

Ohio State Defense Comfortable In Knowles' System Following Spring Camp



It was a balancing act for Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles last season.

In his first season with the Buckeyes, Knowles was tasked with overhauling Ohio State's defensive system after several upsetting seasons by the Silver Bullets under Greg Schiano in 2018 and Kerry Coombs in 2020-21 — with a dominant 2019 campaign under Jeff Hafley sandwiched between those difficult stints. While Knowles sought to return Ohio State back to its former glory, the Buckeyes saw encouraging returns from their defense across the first 11 weeks of the season, and it appeared that Knowles' vision for the unit was already coming to fruition in just his first season at OSU.

But the wheels quickly fell off in losses to Michigan and Georgia, in which the Buckeyes were gashed by explosive plays — both through the air and on the ground — while the Wolverines and Bulldogs each totaled more than 500 yards of offense and 40 points.

While some vulnerabilities in Knowles' scheme were exposed late in the season, most notably its penchant to allow big gains, the Buckeyes enter Knowles' second season at the helm of the defense with a renewed optimism that strides will continue to be made on that side of the ball in 2023.

"We're getting more hands on balls and we're competing," Knowles said during spring camp. "We did not do our job in those matchup games that we needed to, and in order to get better, we have to win against our offense. We have to compete, we have to fight.

"We have to win in practice," he continued. "So what I'm pushing and what I'm seeing are guys who are fighting more at the point of emphasis where you have to make a play."

During the 2022 campaign, the Buckeyes ranked 13th in the nation in total defense — allowing just 321.5 yards per game — while giving up 21.0 points per game, the 24th-best mark in the country. It was clear that Knowles had turned the unit around after an abysmal 2021 season in which Ohio State

finished tied for 59th in total defense (372.9 yards per game) and 38th in scoring defense (22.8 points per game), but the unit's pitfalls against Michigan and Georgia left a sour taste in the Buckeyes' mouths during the offseason.

With another offseason to teach his defensive scheme, as well as a host of returning production — including both incumbent starting linebackers Steele Chambers and Tommy Eichenberg — the spring was critical in laying down the foundation for the next step in the evolution of Knowles' defense.

To Knowles, that growth begins in the secondary, where the Buckeyes bolstered their depth through the transfer portal with the additions of former Syracuse safety Ja'Had Carter and Ole Miss cornerback Davison Igbinsoun.

"The next step and evolution of this defense really starts in the backend," Knowles said. "Everywhere I've been it's kind of taken me time to get the backend up to having that confidence to compete."

That evolution has worn off on his players, including cornerback Denzel Burke — who flashed during the Ohio State spring game with a pair of pass breakups after an up-and-down sophomore season in 2022.

"The second year in the scheme, it's a lot easier," Burke said after the spring game. "You kind of get a feel for what Coach Knowles is going to call and the trust is there. I'm really excited."

Although Knowles' declaration that Ohio State's defensive growth begins in the secondary, the comfortability described by Burke is felt throughout the defensive unit — regardless of position.

With spring camp now under the defense's belt, linebacker Cody Simon emphasized that he feels the unit made significant strides, in regard to its development, to build on in the fall.

"Last year was our first year with Coach Knowles and we learned the defense a little bit, so now we're refining it," Simon said after the spring game. "(We're) learning all of the nuances and how to play certain plays. We're definitely making a lot of strides and I think we did accomplish our goals for the spring."