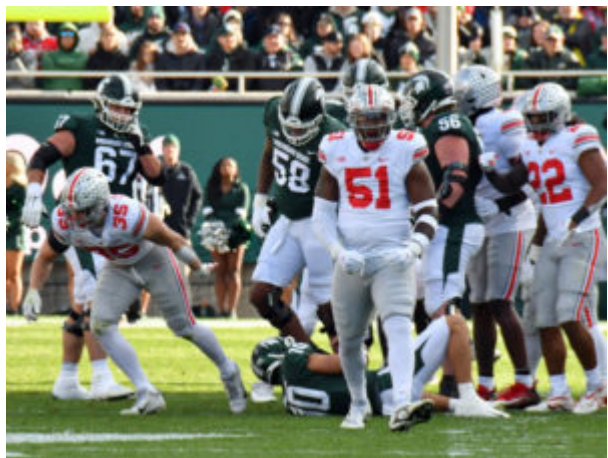


Knowles Knows It's Time To Dial Up Pressure



Pass rush and pass coverage exist in a symbiosis. One influences the other.

That's one of the tenants of Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' philosophy when it comes to stopping opposing aerial attacks. His players are indoctrinated with a related mantra.

"I say, 'Coverage and rush.' Defense responds, 'Working together.' So it's a group effort," Knowles said. "Our front is productive and strong and attacking and confident. That's helping the coverage."

After collecting a season-high four sacks against Michigan State Oct. 8, Knowles and the Buckeyes' defensive front are searching for ways to keep amplifying their sack production and pressure on quarterbacks with a pair of top 10 matchups waiting in the back half of the season.

"As the competition gets more intense, we need to have the ability to bring pressure, to add guys into the rush," Knowles said. "You've seen it a little bit, but we have a much larger arsenal than we have displayed because our front is doing a great job of getting that pressure on the quarterback without bringing extra guys."

Forty percent of Ohio State's season sack total came against the Spartans.

Its four quarterback takedowns in that contest took the team's total to 14, jumping it up to a tie for 39th nationally. Second-year defensive tackle Mike Hall led the way against Michigan State with 2.5 sacks, and he leads the Buckeyes on the season with 4.5.

Hall played just seven snaps against the Spartans to accumulate that total. He had an additional sack stripped away by a teammate's hands-to-the-face penalty.

"He's been hurt, so the plan was to limit his reps just so we could get him through the bye week and get him healthy," defensive line coach Larry Johnson said. "So we decided we could just rush him on third-down packages, trying to give him a chance to get on the field and keep his skill set going."

Hall credited his burst onto the scene to an increase in explosiveness. Johnson stated that, in addition to the weight room, a change in emphasis during practices have helped the whole defensive line improve in that regard.

“We spent more time this offseason attacking the sleds more, just really pounding the sleds, getting more physical fits throughout practice,” Johnson said. “That’s one thing that I added more of, just to make sure we were physical at the line of scrimmage. That’s helped us.”

A mix of personnel and fronts have also kept opposing offensive lines guessing. Fourth-year defensive end Zach Harrison has begun entering as a three-technique defensive tackle, particularly in the team’s pass-rush specialist package.

By using the “Jack” position in unique ways, Knowles is able to rotate through a cavalcade of alignments with three or four men up front. The Buckeyes have generated plenty of happy feet just by rushing four as well.

“It’s everything,” Knowles said. “If you’re creating pressure without bringing extra guys into the mix, then it gives you a lot more options in terms of the coverage and looks that you’re able to do at the line of scrimmage pre-snap and post-snap.”

Knowles’ schematics have already created some havoc in opposing backfields, too, and it shows in the variety of ways sacks and pressures have come. Both starting linebackers, Steele Chambers and Tommy Eichenberg, have been stunted open as free rushers through A-gap at points this year, with Eichenberg running open for a sack on such a design against Notre Dame.

The former Oklahoma State mastermind opened that contest with the Fighting Irish using a cornerback blitz, the same type of call that yielded a sack for freshman cornerback Ryan Turner against Rutgers.

Speaking of cornerbacks, there’s an added emphasis on pass rush because of issues that Knowles and head coach Ryan Day have noted at the position. Players have been losing 50/50 balls on the outside and the team has been down to three scholarship corners at one time due to injuries.

Knowles puts those issues on himself as much as anyone else, however. And overall, Ohio State still does have the No. 7 pass defense in college football.

“Ultimately their production on game day is my responsibility,” Knowles said. “If we’re taking shots at that position, I have to look at myself, too, and say, ‘Well, are we showing our hand too much (in coverage)? Am I giving those guys every chance to be successful through disguise and coverage variation?’ That’s my responsibility, and something we’ll look at hard during the bye week.”

Both rush and coverage are connected, Knowles reiterated. By drawing the right pressures up with the right coverages, Knowles and company are hoping to draw out more fear from opposing quarterbacks.

“It’s all working together, right,” Knowles said. “It’s my job to make sure that that quarterback holds the ball for that extra split second so that he can’t be decisive about the coverage that we’re in, and that leads to more production up front. And that’s better for everybody.”