

Luke Fickell Is Finding His Voice At Cincinnati



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Luke Fickell is nine years removed from his lone season as the interim head coach at Ohio State, a tumultuous and miserable season for the former Buckeye nose tackle that saw him thrust into a dream job that he was not yet prepared for. Fickell was sent out into the ocean without a life raft, told to swim or sink, and he did what just about any coach in the same position would have done: He sank.

Fresh off a 12-1 campaign in 2010 that saw Jim Tressel's Buckeyes come up just short of a national title berth, Fickell's Buckeyes were down their longtime head coach, without star quarterback Terrelle Pryor and facing an intense amount of NCAA scrutiny. They fell to 6-6 on the regular season and dropped a meaningless bowl game against Florida shortly after announcing that Fickell would be replaced by Urban Meyer, a decision that had seemingly been made months prior. To say that Fickell was placed in a challenging situation in replacing his embattled mentor would be a slight understatement.

"I wouldn't wish that on anyone being put through what he was put through, just because, obviously, this was his dream job at his dream school and he got it in the worst possible scenario, as far as Tressel being fired and then all the players that they lost," said Jeff Svoboda, who covered the Fickell era for BSB.

"I mean, the freaking quarterback was Joe Bauserman for half the season, for God's sake. They just weren't going to win many games. And so, as they started losing games, you almost felt bad for him that he had to get up and deal with all the pressure and all the questions mounting, because really, it just wasn't a fair situation for him."

Fickell entered the job in a nearly impossible spot, but he was not without his own issues. As a first-time head coach who had spent his career to that point as a true coach rather than a program manager or figurehead, he never seemed comfortable serving in the public-facing parts of the job.

"I will be honest with you. It was very much an unnatural thing for him to be the guy in front of the microphones," Svoboda said. "He was someone who I think a lot of people felt was much more comfortable behind the scenes than he was as the face of the program. And certainly, he wanted the job, but the media part of it was something that I don't think he was ever really tremendously comfortable with. He had done media as a player, he had done media as a coach, as an assistant. But just being the face of a program at that point in his career, I think, was a little bit overwhelming for

him. And he tried his best, certainly, but it was almost like a fish-out-of-water thing at times. It just was not the most comfortable thing in the world for him to do.

“And I think it might have been the hardest part of the job for him, actually. All things considered, when he was in the facility, at the end of the day, you’re coaching football. But I think that having to be mostly the face of the program and do media every week, not just every week, but multiple times every week and have to answer the questions, especially as things started to go south, as far as the whole win-loss record goes, it was definitely not something I think he was at that point yet tremendously comfortable with. And he tried and he wasn’t a jerk to us or anything along those lines. It was just more of someone who just was not fully comfortable having to ever do that part of the job yet.”

By the time his tenure came to a close, a little over eight months after it began, Fickell seemed more than ready to return to his old role, taking over as co-defensive coordinator and linebackers coach under Meyer. However, Fickell was clear when he returned to the staff that he had eyes on serving as a head coach again down the road when the right opportunity presented itself. Following the 2016 season, after the firing of Tommy Tuberville, Fickell got his wish with an opening at Cincinnati.

“I think that I certainly thought that Luke was going to be (an assistant under Meyer) for a while,” Svoboda said.

“Why is that, though? It’s hard to say, because I think he’d also shown that he wanted to be a head coach. I think that he knew that he was not going to just take any job that came along. But at some point in his life, he wanted to be a head coach. And when the right opportunity came, I think we all knew he would take it at some point. And he obviously ended up doing it the right way. I think that his career path, it’s worked out pretty well for him. He didn’t take a job until he was ready. And then the job he took was a place he could win at.”

According to his former employer, the coach who brought him back to Ohio State after he spent two seasons at Akron, Fickell could not have found a better fit than the Queen City.

“He had talked to a number of different schools over the years about their head coaching jobs,” Tressel said of Fickell in a phone interview with BSB. “And what was great about him was that there are certain things that are important to him. He wants to really love the place he is. Family’s very important to him. Being here in the Midwest is very important to him. So it was such a natural for him to look at Cincinnati, just kind of the same way I felt when Mark Dantonio moved from our staff to Cincinnati. It’s a great program. It’s a great city. They have a proud tradition, and whoever coaches there better do a great job recruiting Ohio.”

