

Knowles Talks Big Plays, Second-Year Approach



Given some of the big-play breakdowns that happened at the end of last season, one of the more anticipated assistant coach interviews from Wednesday for Ohio State's media was defensive coordinator Jim Knowles.

Entering year two of his scheme comes with a renewed focus as players are no longer feeling out both him and his defense, but it also comes with added expectations as the Buckeyes came within one point of reaching a favorable National Championship Game matchup with TCU. A 42-41 loss, even to a team such as No. 1 Georgia, isn't typically pinned on a team's offense.

"Now that I'm coming into year two, I've got to be even more demanding and push and put on more steam with the players individually on the preciseness of the technique," Knowles said. "I've got to really bear down."

Ohio State's two losses to close the year featured a bevy of big plays from its opponents.

Michigan scored touchdowns of 69, 75, 45, 75 and 85 yards en route to a 45-23 victory over the Buckeyes in Ohio Stadium Nov. 26.

Georgia cataloged 10 plays of 20 yards or more in its College Football Playoff win, with a key 76 yard touchdown pass up the sideline after Ohio State safety Lathan Ransom slipped that cut OSU's fourth-quarter lead to 38-31 after a two-point conversion.

"We can't give up big plays like that," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said Wednesday. "That hurt us in the last two games. There's no secret there. Too many big plays. And if we're going to win those games, we can't give up big plays like that. Now was that the only problem? No. But I think Jim knows that and that's something we've got to get fixed in the offseason."

Knowles has a track record of making his defenses better and better the longer he is at a program.

His stop prior to Ohio State, Oklahoma State, he took the Cowboys from the nation's No. 112 total defense his first season to No. 82 in his second year, 44 his third year and 5 his final year. Prior to that at Duke he went from the country's 108th total defense in year one to 22nd his last campaign in Durham, North Carolina.

When he got to OSU, the Buckeyes were fresh off one of their worst defensive seasons in recent memory, finishing 38th nationally in scoring defense, 59th in total defense, 25th in rushing defense and a dismal 97th in passing defense. Despite their big-game big-play shortcomings in 2022, they improved to 24th, 14th, 25th and 26th in those categories, respectively.

“You’re coming in the first year and you want to make sure that you make that connection with everybody,” Knowles said. “Now is the time for me to use it.”

As it pertains to those above-mentioned big plays, Knowles and company can spend an offseason working on the fundamentals that may have caused those shortcomings and demonstrating to players via film why they may have fallen short.

“(We’ll be) looking at the explosive plays, things that might have hurt us and being able to show those to the players, and then saying, ‘O.K., this is how we’re going to fix that,’” Knowles said. “Not necessarily with a call or creativity — I like that and I put a lot of onus on myself to do that, anytime a defense doesn’t work I blame myself — but that’s not the world the players live in. They live in, ‘O.K., how are you going to get me better, coach, at these fundamentals and techniques?’ So you have to spend at least three-quarters of spring ball doing that, getting better.”

There’s also more of Knowles’ intricate scheme for his players to learn in year two, extra changeups and curveballs the unit could potentially throw opposing offenses in 2023.

“Out of everything I hoped to do here during my time at Ohio State, we probably got up to, maybe, two-thirds of it,” Knowles said.

In the meantime, Knowles and the rest of the defensive staff are going through last year’s film to figure out not just schematically what direction they want to take the defense, but also help in personnel decisions as spring approaches.

That varies drastically from his approach after arriving his first season, when he stated he wouldn’t make any personnel decisions based on the previous year’s film due to the fact that the players were in a different scheme.

“Before we talk about the system and where we want to go with it, we’re talking about each player individually,” Knowles said. “Because you can pull their plays and look at their strengths and weaknesses.

“Now that I have a year under my belt, my job is to say, ‘The guys we have coming back, what do they do best?’ And talk about those things.”