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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

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Smelling The Roses

Buckeyes Tab Knowles As Next DC

By **PATRICK MAYHORN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor



Just days after his Oklahoma State Cowboys came up just short against Baylor in the Big 12 title game 21-16 and in turn missed out on the College Football Playoff, Ohio State announced via a statement from head coach Ryan Day that it would be hiring Pokes defensive coordinator Jim Knowles for the same role in Columbus, effective Jan. 2 after the two squads had finished out their seasons.

The Buckeye head coach centered focus on finishing out the year with Ohio State still set to play in the Rose Bowl against Utah and Oklahoma State slated for a Fiesta Bowl matchup with Notre Dame.

"I have offered a position on the Ohio State football staff to Oklahoma State University defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and he has accepted it," Day said. "Starting Jan. 2, Knowles will be the Buckeyes' new defensive coordinator. What is most important at this time is that we put our players in the best position possible to finish this season with a win in the Rose Bowl. To that end,

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN RIOS/PHOTOS BY SONNY BROCKWAY

HEADING HOME — Quarterback C.J. Stroud (right) and wide receiver Chris Olave (left) will get the chance to return to their home state of California as Ohio State earned its 16th Rose Bowl bid and a matchup with the Pac-12 winning Utah Utes. Ohio State last played in Pasadena Jan. 1, 2019, against the Washington Huskies and is seeking its fourth straight Rose Bowl win.

OSU Focused On Granddaddy Of Them All

Continued On Page 13

By **PATRICK MAYHORN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Ohio State is headed to the Rose Bowl for the second time in four seasons, but only the third time since the turn of the millennium. The Buckeyes, who earned their spot as the Big Ten's highest-ranking squad without prior obligations in the post-season, will match up with Utah for only the second time in program history. The Utes, winners of the Pac-12 for the first time, are making their first ever trek to Pasadena for a bowl that head coach Kyle Whittingham described as hugely important to him and to his program.

"It's something we've been working towards for a long time," Whittingham said Dec. 5. "We've been in the league, 10 years now, 11 years? We got into the league and knew we had some things we'd need to improve.

"It's a history-making football team. We've never won the Pac-12. I'm proud of them for that."

For Utah, the game marks an arrival of sorts. Once a Mountain West stalwart and before that a member of the WAC, the Utes made the jump to the big time in joining the Pac-12 during the big realignment moves of the early 2010s, playing their first season as a Pac-12 member in 2011. The Rose Bowl was always a goal in Salt Lake City, as it is for every West Coast and Midwest team alike.

It is, after all, the Granddaddy of Them All. It's the greatest spectacle in the greatest venue, serving frequently as the arbiter for national title claims for decades as the Big Ten and various amalgamations of pacific schools — first in the Pacific Coast Conference, followed by the Athletic Associate of Western Universities, the Pac-8, Pac-10 and now Pac-12 — sent their finest champions to compete.

Although it's no longer designed to decide a national champion outside of the

Continued On Page 12

BSB's Annual Bowl Preview

Buckeye Sports Bulletin's 56-page bowl preview issue is overflowing with information about Ohio State's Rose Bowl berth as well as features, news and updates on all of OSU athletics, including:



- A preview of the matchup against Utah at the Rose Bowl, including our staff prediction, season stats for both teams, bowl notes and a look at Ohio State's history in the Rose Bowl

- A flashback to the 1996 Buckeye football season
- A feature on former Ohio State linebacker and new Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman

- Reports on the men's and women's basketball, men's hockey and wrestling programs

- Plus all of BSB's regular columns and features

Rose Bowl Still Matters To Buckeyes

Continued From Page 1

years it enters the playoff rotation, the pair of programs involved still have plenty of excitement for the game, even if for the Buckeyes this serves as something of a consolation prize – which would have bordered on sacrilege in Columbus 30 years ago.

“The goal that we have here is to win championships, and that’s a goal that we have year in and year out, and we didn’t reach that goal,” Buckeye head coach Ryan Day said Dec. 5. “However, we have an opportunity to go play in a tradition-rich Rose Bowl. And that means a lot. It’s a New Year’s Six bowl. It’s the 16th time Ohio State’s been in the Rose Bowl. There’s a lot of tradition that’s led up to that, and I know our guys are going to want to play hard and win that game.”

Publicly, Ohio State’s focus is almost exclusively on the task at hand – even as privately it can’t help but look ahead to the future, moving quietly behind the scenes to ensure its return to the top of the sport expeditiously, like in the hire of defensive coordinator Jim Knowles from Oklahoma State.

Day declined multiple opportunities to discuss this season at large or to project beyond Jan. 1. Players have been a bit more open about looking ahead, though not by much. After losing to a Michigan team that many felt it overlooked, Ohio State doesn’t want a repeat against the physical, run-heavy Utes – winners of nine games in 10 tries under quarterback Cameron Rising.

“Our guys have a lot of pride in themselves and a lot of pride in this team, and there’s been a lot of hard work and a lot of progress that was made all year before we started this thing. We want to finish this thing the right way,” Day said Dec. 5. “And that’s really what the focus is on right now. I think there’s a lot of lessons that have been learned from the last game, and that will obviously motivate us moving forward.”

“But right now, the focus is on this Rose Bowl and sending out the seniors in the right way, and I know everybody in the program wants to do that. We’re going to get right to work

here this week and start grinding toward it and move forward to the game and play really well in the game.”

And for these Buckeyes, this game does present an opportunity to rewrite their own story. Wounded by its stunning loss to Michigan, Ohio State entered something of a grieving period in the week that followed. Day spoke about a sense of ennui and a feeling of missed opportunity within the program. Players, after the loss, broke down their defeat and nearly broke down in tears.

No, two decades of dominance doesn’t dull that pain in Columbus. When the Buckeyes resolved in the early 2000s to turn the tide of the rivalry and followed through with a historic batch of success, they did so with the express goal of never feeling the way they had after countless losses in the John Cooper and Earle Bruce eras that cut seasons well short of their desired finish.

In 1996, when the Buckeyes suffered their first loss of the season to Michigan on their home turf and entered the Rose Bowl as a fallen title contender rather than the favorite to claim the crown, players and coaches spoke in hushed tones about the misery that losing to that team, of all teams, inflicted.

“It’s an awful feeling,” said OSU senior full-back Matt Calhoun at the time. “I had hoped I would never have to feel it again and here I am, feeling it again.”

Now, 25 years later, Day has for the first time in his career experienced that same feeling. And like those players, he never wants it again.

“The rivalry game is the rivalry game for a reason, and it means a lot to a lot of people,” Day said. “When you don’t win it, there’s a tremendous amount of pain, and nobody knows that more than the players and the coaches here.”

“(It’s) hard to swallow. You can’t just move on after one day. It just doesn’t work that way. Like I said in the postgame press conference, it’s going to leave a mark, and we knew that. It’s going to hurt for a while.”

