

Ryan Day, C.J. Stroud Recognize Challenge Of Playing Against Jim Leonhard's Defense



Since his elevation to Wisconsin's defensive coordinator role in 2017, Jim Leonhard has developed a reputation as a defensive mastermind for the Badgers.

In just his first season at the helm of the Wisconsin defense, Leonhard led the unit to the second-ranked total defense — holding opponents to 262.1 yards per game. Since then, Leonhard's defense has never ranked outside of the top 30 in total defense and has landed in the top five four times. In 2021, the Badgers had the top-ranked defense in the country, as they held opponents to 235.3 yards per game.

As the third-ranked Buckeyes boast a potent offensive attack entering Saturday's matchup with Wisconsin, Ohio State head coach Ryan Day recognized the significance of Leonhard's six-year run of dominance and noted that playing against his unit will be a challenge for C.J. Stroud and Co.

"I have a lot of respect for Jim Leonhard, I always have. I've gone up against him a couple of times and his defenses are always some of the best in the country," Day said on Tuesday. "It's going to be a big challenge for us."

Wisconsin's defense is off to another strong start in 2022. Through three games, Leonard's unit sits as 11th in the nation in total defense (246.0 yards allowed per game) and No. 8 in scoring defense (8.0 points allowed per game).

The Badgers are led by outside linebacker Nick Herbig, who leads the team with four sacks, and a solid secondary on defense. Wisconsin leads the Big Ten with seven interceptions, including a 99-yard pick-six by safety John Torchio against Illinois State, and holds opponents to 170.0 passing yards per game.

With attention to the significant challenges posed by Wisconsin's pass rush and secondary, Stroud said he's focused on finding tendencies from previous Leonard defenses on film.

"They've had the same defensive coordinator for a little while now, so I definitely think you can find

tendencies in old defenses and previous years that we've played them," Stroud said. "I'll go deep into that and just see what I can find of their system of defense, how they run their defense and why they run their defense. I can have a better understanding of the plays we put in and why they're going to work or why they might not work, in whatever situation."

Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles said Leonhard has set a standard amongst coaches in that position with his resume.

"You're always paying attention to who's doing well on defense. They have been consistently very good," Knowles said. "They have a system and they run it and they know what they're doing. All of the things that you want to be as a defensive coordinator, I think he's showing it."

While it will be a battle of minds between Day and Leonhard on Saturday, the Buckeyes' skipper noted both coaches' gameplans will be all for naught without execution from their players.

"At the end of the day, it doesn't have anything to do with the coaches. It comes down to the players," Day said. "What do the players know? What can the players do? As much as sometimes it seems like matching wits between coordinators, that comes into play, but at the end of the day it's what your players know and what they can execute on the field."