

My Thoughts: Help Wanted On Ohio State's Coaching Staff



There's no shortage of blame to go around for Ohio State's 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl - the second bowl loss in as many seasons, and the second consecutive year the Buckeyes have ended on a two-game losing streak - but as things often go in coaching, it starts at the top with head coach Ryan Day.

That is not to say that it's time to put Day on the hot seat - that may be reserved for the aftermath of next season's game against Michigan in Columbus, depending on the outcome - but criticism is due at this point in how Day has constructed his staff for his fifth season at the helm of the Buckeyes.

Ohio State's coaching staff features a quarterbacks coach in Corey Dennis who was a holdover from the Urban Meyer era, already a questionable decision given that Day himself continues to work so closely with the quarterbacks at Ohio State. And that's despite attempts by Day over the past couple of seasons to become more of a "CEO" for Ohio State, with a hand over the entire program rather than a few specific areas.

But as it relates to Dennis, the Cotton Bowl did not serve as a roaring endorsement. The starter entering the game in Devin Brown did not look particularly prepared, though part of that was due to a significant amount of pressure allowed by Ohio State's offensive line throughout the game. Even so, in the rare moments of clean protection before his ankle sprain, Brown did not appear particularly sharp. The poor quarterback play continued once true freshman Lincoln Kienholz - who had taken the majority of second-team snaps in practice, Day said after the game - stepped in, as he finished just 6 of 17 passing for 86 yards.

While an otherworldly performance was not expected for the freshman, there was a thought that against an average Missouri defense - plus a month of practice - that Ohio State might be able to move the ball, but the signal callers did not seem well-enough prepared by their coaches, even if little help was offered by the offensive line and rushing attack.

“Lincoln was put in a tough spot there, to say the least, and I thought he battled his tail,” Day said. “Clearly, we didn’t help him up front. We didn’t run the ball well enough.”

But perhaps the biggest area where it was clear a change may be needed was on special teams with coordinator Parker Fleming. The third phase has been an issue all season for Ohio State, and those issues persisted against Missouri as the Buckeyes dealt with poor field position, procedural penalties and missed kicks due to errors from that unit.

It was evident throughout the contest that the unit was not a recipient of strong coaching, as wide receiver Jayden Ballard – likely through no fault of his own – routinely called for fair catches inside the 10-yard line instead of letting the ball bounce, as is traditionally taught to returners. And the procedural penalties have existed since the first game of the season and have yet to be cleaned up.

“We shouldn’t catch the ball on the 4-yard line,” Day said. “Our heel should be on the 8. I think he felt like in that moment, they were right behind him, and they were going to pin it inside the 4. But still, you have to stick to your rules in that situation.

“And then we missed the field goal, and that one was big at the time. It was a little momentum swing, and they get the ball back on the 30-yard line. There were some good things there (on special teams) but not good enough.”

“Not good enough” has been the rallying cry of special teams for the last several seasons, never quite blowing a game for the Buckeyes but rarely – if ever – being the reason for a win.

None of this is to say that Ohio State does not need a quarterbacks coach or special teams coordinator – to the contrary. Both roles are valuable for college football teams, and the Buckeyes would be remiss to have neither, even with Day’s involvement with the quarterbacks.

But it’s possible the coaches currently filling those roles have hit the ceiling of their current positions, and changes seem to be in the cards for Ohio State after yet another disappointing loss to end the season. If the Buckeyes are looking to do some shuffling – perhaps to open up a spot for current graduate assistant James Laurinaitis – special teams and maybe even the quarterbacks room may be the place to start.

“We’re going to look at everything,” Day said. “Nobody cares that we had a freshman quarterback in there. You’ve got to go win the game. It didn’t happen. Like I said before, everything will be looked at. If it’s what helps Ohio State reach our goals and win these games, then we’ll make those changes.”