

Ohio State Players, Coaches Confident Offense Can Thrive Under Chip Kelly



Coming off a difficult end to the 2023 season that included a third-straight loss to arch rival Michigan and uninspiring 14-3 defeat to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl, Ohio State and head coach Ryan Day made some significant changes to their roster and coaching staff, a massive effort that the program is hoping will turn the tide back in the Buckeyes' favor in the rivalry and put them in prime position to win their first national title since 2014.

While the Buckeyes were big spenders in the transfer portal and recruiting cycle — bringing in top talent such as safety Caleb Downs, running back Quinshon Judkins, quarterback Will Howard and true freshman wide receiver Jeremiah Smith — perhaps the biggest addition the program made during the offseason was the hiring of Chip Kelly as offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach.

Kelly, who spent 14 years as a head coach in both the NFL and college football, headlined by a four-year stint at Oregon where he transformed the Ducks into one of the nation's most innovative offensive powerhouses, has yet to call a play for Ohio State this season. But judging off of what Day and others have said about him during the offseason, the hire may already be paying dividends.

"Chip is one of the best offensive minds in the history of college football, in my opinion," Day said at Big Ten Media Days on Tuesday. "He's a great play caller. And he's got to do that. He has to go and get a feel for our guys and let them call it."

"I love coach Kelly," senior wide receiver added at Lucas Oil Stadium. "I'm so glad he's a part of what we're building here at Ohio State. And I think it's a perfect fit."

Perhaps the biggest impact Kelly can make on Ohio State's offense is with the unit's running game, particularly when it comes to the quarterback. Day and Egbuka each talked excitedly about what a Buckeye offense could look like with a mobile quarterback who can evade the pocket and find some extra yards with his legs, a luxury the program has not had at their disposal since now Pittsburgh

Steelers quarterback Justin Fields ran for a combined 867 yards and 15 touchdowns from 2019-20.

Comparatively, quarterbacks C.J. Stroud (2022-23) and Kyle McCord rushed for a combined net of 71 yards during their time leading the Buckeyes' offense, a stat that is skewed due to the 16 sacks he endured last season but still a major weakness that Day thinks Kelly can instantly improve with either Howard, Devin Brown or even Julian Sayin starting at quarterback.

"We knew we needed a quarterback who can run, or at least have the ability to run and pull the ball," Day said. "That was something that we felt like we needed to do. When you combine that with Chip's history of always having a quarterback who can do that, that was the right fit for where we're at.

"Now, he also has not always just run the quarterback into the ground. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about (running) quarterback power every other play, but having the threat of that. When you think about what Justin (Fields) did, those types of things here. So we have a background in that as well. But I feel like Chip can bring us to the next level in terms of that and it's exciting."

Kelly's propensity to run the football could also help ignite a potentially lethal running back tandem of TreVeyon Henderson and Judkins — one which Egbuka said could emerge as an "explosive duo (that's) going to be hard for teams to stop" — as well as open up the perimeter to allow pass-catchers such as Egbuka, Carnell Tate and Jeremiah Smith to find open spots down the field.

With a plethora of offensive weapons at Kelly's disposal this season, Day said he is confident that his former college coach and longtime friend will find a way to maximize this talent and put the unit in the best position to succeed.

"When you look at any offense, what you are trying to do is trying to figure out what plays maximize the guys you have in the locker room. Chip has a background of doing things a lot of different ways. I think everyone immediately goes to the spread offense and when he was at Oregon and some of the no-huddle stuff. (When) he was at UCLA, you saw him do things with three tight ends in the game. Before that there was a lot of two-back stuff. There's a lot of different versatility in his background. I think the idea is, 'All right, what fits our guys?' It starts with the quarterback and then it goes to the offensive line, the running backs, the receivers, and how that all gets put together.

"I trust Chip with my life, and that's a big part of any time you are handing something over that you have done almost your entire career."