

Knowles “Pleased,” But Sees Room To Grow Defensively



Five weeks into the 2022 season, Ohio State's defense is showing marked improvements from last year.

The Buckeyes have cracked the top 10 nationally in total defense, ranking No. 10 exactly, allowing just 263.8 yards per game. That's down from 374.0 a season ago, and they're No. 7 in pass defense, surrendering only 153.4 yards each contest through the air.

That's not satiated Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' appetite, however. He's remaining focused on the next stop, the next progression, and he sees plenty of places for his unit to improve.

"I'm pleased," Knowles said. "We have seen some success. But defense is such a right-now proposition. Failure is not an option. It's just drive, drive, push, push to be better. Never really look back on any of that until the end of the season."

One area Knowles wants to see better numbers is on third down.

An inventive play caller, Knowles has developed a reputation for having some of the nation's best defenses when it comes to getting off the field in those situations. At Oklahoma State in 2021, the coordinating performance that landed him the Broyles Award as the nation's best assistant coach, the Cowboys ranked No. 3 in the country and No. 1 among Power Five schools in third-down conversion percentage against.

Ohio State is 11th right now, sixth in the Power Five. Good on paper but short of Knowles' expectations.

"We certainly have higher aspirations than that," Knowles said. "We're doing well. But it is a critical part of our system, so our guys are trained from the beginning on how to hold the line and know where that down is. Because to me, that's the game of defense is getting the ball back to the offense."

Sack production could help that number tick upward. The Buckeyes have just 10 quarterback takedowns in 2022, tied for 62nd in college football. Knowles has been good with the pressure his defensive line has applied to opposing signal callers, but wants to tweak his scheme so the rush gets home more often.

"I'm pleased with what we're doing up front," Knowles said. "I think it's my job to continue to create more opportunities. To me, it's a function of coverage and rush working together. It's a matter of the quarterback having to hold the ball. When they're getting rid of the ball quickly or keeping people in in the protection, nobody's guys are going to have a chance to get there."

His largest worry, on the whole, aligns with one of head coach Ryan Day's mantras: Maintaining competitive stamina.

Mistakes happen in a game, and Knowles attempts to alleviate his players from that burden. He tells them on game days their mistakes are his, he said, which he believes gives them the ability to go out and play fast, without worry.

How his players respond to a big play or when the team is ahead, however, remains at the top of his list of concerns.

"You can play well, you can play great for a long time in the game. But it only takes one play," Knowles said. "It only takes one play for something to go wrong or a 50/50 ball to go up in the air. My biggest concern is that we continue to compete and have that mentality on defense of stopping them on that play, no matter what the score is."

Overall there's an heir of immediacy with Knowles, found not only in his quotes to the press but in his aggressive play calling and instruction to his players. The Buckeyes' defense will search for more growth opportunities Saturday at Michigan State.

"Like I said when I got here, we don't have three or four years to put this system in, to make it into a premier defense," Knowles said. "It's got to happen right now, this season. So it's my job to keep pushing that."