Now in his fourth season with the Bearcats, Fickell’s patience in searching for the right fit has been rewarded. After a 4-8 season to open his tenure at Cincinnati, Fickell found a groove in year two, rattling off an 11-2 record with a young team and following it up with an 11-3 campaign in 2019. Entering year four, pollsters placed UC at No. 20 in preseason rankings, and ESPN analyst Bill Connelly called for another strong season while saying that Fickell had turned Cincinnati into the “Group of 5 team most acting like a P5 team on the recruiting trail” after landing top-50 classes in 2018 and 2020 and eight top-500 recruits nationally (according to 247Sports).

“Despite the iffy passing game, this still should be another dynamite year,” Connelly wrote of UC prior to the start of the 2020 campaign. “Fickell’s building job isn’t done, but the progress has been blatantly obvious.”

Through seven games, the Bearcats have blown even those lofty expectations out of the water. After a 38-10 win over Houston on Nov. 7, Cincinnati sat at 6-0 with wins over two ranked (at the time) teams in No. 22 Army (24-10) and No. 16 SMU (42-13) along with dominant showings against conference foes Memphis and South Florida. Another win over ECU on Nov. 13 put the Bearcats at 7-0.

This is a program winning with style and with a very defined ethos, too. Always a defensive-minded coach, Fickell has baked his propensity for smothering defense into the team thanks to some help from former Buckeye linebacker Marcus Freeman, now the defensive coordinator with the Bearcats. Through six games, Cincinnati was allowing just 11.7 points per game, including those dominant performances against SMU, Memphis and Houston.

That defense paired with a consistent rushing attack and a surging senior quarterback in Desmond Ridder - who has played the best football of his career over the past month - has the eyes of the college football nation on Cincinnati. After bludgeoning the Cougars, the AP voters rewarded Cincinnati with the No. 7 spot in the Nov. 8 polls, only 3 spots below the highest ranking in school history, delivered by Brian Kelly in week 15 of the 2009 season.

Fickell's success in building Cincinnati in his hardworking, defense-first image comes as no surprise to Tressel, who told BSB that he hasn't had the chance to watch a ton of Cincinnati football this season but has seen glimpses of the job his former defensive coordinator has done.

"Well, I knew he was very, very talented and stood for the right things," Tressel said of Fickell. "I also know that Cincinnati is a great place, and he feels very strongly about the University of Cincinnati and the city of Cincinnati and the state of Ohio. And so it's not surprising, not that it's easy, and like anything else. I don't know what they are now, 6-0 or something like that. That doesn't make that seventh game any easier. And sometimes it makes it harder, but I'm not surprised at all that they're doing well. Luke will do a good job of keeping things focused on the moment. And it's going to be fun to watch how he can come down the stretch.

"They know what they're doing; they've had good continuity; they've grown their program. That first year they got to know one another and, really, they've been good ever since. Marcus has done a great job for them there on the defensive side, and they're tough, they're physical. Everything's important, special teams, the way they carry themselves, running the ball, throwing the ball. They put a lot of pressure on defense, and it's not a surprise that they're good. Luke really felt going into the year that this could be a good year."

The fact that Fickell's performance at Cincinnati has caught Tressel's eye is an achievement in itself. The former Ohio State coach, now serving as Youngstown State's president, explained to BSB that he often feels more nervous watching his former assistants than he did coaching his own games.

"I'm probably more nervous when I'm watching Luke or P.J. Fleck or Mark Dantonio or Mel Tucker," Tressel said. "I'm probably more nervous watching how they're doing than I was when I was coaching because I know them. I feel like I was a part of their lives. I'm awfully proud of them. And you also know that no matter how well it's going or how difficult it's going, they've still got to get ready for the next day. And whether it's Luke and Marcus rolling along or Mel had that tough first loss and then the big win the next week, or P.J.'s had a couple of tough ones recently - you want them to be able to continue to progress and you're awfully, awfully proud of them."