To add salt to the wound – which Michigan had been anxiously awaiting for 10 years – the

Buckeyes were painted after the game, both nationally and by the Wolverines, as a team that simply wasn’t capable in the trenches. With 297 Michigan yards on the ground to show for it, Ohio State is without much to offer for disagreement.

“They’re a finesse team, they’re not a tough team,” Michigan offensive coordinator Josh Gattis said on the ‘Inside Michigan Football’ radio show in the days after The Game. “And we knew that going into the game that we can out-physical them, we can out-tough them and that was going to be the key to the game, and that’s what we prepared for all year long.”

“You saw earlier this year in the game they lost to Oregon, Oregon was the most physical team on the field. That’s the way they lost, and we committed to that recipe, and it paid off.”

Day had little answer in parrying that statement, saying that he doesn’t “really think much about that at all,” but he was clear throughout his pre-bowl chatter that the way Ohio State lost to the Wolverines was unacceptable.

Now, with another physical, run-heavy and defense-led team on the docket in Pasadena, Ohio State has the opportunity, not quite to right those wrongs (that can only happen in Ohio Stadium on Nov. 26, 2022) but to change the tune around his program. Even as the Buckeyes deal with the disappointment of their rivalry loss and of missing out on the College Football playoff for the first time in Day’s tenure, the focus has shifted, and Ohio State is again looking forward.

“That’s our goal as we head into every year,” Day said of the CFP, “and so, yes, it’s been a tough week for us. But you can only feel sorry for yourself for so long. You’ve got to move on. You’ve got to get back to work, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

Beyond the team building or the conversation around Columbus, the Rose Bowl too presents the same opportunity it always does. It’s the Rose Bowl. It’s a trip to one of the sport’s finest venues to match up with the best of the Pac-12. The Buckeyes will compete in almost assuredly beautiful weather for the opportunity to call themselves the Rose Bowl champions,

which, playoff or not, is still meaningful for a program with as thick a history in Pasadena as any program in the Big Ten.

And for some Buckeyes, it even offers a chance to return home.

Redshirt freshman quarterback and Heisman runner-up C.J. Stroud never got the chance to attend a Rose Bowl when he was growing up in Inland Empire, Calif. He made the trip to Pasadena plenty to attend UCLA home games both as a fan and a recruit, but he’s never seen the Rose Bowl itself.

“I went to a whole bunch of UCLA games growing up,” Stroud said. “I was getting recruited by them a little bit coming out of high school, so I went to a couple of those games, but (this is) a little more big-time than the UCLA games. Probably a little louder, a little more people. A little bit different of an atmosphere, so I’m excited.”

Stroud is one of four players from The Golden State who have donned the Scarlet and Gray this season and will make the trip to California for one last game.

Walk-on quarterback J.P. Andrade, wideout Chris Olave, Stroud and linebacker Kourt Williams all hail from California as well, and, like Stroud, are relishing the chance to visit home – and to get a few more familiar faces in the crowd.

“Growing up back home in California and being a full-fledged Cali guy, born and raised there, so it’s definitely a blessing to be able to play in this game,” Stroud said. “I’m super excited for (it). We’re going to try to go out the right way, have fun back home and just have fun with the game.”

“(My family) comes to every game. But, I’ll probably have a couple more people come like some cousins and some family or some homies from back home – definitely some other people that can’t make it all the way out to Ohio, which is really cool.”

Though Stroud is looking forward to the Rose Bowl, one of his battery mates and another son of California has yet to make a definitive statement on his availability. With the NFL draft on the horizon, receivers Olave and Garrett Wilson have been the topic of discussion around Columbus, as they could choose to opt out of the Rose Bowl to avoid injury.

Stroud told media that whatever they decide, he’ll support them – and alluded somewhat heavily to it as a possibility. If the pair does decide not to play, Ohio State would likely turn to Emeke Egbuka, Julian Fleming, and Marvin Harrison Jr. (and perhaps even walk-on Sam Wiglusz, the frequent subject of compliments in the media from his teammates) to contribute.

“I told them to do whatever is best for you,” Stroud said. “At the end of the day, whatever they decide to do I’m behind them. In this sport, you’ve got to do what’s best for you, even if it might look selfish. Those guys gave everything to Ohio State. I’ve never seen them make a selfish decision. If they don’t play, then it’s probably a benefit to them and I fully respect it, then it’s time for guys to step up for next year. Get their feet wet.”

“Everybody will be fine. Even if my boy Sam Wig’s got to play. It doesn’t really matter. At the end of the day, we’ve just got to go win a game. It’s not going to be easy. Utah’s a hell of a team. They do a lot of good things, and we’re definitely not taking it lightly at all. I feel like whoever has to step up will, if that needs to be.”



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Knowles Offers Twist On Traditional 4-2-5 Defense

Continued From Page 1

we will continue our planning and preparation for the game with our current staff of 10 assistant coaches."

With Knowles' arrival, Ohio State will have some decisions to make about its currently full coaching staff, and it is expected that more than one Buckeye coach will be moving on as Knowles joins. And while Ohio State preaches the virtues of the Rose Bowl at every turn, it's hard not to look into Knowles. After all, he's fashioned himself as one of the sport's most interesting characters and designed a defense that is one of the best in the country.

Oklahoma State fielded the nation's eighth-best scoring defense (16.8 points per game), fifth-best rushing defense (91.2 yards per game) and third-best overall defense for yards allowed per game, sitting at just 278.4 a contest behind only Georgia and Wisconsin. It leads the nation in sacks with 55 and holds an outstanding 26.1 percent conversion rate allowed on third down, good for second nationally. Ohio State, for reference, finished the regular season with a 41.4 percent rate allowed, enough for 97th nationally.

"We're proud of that," Knowles said on the Gap Down Backer Podcast. "I can't say that the stats affect me a lot, though. I'm old-school, I guess. I'm 56. I've been around for a bit, and the new wave of analytics – I appreciate it and we have an organization to have those numbers, so it influences me, but I'm not a guy who relies on that. It's a process that you set up at the beginning, you work through it and then you make week-to-week adjustments based on your opponent and what your guys are doing well, and that's where the constant change comes for me. You set your plan, you work it, and you're open to changes when necessary. The numbers are part of it, but they aren't that big."

For an Ohio State program fresh off a season marred by a pair of losses that saw it beaten in the trenches, those rushing stats and the physicality that Knowles instilled in his Oklahoma State defense was enough for Day to expedite the process and secure his signature.

"I think there are some things that we'll get into certainly down the road, but immediately, we've got to obviously do a better job stopping the run and running the football," Day said. "That's the No. 1 thing that we recognize."

"Our goal every game is to win the line of scrimmage, is to run the football and be physical, play great defense. We'll continue that. And I think this bowl practice, we'll have an opportunity to get back out there and really emphasize pad level, hand placement."

Knowles can bring with him a tremendously impressive rush defense and a system that gave just about every Big 12 foe fits, but the veteran coach will certainly preach the importance of patience when he arrives in Columbus.

