

OSU Defense Focused On Fixing Mistakes, Playing Angry



Michigan's offense hit five home runs against Ohio State's defense in what proved the Buckeyes' demise. Blasts of 45, 69, 75, 75 and 85 yards netted the Wolverines five touchdowns in their 45-23 victory Nov. 26.

Wide receivers were left open, run fits weren't made and players were caught out of position.

"It's explosive plays really, what it came down to," Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles said Wednesday. "And really that's what most football games come down to from a defensive standpoint, something that we had been very good at when you look at our numbers over the course of the season. So not systematic, just too many explosives."

After a month to evaluate what went wrong in The Game, Knowles and company get a chance to rectify the meatballs they served to Michigan with a College Football Playoff semifinal on tap for Dec. 31 against Georgia. With proper corrections and a bit of attitude, the defense is confident it can put on a good showing.

"You have to look at those on an individual basis, determine what the issue was on that particular play, hold myself accountable for it," Knowles said. "If it was a problem with the scheme, the players understand it. We deal with those as a defense together, you know, because those are the critical factors in winning the game."

Losing to an archrival in a high-stakes game is something you'd expect to enrage a team, and that's certainly been the indication given by OSU's players.

Second-year defensive end Jack Sawyer gave a snappy answer when asked whether the team had been practicing with an edge since.

“One hundred percent,” Sawyer said. “We feel like it’s always been Ohio against the world. We feel like that’s never going to change. So throughout this whole month of bowl prep, our defense has been playing very pissed off in practice, I think the team as a whole has been. And I think that’s where we need to be.”

Busted coverages are an issue the Buckeyes will need to correct to have success. Michigan wide receiver Cornelius Johnson and tight end Colston Loveland each slipped behind the Ohio State secondary for scores. OSU can’t afford to lose star Georgia tight end Brock Bowers — or any of quarterback Stetson Bennett’s receiving targets for that matter — in a similar way.

Knowles pins the lost assignments squarely on his shoulders.

“You look at the things that you’re talking about, and you say, well, okay, he’s a really good player. He’s a really good kid. And something went wrong,” Knowles said. “So people want to point blame, and that’s where it comes back to me. I mean, it’s definitely, you know, our players, they are always trying to play their best. So now it’s up to me.

The plus side for Ohio State, Sawyer and others said, is that it feels the mistakes it made against Michigan are correctable things. It wasn’t a lack of ability, more so a lack of playing up to their standard.

They’re confident in how they match up with the Bulldogs.

“I think we’ve got advantages across the board on both sides of the ball,” Sawyer said. “We’ve just got to go out there and execute.”