

Moone's Landing: Ohio State Has A Defensive Line Problem



After a dominant season for the 2019 Ohio State defensive line, which saw now-New Orleans Saints defensive end Chase Young rack up 16.5 sacks and 21 tackles for loss as well as now-Jacksonville Jaguars defensive tackle DaVon Hamilton pour in six sacks of his own, the Buckeyes defensive line has been a shell of its former self the past four and a half seasons.

There could be a myriad of people and outside factors to blame: defensive coordinators, NIL deficiencies or perhaps that 2019 season was just an anomaly. But when you bestow your unit with the moniker of “The Rushmen,” you simply have to follow up with impressive numbers year in, year out. And quite frankly, that hasn’t been the case.

Since that 2019 season, many fans and beat writers alike have noticed a disturbing drop off in the impact that the Ohio State front four has been able to have in big games.

Let’s look at the “big” games the Buckeyes have played in since. Ryan Day and company have faced eight AP top five teams from 2019 to 2024, posting a 2-6 record with wins over then-No. 2 Clemson in the 2021 Sugar Bowl and then-No. 5 Notre Dame in Columbus in the 2022 season opener.

In the other six games played, which feature a pair of top five defeats to archrival Michigan, the Ohio State defensive front has combined for eight sacks. That’s good for just over a sack per game, all in losses. The two losses to Michigan alone saw just two total sacks, not even counting the 42-27 defeat to the then-No. 6 Wolverines in 2021 when the Buckeyes did not tally one sack.

To add further insult to injury, in the four “biggest” games for Ohio State since 2022, which all saw losses to top five teams, the Buckeye defense has not allowed a fourth quarter punt in 11 total drives. Instead of getting the opposing offenses off the field, the Ohio State defensive unit gave up six touchdowns and four field goals, a 91 percent scoring success for opposing teams.

In Ohio State’s most recent loss, a 32-31 heartbreaker to Oregon in Eugene on Oct. 12, the Buckeyes once again posted a goose egg in the sack category; a regular yet frustrating outcome that Buckeye fans have begun to get accustomed to.

All of these stats and whirlwind of numbers point to a common denominator for Ohio State’s defensive

struggles in big games: a lack of a pass rush and overall impact from the defensive line.

Defensive line coach Larry Johnson, a cornerstone of the Ohio State defensive coaching staff since 2013, is often quoted as being the main culprit for the pitiful numbers put up. However, as the old saying goes, “players make plays,” and the Buckeye defensive line simply has not done that.

What can be done? Ohio State brought in three defensive linemen in the 2024 class, four-stars Eddrick Houston and Dominic Kirks and three-star Eric Mensah, with Houston and Mensah serving as the edge rushers among that group.

Currently in the 2025 cycle, the Buckeyes sit with six defensive line commitments, including four-star edge rushers Zion Grady and Zahir Mathis, two players ranked in the top 16 positionally and top seven in their states, respectively.

Obviously, no medium could predict how these athletes will turn out on the field for Ohio State or what their overall impact will be, but they’ll need to be impressive in order to shift the snowballing narrative of the lack of production from the front four.

The remainder of the regular season will likely see just one more top five team in Penn State on Nov. 2, barring a loss by the Nittany Lions. Penn State stands out as another anomaly for Ohio State defensively, as the Buckeyes have notched 16 sacks in the four previous games dating back to 2020.

With that, if we see another dominant performance by “The Rushmen” in November, take it with a grain of salt. If Ohio State is able to advance to the Big Ten title game and the newly expanded 12-team College Football Playoff, those games should serve as ultimate tests on what this defensive line is capable of.

If the unit is able to shift the narrative and return to late 2010s form, so be it and good for them. If not, beware of what is to come for a once very talented unit.