He arrived at Oklahoma State by way of Duke in 2018 and pieced together an improved defense each season at the helm, but his first season wasn't exactly a glowing success. The Cowboys ranked 112th in

total defense and 97th in scoring defense as Knowles worked to adjust to the Big 12, which he said played a major role in departing from Durham in the first place.

"I wanted to get out of my comfort zone," Knowles told CBS Sports. "I really thought, 'Well, (it's) the Big 12. It's a special form of insanity. OK, let me see how I can hold up.'"

Four seasons later, he's toppled the wild west and has his sights set on what some might call Ohio State's underperforming collection of talent.



Jim Knowles

In its new coach, it has something of an odd one. A Philadelphia native who graduated from Cornell and worked initially on Wall Street out of school before the allure of football drew him to coaching, Knowles has earned the reputation as something of a mad scientist among his players and colleagues.

"Jim's interesting," Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy told The Athletic. "He's kind of like a mad scientist. He goes in his office on Sunday and closes his door. You don't see him until Sunday night when we go to practice. I mean, he's in his office right now (Monday morning) with his door closed. I really won't see him much today until late in the afternoon. And then you don't see him a lot Tuesday until practice. That's really the story that's interesting with him. He goes in and puts on that mad scientist hat and comes up with things he wants to do, and you just don't see him much until usually Tuesday at practice."

He left the lab, first at Duke and then at Oklahoma State, with a brand-new way to operate out of his base 4-2-5 defense, which isn't terribly dissimilar in structure from what Ohio State has been running in the Day era. Knowles uses a hybrid safety as the Buckeyes do, though his is referred to as a "Rover" and is a bit more of a safety than a linebacker. But he deploys a cover safety and a true safety as the Buckeyes do, a pair of outside cornerbacks, two linebackers and four linemen.

His largest departure from the norm in the 4-2-5 comes on the line. Knowles is the proprietor of the "Leo" position, which Knowles defines as a spot for instinctual, creative players, working as a combination of a defensive end and a linebacker.

"The (Leo) is a fun position for the players," Knowles said. "You don't have to have a certain size or even a certain skill set, you just have to have a ballplayer at that position – someone who enjoys the game, has instincts, who is creative. You can find that guy anywhere."

"This guy can play offense on defense. He can be like a tailback where you can tell him what to do specifically, and no matter what it will have an effect on the offense. You can move him around, put him wherever you want, and the offense never knows where it's coming from. Part of playing great defense is the ability to adjust, and when you have a guy who is an adjuster like that, you can do so many different things and it allows for a lot of creativity."

This season, 6-3, 250-pound Brock Mar-

tin and 6-2, 225-pound Collin Oliver filled the role for the Pokes, racking up a combined 66 tackles, 27 TFL and 18½ sacks.

Knowles uses the spot, as he says, as a fixer for anything ailing his defense. It functions largely as a stand-up defensive end, which can work off the edge of the line as an end traditionally would, but Knowles moves him around the defense depending on what the offense shows him. If his Leo is being chipped on the edge by a tight end, Knowles moves him into the middle of the defense and rushes him from there, forcing the offense to either leave a blocker in the backfield to answer it or to change its pass protection plans entirely. He dials up entire plays just for the Leo, like you would a running back, to free it up for easy rushes into the backfield.

Anything the offense shows, the Leo offers an answer for. When Oklahoma State was beaten by specific looks in the first half against Oklahoma and Baylor on Nov. 27 and Dec. 4, Knowles reworked his Leo's responsibilities at the half, and in both games his defense came out and blanketed its opponent. The Sooners scored nine second-half points – one on a safety, one on a fumble recovery – and the Bears scored zero.

It all ties back into an idea that Knowles formed when he was coaching at Cornell, based around his background working on both sides of the ball and on wanting to build a more aggressive way to play defense. He calls it playing offense on defense and uses that to paint every part of his scheme, from the way his players play to the way he calls games, at times dialing up specific blitzes for that Leo in the same way an offensive

coordinator would design running plays for a tailback.

"Early in my career I was fortunate enough to coach on offense at Cornell," Knowles said. "I learned protections and things that cause offenses problems, how much scheming goes into it from an offensive perspective to predict where the defense is going to be so that you get the right matchups and blocking assignments. Once you're exposed to that, you see that there are opportunities to play offense on defense."

"Just the word defense itself, it gives the feeling of being back on your heels. You have to, in my opinion, make the defense aggressive to put the offense on its heels. That means taking advantage, taking some chances, playing that first-down marker like it's a goal-line in terms of selling it to your players and taking a stand. That changes the game. In today's game, everything goes so fast and offenses are so powerful, that when you get a third-down stop, in essence, you are stealing possessions. You need to steal possessions and you can either do it through takeaways or third-down stops, and you have to approach it like that."

On Jan. 2, Day will hand the keys to Knowles and task him with fixing a Buckeye defense that helped hold one of the most effective offenses in school history out of the playoff. And though his approaches may be unconventional, these Buckeyes are trusting the Cornell graduate to make sure that they aren't watching an in-state foe like Cincinnati, which claimed the No. 4 seed, or those dreaded Wolverines (No. 2 seed) in the playoffs again next season.

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First-Year DCs Set High Standard For Knowles

By **BRADEN MOLES**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Given the last several years of uncertainty on the defensive side of the ball for Ohio State, expectations are high for new defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and what he might bring to the table.

The Buckeyes are coming off a season in which they allowed 22.8 points and 372.9 yards per game, which ranked 38th and 59th in the country, respectively. It's been a two-year stretch – and three out of four years going back to 2018 – that the defense has not been up to snuff for what is expected at Ohio State, but with Knowles' pedigree and the success he found at Oklahoma State with his 4-2-5 scheme, which is being installed during spring practice, the thought is that he may bring about the return of the Silver Bullets.

With Knowles set for his first season as defensive coordinator, Buckeye Sports Bulletin is looking back at how Ohio State's defensive coordinators have performed in their first seasons, dating back to our publication's start in 1981. First up is former defensive coordinator Bob Tucker, who took over on defense following the 1981 season.

Bob Tucker

Tucker, who previously coached outside linebackers under Earle Bruce from 1979-81, took on inside linebacker duty for the 1982 season following the firing of the bulk of Ohio State's defensive staff. He was the lone survivor, while defensive coordinator Dennis Fryzel, defensive backfield coach Nick Saban and middle guard/tackles coach Steve Szabo were all let go following Ohio State's 31-28 win over Navy in the 1981 Liberty Bowl.

Though a formal defensive coordinator was not listed on Ohio State's media guide for the 1982 season, it was clear that Tucker was the leader of the defense as the only returning coach on that side of the ball. He took over a defense that had allowed just 21.1 points per game in the preceding season and returned eight starters, and Dom Capers (defensive backfield), Randy Hart (middle guard/tackles) and Fred Pagac (outside linebackers) were also added to the defensive coaching staff.