However, in the way that Cincinnati plays, it's hard to find anything to pick at, especially for someone

like Tressel, who always had much more interest in consistency and doing the little things right, which shows up in game after game for the Bearcats with Fickell at the helm.

He's no Tressel-clone, though. That era of Fickell, defined by the 2011 season in which he tried and failed to mimic Tressel, is gone. While that season provided plenty of lessons to the former Buckeye nose guard, none was more important than the value in finding his own voice, his own leadership style.

"I could write a book about the mistakes we made or I made," Fickell said of the 2011 season and his early years as a coach in a 2017 interview with BSB. "But I think the No. 1 mistake was trying to be somebody (I wasn't) and that's hard as a leader. In the midst of it I thought I had to be like Jim Tressel, and in reality, you can't be like Jim Tressel. Nobody can. But I thought that was what was best to give us an opportunity to be successful and not have a bunch of different changes on people, whether they were the players or the coaches. That was just the conscious decision that I made, and it was probably the one that is detrimental because you can't be consistent being somebody that you're not."

Now, that's not to say that Fickell has any interest in separating himself from his mentors. He openly cites Tressel, Meyer and his former head coach John Cooper as big inspirations to his coaching style.

In fact, he says that all three will always be a part of his coaching style. "That's who you are," Fickell said. "The environments that you've been in, the situations that you've grown from help shape who you are and who you will be as a leader, and every single one of those guys has a part that I've learned from."

Above all else, that's the value of that failed 2011 campaign for Fickell, both in his eyes and in the eyes of Tressel. It was a painful, challenging year for him, but it was a year that showed him what he needed to change to be successful when he filled a similar role in the future. Realizing that he couldn't just be Tressel, or Meyer, or even Cooper was the key to Fickell finding himself as a coach.

"Again, we've got a book of things, of mistakes that we made, that I made," Fickell said. "I've got them saved and I'm just making sure that we learn from those experiences. If something comes up, I try to look back to say, 'OK now hold on, did we ever have one like that? Because if we did I'm sure I made the wrong choice in that situation.'

"But you always reflect back on the things that for me weren't successful and try to figure out why, and that's an eight-month process that hopefully will last me 10 years as a head coach that I can't get all the things that happened in that eight months."

"That was a tough year for him in 2011 with all the transition and all the heartache and whatnot that was there," Tressel said. "I think it was a great learning experience for him, probably a painful one, but most of our good learning experiences are painful. I think he was ready to venture out on his own. And he had a great opportunity to work with Urban for a couple years there. And I think he had a lot of different looks at how you can do things, but he had to come up with how he was going to do things. And I think he's done a great job with that."

The new Fickell is much more comfortable. He's built a program in his image around recruiting the state of Ohio and building out a devastating defense and capable offense, but he's also built a public persona for himself that matches the personality of his team. He's also shed that media-anxiety that he had in Columbus, according to Cincinnati Enquirer writer Charlie Goldsmith, who covers the team and heaped praise on Fickell's media presence.

"He's great," Goldsmith said. "I mean, he's the head coach and the voice of the program and he's just great at it. He has good interactions with the media and is very well-respected."

That hardworking, Cincinnati pride is working for Fickell too. In a year with full attendance allowed, Nippert Stadium would likely be at capacity for every home game, as Fickell has leaned hard into embracing the community and getting both students and fans involved.

"I think they all take a lot of pride in the fact that they're in Cincinnati," Goldsmith said of the ethos that Fickell has instilled in the program. "They recruit a lot of local kids. They have really tried, more than previous coaches, to connect with the fan base. That, and taking pride in where they're from, I think is the biggest difference."

That's Fickell as a head coach. The calamitous interim season will always be there, but it's a chapter that he's learned from and moved past. In Tressel's words, he's learned how to be himself.

"I think the biggest thing Luke and I would talk about is, Luke can't be John Cooper. He can't be Jim Tressel. He can't be Urban Meyer. He had to be Luke Fickell. I think he learned that."

Right now, it's hard to imagine that there's anyone he'd rather be.