

Moone's Landing: Backfield Presence Returns To Form Against Tennessee



Before the biggest game of the Ryan Day-Jim Knowles era at Ohio State, the idea, or lack thereof, of a pass rush and overall backfield presence for the Buckeyes was often discussed and mulled over heading into matchups against the upper echelon of college football teams.

That “lack thereof” term is not used just as suggestive, the numbers were there to back it up. Two total sacks in the four previous games against Michigan and zero sacks against Oregon on Oct. 12.

With legacy on the line and looking to avenge another bad loss to Michigan, the pass rush that so often went into the dark in big games rode the scarlet wave of Ohio Stadium to the tune of four sacks (35 yards), six tackles for loss and three passes broken up by edge rushers.

The two main contributors to the return of the Rushmen were senior defensive ends Jack Sawyer and JT Tuimoloau, as the pair combined for 3½ sacks and four tackles for loss, arguably the biggest impact the duo has had in the same game since coming to Columbus.

It's been a long time coming, too, and it couldn't have come at a better time in the 25-point victory over the Volunteers. There were so many moving factors, or those at blame, regarding the head-scratching lack of production from pass rushers at Ohio State, especially in big games. However, it felt like something just clicked against Tennessee.

Even with a Davison Igbinosun interception that was called back on a (questionable) roughing the passer call on Kenyatta Jackson Jr and a few instances of lost containment of Volunteers quarterback Nico Iamaleava, Ohio State's defensive front looked in control the entire night against a vaunted Tennessee front that paved the way for SEC Offensive Player of the Year Dylan Sampson (256 carries, 1,485 yards and 22 touchdowns).

After not having Sampson for almost the entire game due to a lower body injury, that same Volunteer front was unable to hold a motivated and playing-for-pride Ohio State defensive line that put together arguably its best effort under Knowles.

Even when there were moments throughout the game where Tennessee was able to weather the storm that Ohio State was raining down with, such as limiting the Buckeye lead to 11 points just before half, the defensive line for Ohio State kept things in check and did something that fans and writers haven't

seen the Buckeyes do much in the past four seasons: respond.

Coming out of the half with the lead trimmed down, facing a third-and-7 from its own 38-yard line, Tennessee opted for a speed option pitch into the boundary that was quickly snuffed out by safety Lathan Ransom for a loss of 4. It wasn't just the pass rush that came back to life against the Volunteers, it was a heavy, persistent and inevitably presence in the backfield that made it hard for Tennessee to move the ball all game long.

Now, the big question heading into Wednesday looks at sustainability. Can Ohio State, which will go from playing its last game in sub-20 degree Fahrenheit temperatures in Columbus to a balmy 68 degrees in Pasadena, Calif., sustain what it had against Tennessee and right the wrongs it made against Oregon on Oct. 12 to capture hands down the biggest win in the Ryan Day era at Ohio State?

I critiqued Ohio State after the Michigan loss and cited a repetition of trends that plagued the Buckeyes for the fourth-straight year. The biggest thing Ohio State will have to do against Oregon in order to avoid another heartbreaking loss is eliminate the trends that stunted them the last time the teams faced off. It's not often a team gets second chances in a season, and with all the chips on the table in the Rose Bowl, Ohio State either has to cash in now or head out of the casino.