The result was an improved defense as the Buckeyes gave up only 17.3 points per game. Ohio State finished the season 9-3, dropping consecutive games against Stanford, Florida State and Wisconsin – all unranked – despite giving up just 21.0 points on average in those contests, including a 6-0 shutout loss to the Badgers.

Tucker stayed on as defensive coordinator for one more season before leaving to become the head coach at his alma mater, College of Wooster, where he coached for 10 seasons, eventually returning to Ohio State in an administrative role until 2008.

Gary Blackney

Following Tucker's departure, Gary Blackney was promoted to defensive coordinator for the 1985 season after just one year



SONNY BROCKWAY

TOUGH TASK — Jim Knowles will be tested in his first outing as defensive coordinator at Ohio State when the Buckeyes take on Notre Dame to open the 2022 campaign on Sept. 3. With a strong season, he'd become the seventh OSU DC since 1982 to improve on his predecessor's final mark for points per game allowed in his first season at the helm.

on staff as the defensive backs coach. He inherited a strong defense from Tucker that featured linebackers Eric Kumerow and Chris Spielman, as well as all four starters in the secondary – cornerbacks Greg Rogan and William White, rover Sonny Gordon and safety Terry White.

William White led the secondary with six interceptions, while the team combined for 21 interceptions and held opponents to 17.7 points per game, just one more point per game than Tucker's final defense at Ohio State.

It was another 9-3 season for Bruce. The Buckeyes fell to Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan before downing No. 9 BYU in the Citrus Bowl, allowing just a touchdown in the 10-7 victory.

Blackney's defense showed further improvement in the next two seasons, allowing just 13.8 points per game in 1986 and 16.5 points per game in 1987, but he ended up a casualty of sorts of Bruce's firing following the 1987 season. It was reported in BSB on Jan. 16, 1988, that Blackney would remain on staff following Bruce's firing and John Cooper's subsequent hiring but that his role would be reduced.

He ended up coaching inside linebackers for the next two seasons and left to become the head coach at Bowling Green from 1991-2000. Blackney quit following the 2000 season, leading to the Falcons hiring an upstart wide receivers coach at Notre Dame – Urban Meyer.

Bill Young

Bill Young would serve as Cooper's defensive coordinator after assisting Cooper for eight seasons during stops at Tulsa (1980-84) and Arizona State (1985-87).

"I went to the little OSU – Oklahoma State University," joked the former defensive lineman, who was an outstanding senior for the Cowboys in 1967. "I'm really excited to be here. It's one of the schools you always dream of having the opportunity to coach at."

"I went through college at a time when Ohio State football was doing – and they still are – really super in football. And Woody Hayes was one of the guys you look at as a figure of what you want to be as a football coach."

"We're going to be aggressive, and we're going to run to the football," said Young on his defensive philosophy. "We're going to be fundamentally sound and do things that are necessary to win the game. Whatever it takes – that's John's philosophy. He's a real believer in being a teacher and teaching all aspects of the game."

While Young had high hopes, the defense – and the team as a whole – suffered a significant setback in his first season, going from 16.5 points per game in 1987 to 25.7 in 1988, which ranked 68th in the country. Cooper said before the season that he felt the team was thin on defense, and that was reflected with just five returning starters on defense.

"We don't have a great deal of depth or experience in some areas," Cooper admitted. "We will have to make up for that with team tackling, hustle and effort. Our defense is going to have to make things happen."

Unfortunately for Ohio State, that was not the case, as the Buckeyes gave up at least 30 points in six games en route to a 4-6-1 finish, its fewest wins in a season since a 3-5-1 record in 1959.

Though Young had a challenging first season as defensive coordinator, he was

able to whip things into shape over the next seven seasons, of which the high point was allowing just 13.2 points per game in 1992, fourth-best in the country.

Following the 1995 season, Young accepted the defensive coordinator job at Oklahoma under head coach John Blake.

Fred Pagac

Once Young was off to Oklahoma, the door opened for Pagac, who had been on the staff in various roles dating back to 1978. He began as a graduate assistant before working his way up to linebackers coach in 1982, where he remained until his promotion to defensive coordinator before the 1996 season.

As chronicled in the April 27, 1996, issue of BSB by Jeff Rapp, Pagac was known for his "incessant bark."

"The fiery first-year defensive coordinator likes to use his lungs to amplify his point and sometimes raises more than the decibel level," Rapp wrote. "Poor decisions are annoying but can be rectified, Pagac asserts, and usually don't warrant a kind of hut-ho response."

"A lack of effort or apparent desire, however, is so mind-boggling to Pagac that his eyes often widen greatly and an occasional spittle of chewing dip shoots from his feared mouth when addressing the problem."

"Pagac even tends to point the bill of his coaching cap to the back, further illustrating the unmatched intensity in his face, just in case the offending player isn't already skittish in his presence."

The intensity paid off, as not only did Pagac continue Young's strong run of defenses at Ohio State, but he improved on it, going from 16.9 points per game in 1995 to 10.9

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

in 1996, second best behind North Carolina (10.0 ppg). He had 10 returning starters to work with, including linebacker Greg Bellisari, cornerback Shawn Springs and defensive end Mike Vrabel.

Pagac's defense pitched three shutouts that season, including a 72-0 thrashing of Pitt and big wins over Minnesota (45-0) and Illinois (48-0). The team's lone loss came at home to No. 21 Michigan, when the Buckeyes fell despite only giving up 13 points. The season was capped off with a 20-17 win over No. 2 Arizona State in the Rose Bowl.

After three more seasons as defensive coordinator, Pagac experienced a rare transition compared to his peers on this list – he received an internal promotion, acquiring the title of assistant head coach under Cooper.

"His duties won't change a whole lot," Cooper said. "If I'm not here, obviously he would be the guy to run the daily operations of the program. Fred's done a great job and been very loyal to this program and been very loyal to me. I just felt like it was a natural (move) to promote him to assistant head coach."

Jon Tenuta

With Pagac relinquishing his defensive coordinator duties, the job fell in 2000 to Jon Tenuta, who had coached the secondary for the previous four seasons.

"It's a great honor to be here at Ohio State, period," said Tenuta, who had seven years of experience as a coordinator between his previous stops at Marshall, Kansas State and SMU. "I look at this as a great honor for me personally, and I am pleased."

"I'm sure Fred and I will continue to argue everything out with the defense. It will be just like we've done things for four years now."

The defense showed great strides with Tenuta running the show, going from 23.9 points per game in 1999 to 18.5 in 2000, which ranked 14th in the country. The Buckeyes allowed just 319.4 yards per game (24th) and had 19 interceptions, led by defensive back David Mitchell with five picks.

Despite the defensive improvement, Ohio State went just 8-4 on the season, leading to Cooper's ouster. Tenuta opted not to stick around, accepting a dual defensive coordinator/defensive backs coaching role at North Carolina and establishing himself as a one-and-done defensive coordinator with the Buckeyes.

While Tenuta could have set himself up well at Ohio State given his first outing as defensive coordinator and potentially lobbied for a spot on Jim Tressel's staff, his departure set the stage for one of college football's better minds to join the Buckeyes.

