

My Thoughts: Ruggles Was Failed Before Kick Sailed



First things first. There's no sugarcoating it: placekicker Noah Ruggles' 50-yard boot missed, and it missed badly. A usually reliable kicker for Ohio State, Ruggles - who had connected on 17 of 19 before that fateful moment and 37 of 40 since arriving in Columbus prior to the 2021 season- sailed the game-winning kick wide left, deflating the Ohio State sideline while the Bulldogs' sideline began a celebration ahead of their impending trip to Los Angeles for the College Football Playoff National Championship Game.

While the miss was a rarity for Ruggles, put in context, there was no predicting how the ball might fare. His career-long entering the game was just 49 yards, completed back during his time at North Carolina, and his long at Ohio State was just 48 yards, achieved earlier in the evening. In two seasons with the Buckeyes, his lone attempt from beyond 50 yards was a missed 53-yard boot against Penn State, so the track record was not there to believe that it was automatic for Ruggles, at least to the degree that it was the decision worth playing for.

Ohio State had even shown some belief that there were kickers on the roster more capable of connecting from deep, trotting out walk-on freshman Jayden Fielding for a successful 57-yard attempt during an open media session in the week prior to the Peach Bowl.

All that being said, the kick itself - both the distance and the fact that Ohio State needed the score to win in the first place - were symptoms of larger issues throughout the game.

"Yeah, it doesn't come down to Noah," linebacker Tommy Eichenberg said. "It comes down to us, it comes down to me. I've got to do better, really."

Defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' defense, one predicated on limiting explosive plays, allowed 10 plays by the Bulldogs that gained at least 20 yards, including Stetson Bennett's 76-yard touchdown pass to wideout Arian Smith and a 35-yard completion on Georgia's game-winning drive late in the fourth.

Had the defense not allowed those 187 yards and 18 points in the fourth quarter, the Buckeyes wouldn't have been in a position to need Ruggles' leg - which had already connected on two prior kicks - to send them to the national championship game.

Conversely, Ohio State's offense was dealing throughout the contest, playing to a level against Georgia

that nobody had reached this season with 467 yards of offense and a career day from quarterback C.J. Stroud, who finished with 348 passing yards and four touchdowns. But even the mighty Ohio State offense suddenly shuttered in the final frame, going three-and-out on their first drive of the fourth quarter and later settling for a field goal after Stroud was sacked in the red zone.

Needing just a field goal to win on their final possession of the game, the Buckeyes - who got down to Georgia's 31-yard line with 24 seconds remaining following a 27-yard scramble by Stroud - opted to run it up the gut with freshman Dallan Hayden on first-and-10, losing a yard in the process, settling for a field goal that tested the bounds of Ruggles' kicking ability instead of trying to find the end zone.

"Two timeouts left, any couple yards right there could add to the field goal, and that was the idea," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said. "We didn't quite execute it as well as we would like to, but I wouldn't change that call."

"It was a good call, great call," Stroud added.

Stroud fired a pair of incomplete passes over the next two plays, perhaps an acknowledgement by Day that the Buckeyes should have thrown it in the first place, but even with two timeouts left, the winding clock with just eight seconds remaining forced Ruggles and Co. on for the field-goal attempt.

As the clock hit midnight and shifted from 2022 to 2023 - quite literally, as Ruggles' ill-fated attempt appeared to have hit the turf right as the calendar rolled over - his boot landed left of the post, shattering Ohio State's hopes, and likely nobody on the field felt worse in that moment than the kicker who had just played the final game of his college career, missing the opportunity to extend it for one more game.

But even though Ruggles will likely shoulder most of the blame - both from himself and the critics, given that the game ultimately came down to his foot - his teammates agreed that the fault is shared among the team.

"Love that kid," linebacker Steele Chambers said. "You can't put it on him. There's so many other times that game that everything could have been executed better, we could have done our jobs better. It's not just one play, so anyone that says he lost the game, they're just wrong. He's a part of our brotherhood too. He's a hell of a player. He kept us in the game because he was making kicks all day."

With Ruggles set to depart Ohio State now that the season has concluded, instead of his final memory a celebration of a Peach Bowl victory and what might have awaited in Los Angeles on Jan. 9, he'll be forced to reckon with a missed kick that he never should have been lined up for in the first place.