

# Ohio State Prepares For Elite Iowa Defense



For the first time perhaps all season, Ohio State will go up against a truly elite unit. Although Iowa certainly hasn't been known to be a well-rounded, balanced team, the team's defense has been revered over the last few seasons.

With an offense averaging just over 15 points per game in 14 games last season, it took almost an unfathomable defensive effort that saw the Hawkeyes give up just 14.8 points per game, fourth best in the country in 2023, to win 10 games and make the Big Ten championship game. For his efforts, long-time Iowa defensive coordinator Phil Parker deservedly won the Broyles award given to be the best assistant coach in college football.

In 2022, Parker led the Hawkeyes to similar results, as the defense put up even better points allowed numbers, giving up 13.3 points per game.

Through four games, it has been the same Iowa defense that has stymied opposing Big Ten offenses and somehow carried one of the nation's worst offenses into Big Ten contention for years.

During their weekly press conferences at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on Tuesday, Ryan Day and offensive coordinator Chip Kelly made it clear that they know what they are up against.

"Coach Parker does a great job of making sure they understand how they're being attacked," Day said. "You just look year after year; it's similar in terms of the statistics and the production. They know what they're recruiting there, and they do a great job. It's a real challenge for our offense this week, and we got to have a great week of practice."

"We're not going to out scheme Phil Parker," Kelly said. "I think people think a little too much into that part... This game has always been about the players and always will be about the players, so who can really show up in those matchups, and that's what this game is about."

As Kelly mentioned, it is often the players rather than coaches that decide the fate of games. Kelly specifically pointed out All-Big Ten caliber starting defensive linemen Yahya Black and Aaron Graves, along with All-American linebacker Jay Higgins, as specific difference makers in the Hawkeyes' lineup.

"This is as good of a defense as we've faced, but there's going to be a lot of one-on-one battles. We have to win against their interior defensive linemen, who are outstanding. So that matchup with our center and guard against the two interior defensive linemen and their All-American linebacker are huge

matchups.”

Perhaps the most unheralded of the three players Kelly pointed out, Graves has been extremely productive so far. Through four games, Graves has already recorded three sacks, which, as it currently stands, is tied for the fourth most in the Big Ten. Graves’ pass-rushing numbers are quite the feat for an interior defensive lineman through a third of the season.

Higgins has somehow continued the blistering pace he set forth in his All-American 2023 campaign. The fifth-year linebacker possesses the rare talent to excel both in pass coverage and as a tackler, leading the team in both interceptions with two and tackles with 34. Higgins has also forced a fumble and has two pass breakups.

An All-Big Ten honorable mention a season ago, Black perhaps has had the quietest start of the trio but has still gone for 11 tackles, including 2.5 for loss so far.

“It doesn’t matter what year you watch them, it’s the same guys inside,” Day said. “They just play with great technique, they’re well-coached, they understand how they fit into the defense, the pad level’s low, their hands are low, they play physical, they run to the football.”