Mark Dantonio

Along with offensive coordinator Jim Bollman, Tressel's biggest splash on his inaugural staff was Mark Dantonio, who had served as a graduate assistant at Ohio State from 1983-84 and coached under Tressel at Youngstown State from 1986-90. Tressel pulled Dantonio away from Michigan State, where he had been the Spartans' defensive backs coach for six seasons, to become Ohio State's defensive coordinator.

In the Feb. 3, 2001, issue of BSB, Rapp wrote, "Dantonio will take over a defense that had been under the supervision of both

Name	First Season	Net Change In PPG
Bob Tucker	1982	-3.8
Gary Blackney	1985	+1.0
Bill Young	1988	+9.2
Fred Pagac	1996	-6.0
Jon Tenuta	2000	-5.4
Mark Dantonio	2001	+1.8
Mark Snyder	2004	-2.1
Jim Heacock	2005	-3.0
Luke Fickell	2012	+1.8
Greg Schiano	2017	+3.5
Jeff Hafley, Greg Mattison	2019	-11.8
Kerry Coombs	2020	+12.1

assistant head coach Fred Pagac and defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta. Their tenure, which dated to the 1996 season, produced units that were nationally ranked in several categories and were anchored by future pros such as Andy Katzenmoyer, Shawn Springs, Antoine Winfield, Damon Moore and Na'il Diggs."

Dantonio didn't shy away from the recent history.

"They've been excellent here," Dantonio said. "In the past couple years, they've really stopped the run, and in '98 they were tremendous. They've got good players here – or we've got good players here – and the coaches here, Coach Pagac and his staff, have done a great job. The cupboards definitely are not bare here."

Dantonio inherited a defense returning six starters while losing cornerbacks Nate Clements and Mitchell, but Dantonio expected to play an attacking style once again.

"We played a lot of press coverage with the corners up. We've had a lot of good corners (at MSU)," Dantonio said. "Our safeties have usually been two of our leading tacklers every year. (Free safety) Richard Newsome led the conference in tackles per game last year."

Later, in the Sept. 8, 2001, issue of BSB, Steve Helwigen wrote that Dantonio was opting to stick with what had worked at Ohio State: a base 4-3 defense.

"Where I've been, we've pressured people, and I know Ohio State has pressured people," Dantonio said. "I think in this day and age we have to be able to affect the quarterback."

"Depending on how well we are able to affect the quarterback with our front, people will dictate how much we have to do in addition to that."

"We want to be sound and not give up the big play and make them earn everything they get. At the same time, we want to make the big play and come up with turnovers."

Dantonio's first-year defense gave up more points per game than Tenuta's – 20.3 in 2001 compared to 18.5 in 2000 – but still intercepted 21 passes and held opposing offenses to 20 or fewer points in eight games. The offense struggled, meanwhile, leading to a 7-5 record for the Buckeyes in Tressel's first season. Even in Ohio State's losses, Dantonio's defense gave up only 25.4 points per game while the offense mustered just 20.0.

The foundation Dantonio established in

his first season as defensive coordinator set the stage for Ohio State's title run in 2002, in which his defense allowed just 13.1 points per game, leading the Buckeyes to a perfect 14-0 record.

Dantonio left after the 2003 season to take the head coaching position at Cincinnati, where he remained for three seasons before taking the lead job at Michigan State. He coached the Spartans for 13 seasons, retiring following the 2019 campaign.

Mark Snyder

Dantonio's departure led to linebackers coach Mark Snyder receiving a promotion to defensive coordinator in 2004. Snyder had spent the previous three years on staff.

"We will continue to be an attacking type of defense that runs to the ball and puts pressure on whatever type of offense we are playing," he said. "We will emphasize speed, sure tackling and playing with emotion."

Snyder, in his only season as defensive coordinator, stuck to the status quo set by Dantonio and his predecessors and turned in a top-20 defense for Ohio State. The Buckeyes gave up just 18.2 points per game, led by linebackers Bobby Carpenter and A.J. Hawk and standout cornerback Ashton Youtby.

Snyder likely would have continued in his role given his success but elected to return to his alma mater, Marshall, to become the school's head football coach after the season concluded.

Jim Heacock

Defensive line coach Jim Heacock then took over Snyder's role, having served nine years on the staff across Cooper and Tressel's tenures. He had no shortage of returning starters to utilize, including linebackers Carpenter, Mike D'Andrea, Hawk and Anthony Schlegel; defensive linemen Quinn Pitcock and Marcus Green; and defensive backs Tyler Everett, Nate Salley, Donte Whitner and Youtby.

"First-year defensive coordinator Jim Heacock has a deep, talented, experienced and physical collection of athletes in his lineup," read the team's 2005 media guide. "And forget the age-old notion that Big Ten teams lack speed. These guys can run."

The defense capitalized on the returning production, finishing among the nation's best in most categories, including points per game (15.3, fifth), yards per game (247.6, fifth) and rushing defense (73.4 yards per

game, first). Hawk led the team with 121 tackles. Ohio State finished 10-2 that season, dropping games to No. 2 Texas and No. 16 Penn State by a total of 10 points.

Heacock continued a strong run of defenses over the next several years, never ranking worse than sixth in points per game allowed until the 2011 season, in which Ohio State's defense allowed 21.0 points per game, finishing the season 6-7 under head coach Luke Fickell. Following the conclusion of the 2011 season, Heacock was not retained by Meyer and retired from coaching.

Luke Fickell

Fickell remained on staff once Meyer was on board, returning to the defensive coordinator position which he had co-ordinated with Heacock since 2005. Meyer also hired former North Carolina defensive coordinator Everett Withers to co-coordinate with Fickell.

Coming off a challenging season, Ohio State had plenty to be hopeful for going into 2012. The Buckeyes returned several starters on defense, including defensive linemen John Simon and Johnathan Hankins, linebackers Ryan Shazier and Etienne Sabino, and defensive backs Bradley Roby and C.J. Barnett.

Fickell and Withers' defense held opponents to 22.8 points and 359.6 yards per game, which ranked 31st and 34th, respectively. Though not up to the normal expectations at Ohio State, it was enough to help lead the Buckeyes to a 12-0 record.

Fickell worked with Withers from 2012-14 and later was given co-coordinator titles with Chris Ash from 2014-16 and Greg Schiano from 2016-17. After giving up around 22 points per game in his first three seasons as defensive coordinator under Meyer, Fickell pulled everything together following Ohio State's national championship in 2014 and led the Buckeyes to a top-three defense over the next two seasons.

His run as defensive coordinator at Ohio State led to him getting a shot as head coach with Cincinnati. Fickell led the Bearcats to their first appearance (and first appearance for a Group of Five school) in the College Football Playoff in 2021.

Greg Schiano

Schiano had spent the 2016 season co-coordinating along with Fickell, and Fickell's departure to Cincinnati left Schiano as the obvious candidate to maintain control of the defense. He was named the team's sole defensive coordinator heading into the 2017 season.

In the August 2017 issue of BSB, Schiano expressed confidence in his group despite a number of key departures, including several first-round NFL draft picks in cornerbacks Marshon Lattimore and Gareon Conley and safety Malik Hooker.

"We have a chance to be exceptional," Schiano said. "What's given them a chance is they've worked incredibly hard to get to this point. But I've told them all that just gives us a chance, and I don't just mean work with (strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marrotti). They've worked hard in the classroom, learning the defense, learning the subtleties of it, and now we have to go out there and execute it over and over again."

Continued On Page 14

Buckeye DCs Have Varied First-Year Success

Continued From Page 13

The result was the defense that took a slight step back but by no means performed poorly. The Buckeyes still ranked 15th in points per game (19.0) and were ninth in total defense at 300.9 yards per game.

After just one season with Schiano as the lone defensive coordinator, it was decided that Alex Grinch would be brought in from Washington State to co-coordinate along with Schiano, allowing him to operate with a broader set of responsibilities over the defense.

"With the addition of our 10th coach, it allows me to (have more oversight of the defense)," Schiano said. "I can kind of fill in where they need a little help. If you take it that one of the linebackers does a different job than the other two, I can help there. I can help whatever position is needed."

None of the staffing changes helped to improve the defense, which fell to 51st in points per game (25.5) and 72nd in total defense (403.4 yards per game). The Buckeyes gave up 30 points in five games, including in a loss to Purdue, 49-20, and nail-biters over Nebraska (36-31) and Maryland (52-51).

The poor defensive performance led to Schiano's firing and Grinch taking the defensive coordinator job at Oklahoma. Meyer, the head coach who had hired both, would step down following the season's conclusion.

Jeff Hafley, Greg Mattison

Grinch and Schiano were out, meaning that Ryan Day began his first season as head coach with a clean slate. He opted to poach Greg Mattison from Michigan and hired Jeff Hafley from the San Francisco 49ers, where he and Day had worked in years prior, and gave them co-defensive coordinator titles. Hafley's work with secondaries was renowned, and Mattison looked to bring an edge to the defense.

"His expertise in the back end, he's got a secondary coach as I've ever seen, and I know the players would say that," Mattison said, while cornerback Jeff Okudah said Hafley's knowledge and enthusiasm were contagious.

"Things the offense does and things that would pass through last year, guys are stepping up and identifying like splits or formations and everyone's player condition is just flying through the roof so we're playing faster," Okudah said.

In the April 20, 2019, issue of BSB, Mattison explained that he was hired at least partially for his experience running aggressive units.

"He definitely wanted us to be able to play the kind of defense that he's seen me be associated with," Mattison said of why Day hired him. "It's pretty evident with Larry (Johnson) that it always started up front. You want to be a very physical team against the run and you want to be a pressure team,

whether it's pressure with a four-man rush or it's pressure with blitzing, or whatever. But you want to not let quarterbacks sit back there and feel pretty good about themselves."

The defense showed immediate improvement under Hafley and Mattison's tutelage, allowing over 11 fewer points per game (13.7 in 2019, 25.5 in 2018) and establishing a defense full of superstars for Ohio State.

Defensive end Chase Young went off for 16½ sacks despite missing two games, while the Buckeyes' secondary shone with defensive backs Damon Arnette, Jordan Fuller, Okudah and Shaun Wade allowing only 156.0 passing yards per game, the best mark in the country.

The defense (as well as a not-too-shabby offense with Day and quarterback Justin Fields) helped lead the Buckeyes to the College Football Playoffs, where they fell to Clemson in the semifinals. Hafley's audition as defensive coordinator was strong enough that he immediately received interest from schools to become a head coach, and he left after one season to take the reins at Boston College, where he is headed into his third season.

Kerry Coombs

Hafley departed from Ohio State in December 2019, but the defensive coordinator position – whether Mattison would become the sole coordinator or if someone else would be given the co-title – remained in limbo until former staffer Kerry Coombs' return was announced on Jan. 20, 2020.

Coombs had served as cornerbacks coach at Ohio State from 2012-17 before heading to the pros and joining Vrabel at Tennessee. In the Feb. 1, 2020, issue of BSB, Day said Coombs was the one coach they had hoped to bring back.

"He is an excellent coach, and he has had two outstanding seasons in the NFL on Mike Vrabel's staff with the Tennessee Titans," he said.

Coombs – and Mattison, at least for one season – faced an uphill battle trying to keep the defense playing at the level it did in 2019.

"We've got a lot of work to do, but the kids have been playing extremely hard," Coombs said. "They are working and learning. It is a work in progress. I believe they're going to get there."

With the loss of several starters, including Arnette, Fuller, Okudah and Young, as well as the pandemic throwing the season in limbo until a start was eventually set for

late October – not to mention Coombs' lack of coordinating experience – things never came together for Ohio State's defense in 2020.

The Buckeyes cratered to 122nd in passing defense as one of just six teams to give up more than 300 passing yards per game. They were 59th in yards per game (401.6) and gave up 25.8 points per game, an increase of over 12 points per game from 2019. While Ohio State gave up only 97.6 rushing yards per game, sixth in the country, it didn't matter – teams loved throwing against the Buckeyes to the tune of 39.5 attempts per game, tied for the most among 127 teams that season.

Despite the defense, Ohio State still made a run to the College Football Playoffs, defeating Clemson before falling to Alabama in the national championship game. Perhaps due to the circumstances of the season and the challenges faced by Coombs, or simply because the Buckeyes still made a run to the title game, Coombs was given an additional year as defensive coordinator this past season.

It didn't last long, as he was demoted following Ohio State's week-two loss to Oregon, and he was not retained following the season, setting the stage for Day to hire Knowles.

Although there are perhaps too many unique instances above to pull any lessons for Knowles, the one common factor for a successful first-year defensive coordinator is returning starters, of whom the Buckeyes have plenty.

Defensive backs Cameron Brown, Denzel Burke, Ronnie Hickman and Josh Proctor; defensive end Zach Harrison; tackles Jerron Cage and Taron Vincent; and linebackers Steele Chambers, Tommy Eichenberg and Cody Simon all started at one point or another last season, giving Knowles plenty of talent to work with as he takes on a new challenge at Ohio State.

"When anyone thinks of the best in college football, they think of Ohio State," Knowles said. "That goes for people in the coaching profession too. You want to be the best, you want to be at the best, you want to compete against the best, you want to be at a place that's 100 percent supported by the university, the community and the alumni – a place with a rich tradition. When you put all of those things together, it's Ohio State. For someone who has worked his way up in the profession, it's really the culmination of a professional dream to get to Ohio State and to be with the best in the business."

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Knowles Takes Unique Approach To Tackling

By **PATRICK MAYHORN**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Jim Knowles is no stranger to straying from mainstream thought when it comes to coaching football. Ohio State's new defensive coordinator, plucked away from Oklahoma State after constructing a top-10 unit in Stillwater, has built a career around challenging conventional thought and creating advantages with unique ideas.

Faced with a talent deficit as the defensive coordinator at Duke in the early 2010s, Knowles constructed a dynamic 4-2-5 defense with multiple hybrid positions to provide better answers for spread offenses while forcing opposing coordinators to contend with skill sets and schematic looks they wouldn't see anywhere else.

Having constructed a consistent top-25 group in Durham, Knowles jumped to Oklahoma State in 2018 and worked to flesh out a similarly versatile system, leaning even more into those hybrid positions and eventually creating one of the nation's most disruptive and havoc-heavy defenses by eschewing traditional thought on positional archetypes and roles. The Cowboys worked linemen into coverage to confuse blockers and create clear shots to the passer for linebackers while shaping the secondary around defensive backs who had the ability to make tackles they aren't typically supposed to make.

In speaking to media at the opening of his first spring practice as a Buckeye, Knowles turned heads again, bucking the conventional wisdom when asked about his plans for balancing tackling practice – which of course entails bringing players to the ground, sometimes at full speed – with keeping his group healthy.

His gathered audience jolted to attention when he answered with a swift departure from football orthodoxy.

"You don't have to practice bringing guys to the ground," Knowles said, before stiffening his stance further. "You can't. We're

trying to save bodies. The number of blows that a guy takes is really important to us."

Make no mistake, Ohio State is still practicing its tackling – perhaps more than any other defensive fundamental – as it works to rebuild a defense that has faced constant struggles with bringing ball carriers to the ground in three of the last four seasons. But the work done under Knowles' guidance and according to his master plan is truly fundamental, centered not around the pop of pads but around establishing repeatable habits for smart tackling without putting at risk the players, college football's most limited resource.

Tim Walton's cornerbacks work to stick to the side of a ball carrier in motion, hoping to knock loose the football with a well-placed jab as the first stage of their "thud pace" tackle, meaning that contact is made (preferably at or close to the near hip of the ball carrier) but the ball carrier is never taken to the ground.

Safeties work with their new director, Perry Eliano, on pursuit angles, darting to the midsection of a standing tackling dummy, chopping their feet before exploding through contact with arms wrapped tightly around the dummy and their heads behind the contact, not in front of it.

Knowles' group, a batch of linebackers he hopes can reclaim the "Silver Bullets" moniker that Ohio State has struggled to embody recently, takes an even closer look at head placement. A team staffer rolls out a thick foam ring, which looks to be just under 4 feet tall (to encourage good leverage and proper tackling height), angled to simulate a ball carrier running to the outside opposite a linebacker set in his traditional position. The linebackers have to track the angle and bring the donut down with a wrap-up tackle, leading with their shoulder and shooting their lead arm into the center of the ring while keeping their heads out of the tackle and behind the ring, rolling to the ground through the contact.

The Buckeyes aren't practicing full-con-

tact tackles on human bodies, but the technique behind Knowles' approach to tackling doesn't need human bodies to be taught. His core tenets – group positioning, proper angles, hip tracking, driving feet and rolling through contact – apply all the same to Ohio State's extensive collection of coaching gadgets. In fact, Ohio State's cerebral new coordinator needed just the nearest object to explain his philosophy to a gaggle of reporters in March.

"The bottom line is that you don't have to practice bringing guys to the ground – it's all about positioning," Knowles said. "Tackling is technique and timing. What I'm looking for out there is what I call 'owning your hip.' You can do this all year long, you don't need pads on, you just need to own your hip."

Seated at a table behind a microphone on a short stand, Knowles rose to provide an example.

"If this microphone is the runner, I have to have one guy at its side – in a good position – and he has to tag (coaching slang for hit) the hip. And then I need another guy in front of him, with his near leg up (the near leg is on the same side of the body as the leading shoulder, and to have it up just means to have it in front of the other), and he's got to tag the hip. You can do that all over the field, you don't ever really have to tackle somebody in practice. It matters if you're in the right position. I teach them that it's OK to miss tackles if you're in the right position."

Comfortable as Knowles is in defining his ideal tackle, the new approach to bringing down ball carriers in Columbus does still merit a deeper look both at the technique Ohio State fans can expect to see this season and at what makes that technique successful.

What Makes For An Ideal Tackle?

The approach Knowles brings to Columbus has many names, but the most common moniker is "rugby style" or "hawk." The

former comes – as one might guess – from rugby, where defenders have no helmets and have learned to tackle with leverage and physics, leading with their shoulders and rolling through tackles to avoid sustaining head injuries.

The latter is simply the football adaptation of that approach, named for the Seattle Seahawks, who started deploying rugby style tackling under the direction of head coach Pete Carroll and helped to popularize the approach in the American game.

"We are a shoulder-leverage tackling team," Carroll says in a now widely shared teaching tape. "We've found that we can practice and drill our tackling without pads or a helmet. We can train and develop our safe tackling system in shorts and T-shirts, and it's a system that we believe can work on all levels, during all phases of the year – in season, offseason, and spring football."

"How we teach this system of tackling was inspired by those who play rugby around the world. Rugby players have taken the head out of the game and truly exemplified shoulder tackling."

The names can be used interchangeably, but for the sake of clarity, Knowles' teaching can be described in the shorthand as rugby style.

"I'm into rugby-style tackling, for sure," Knowles said. "The standard approach, again, if this (microphone) is the ball carrier, what we all taught going back to Woody Hayes is that you put your head across the bow when you're making a tackle. We don't use the head anymore, so you don't teach that. Now you teach near leg, near shoulder, profile tackling because you're keeping your head out of it. If you're keeping your head out of it, that's naturally – as the runner gets away from you – going to turn into a rolling tackle. Everything we do is really based on those principles, keeping your head out of the tackle. It all turns into rugby tackling, it really does."

"We are not harping on those major contact collisions in practice," he continued, with a clap to illustrate, "even when we get pads on. We're not. Football is a physical game, it's going to happen, but we're teaching angles and keeping your head out of it and that leads into the rugby approach."

As Knowles details, the major difference between much of tackling consensus and rugby style is in head placement. Defenders were taught for decades to lead with the head across the ball carrier's body (or across the bow, as Knowles says) on profile tackles (coming from the side), using the head to halt the runner while connecting with the back shoulder and wrapping up through that contact, creating the largest possible collision. For straight-on tackles, defenders were instructed to use the top of the helmet as a spear prior to targeting rules, which shifted into heads-up, face-mask-into-sternum tackling after targeting rules came into play.

This is not how Ohio State wants to tackle. Knowles wants his group leading with a shoulder into the ball carrier's hip, with their head behind the runner's body on profile tackles and to the side in straight-on encounters.

Hitting at the hip gives the defender a

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leverage advantage and an easily identified, repeatable target. The defender's shoulder is always used to lead, as is the corresponding leg – near leg up, in Knowles' terminology. Because the brunt of the tackle's force is going into one side of a player's body (without the head and neck there to absorb the force), the other side will naturally wrap around the back end of the ball carrier and convert into a roll, drawing the impact in and redirecting it into pulling the offensive player down.

Working in tandem with that, Knowles preaches positioning and group tackling. He always wants one player making contact at the hip from the side, with another nearby to clean up if that first tackler misses – allowing his defenders to play fast and loose, without worries that a missed tackle will surrender a huge chunk of yardage. That's the Knowles system, in both its micro (hip targeting, near leg and shoulder leading) and macro (multiple tacklers in good position because they focus on taking the correct angles) scale. It can all be taught individually and built into a complete approach without ever needing to tackle to the ground in practice.

"(With this approach,) when you're looking at it as a fan or a guy who reports on it and you see a guy fly by and miss but he's on the right angle, you're not going to pay much attention to it because there's going to be another guy right there," Knowles said. "You're not going to miss badly because there's going to be another guy in a position to make a tackle. The ones that stand out are when a guy loses leverage, the ball cuts back, there's nobody else there on the defense and it looks bad. It's all about timing, technique and angles.

"We're on them all the time about tagging hips and being in a position with the near leg up – and you have to mentally tackle, even when you aren't in. The adjustment starts in your mind and then goes into your body. When you do that repeatedly (it becomes ingrained). If you look at the teams I've had in the past, we were great tacklers, but we never tackled in practice. We worked and harped all the time on positioning on the field and body positioning. It's an 11-man game. If they're going to miss, (I want them to do it) aggressively and on the proper side of the runner."

For Knowles, teaching this style of tackling isn't just about developing good habits and confident players in an easy-to-understand system – it's personal. In 2008, Knowles lost longtime friend and former Cornell teammate Tom McHale at just 45 years old to what was recorded as an accidental drug overdose. McHale's wife, Lisa – with whom Knowles is still close – donated his brain to Boston University's School of Medicine, which identified chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE.

"I really made a change a few years back when one of my best friends at Cornell, a guy named Tom McHale, became one of the first to donate his brain to concussion research," Knowles divulged as he explained his plans for Ohio State's tackling. "It made me change everything that I do – I think the whole sport has changed."

As Knowles learned more about the damage that established football techniques could wreak on a brain, he dedicated himself to changing how he taught.

He sought out and learned the teach-



FILE PHOTO

FROM THE ASHES — Jim Knowles isn't the first Ohio State defensive coordinator to install rugby style tackling, as both Jeff Hafley and Chris Ash (above) preached the virtues of wrap-up, shoulder-leverage tackling styles for the sake of both safety and effectiveness during their time in Columbus. Ash has been one of its foremost supporters since 2014.

ing points of rugby tackling, in hopes of both making the game safer for his players and of preserving the sport he loves, even if it meant breaking from the norm. For Knowles, this isn't just a difference of opinion, it's an imperative shift.

"You really have to look at how you're doing things," Knowles said in 2015. "It's still a great game, right? But we need to preserve it, even if you have to do some drastic things. In order to protect this game, tackling like this is a necessity."

Rugby Tackling Not New At OSU

Although Knowles may be a trailblazer in his approach to practice, he's not the first Ohio State head coach to lead the Buckeyes into rugby style tackling. Defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley used a slightly modified system during his one season at Ohio State back in 2019 after learning it under then-defensive coordinator Robert Selah (who worked with Carroll in Seattle from 2011-13) when he worked for the 49ers, citing similar reasons to the ones Knowles shares.

"We're still teaching the components of the rugby-style tackling," Hafley said in March of 2019. "The whole key to tackling is trying to keep the head out for the safety of the game. There are other things that we've all learned and we've come together to talk about, but the main thing is to keep the head out of it for safety reasons."

Chris Ash, who worked as Ohio State's co-defensive coordinator in 2014 and 2015 next to Luke Fickell, was an even larger proponent. He had long adhered to the tackling fundamentals he was taught as a player in the 1990s, but he called a full-staff meeting ahead of his first season with the Buckeyes after watching Carroll's video upwards of 20 times in his estimation and ultimately con-

vinced the brain trust in Columbus to adopt Carroll's technique.

"The Pete Carroll video really got a lot of people to go back and evaluate what they're doing, but not a lot of people necessarily bought into it because it's different," Ash said in 2015. "If you get out of your comfort zone, people are willing to do that. We did, and it paid off. If you're a coach that's been doing the same thing for 30 years and felt like you've had success doing it, you might think, 'Why am I going to change what I'm doing?' I look at it differently. There's always a way to do stuff better. You've got to at least evaluate it.

"I start watching our film, and I'll be damned. Everything he's talking about is showing up on film and we're not even coaching it. We got together as a defensive staff. I said, 'We've got to watch this. We've got to talk about this. Something's not right here. We're all smart coaches and have been coaching for a long time, but what you're coaching, what I'm coaching, it's not happening on film. We've got to talk about this.' We had some serious conversations for a few weeks.

"I think it's hard for coaches to stand up and say, 'We were wrong. We were teaching it wrong.' And in 2014 we decided we were wrong and there are better ways to do it. Tackling is not the only fundamental in football that people continue to learn and do better, whether it's blow delivery, stances, steps – whatever. There are always ways to improve and do it better. I think what a lot of coaches need to do is have the guts to admit they are wrong and find ways to do things. Not everybody is willing to do that."

For Ash, the switch was life-changing. Ohio State took to the new style almost immediately and saw defensive improvement across the board, all the way to the 2014

national title. On top of that, Ash saw injury rates drop and felt that his teaching wasn't just more effective, it was creating a much safer game for his players.

"It eliminated some injuries," said Ash. "But it also was a lot more effective. And I can tell you honestly right now, as a coach, I could go show you our film and what we teach, what we coach, what we drill and guess what? It shows up on film. Not once, not twice, not by luck but by design. Our players have bought into it, and that alone, in my opinion, led to us having a lot of success, especially late in the season.

"I'm so glad I watched the video when I did, that we went through as a staff and did a self-evaluation when we did, because I feel, after 18 years of coaching, I teach something that actually shows up on tape and is safer for the players."

Just as it was under Ash and Hafley, Ohio State's goal under Knowles' guidance is defensive improvement. But the path to that improvement starts with the development of safe, repeatable fundamentals – all established in the details of rugby style tackling and taught without sacrificing the bodies of the Buckeyes.

"The thing I've noticed with Jim is that it's not a competition every day of who can win the drill. It's about teaching because he has his eyes on that first game in September," head coach Ryan Day said in March. "There will be a time when we want to go against each other, move the ball and compete, but I think that's the veteran coach in him. He understands the big picture. There's a method to the way he's installing, the way he's teaching.

"We had a practice before we left for spring break where he ran the same defense for the entire practice. It's unbelievable teaching to me. It's not about winning the drill, it's about getting better as a defense, learning and developing at a high level. I thought that was really impressive. I'm impressed with the way the guys have been playing, their energy and attention to detail."

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