

Ryan Day, Jim Knowles Prepping For “Efficient” Hartman, New-Look Fighting Irish Offense



In its highly-anticipated Week 1 matchup against Notre Dame last season, Ohio State had little problems limiting the Fighting Irish offense, holding quarterback Tyler Buchner and his unit to just 253 total yards and 10 points. This year’s matchup between the two blue-chip programs will likely present a much tougher challenge for the Buckeyes, however, as sixth-year Wake Forest transfer Sam Hartman has since taken over under center for the Fighting Irish, a change that has allowed them to average over 500 total yards and 40 points per game in their first four games this season.

Head coach Ryan Day and defensive coordinator Jim Knowles said on Tuesday that the introduction of Hartman has turned this year’s version of Notre Dame’s offense into a well-rounded unit predicated upon a strong run game and aggressive passing attack, something that their team must be aware of in the days leading up to the top-10 matchup on Saturday night.

“I think they’re doing a really good job with him,” Day said. “They’re running the ball, they’re running the ball out of multiple personnel groupings, and (are) efficient. I think it’s just a different style of quarterback than when they had (Tyler) Buchner last year. That was more of a quarterback run, spread run-game, (offense) this is a little bit more pro-style.”

“It’s become a running, smash-mouth offense (that takes) shots over the top,” Knowles added. “It’s definitely something we have to be prepared for.”

With Hartman — the ACC’s all-time leader in career touchdowns (110) — commanding the huddle, the Fighting Irish offense has thrived in the deep passing game, connecting on five touchdowns worth 35 or more yards through their first four games, including 75-and-76-yard scores in Notre Dame’s Week 3 matchup with Central Michigan. This has been a major point of emphasis for Knowles’ defense so far this season, as they have given up just a single touchdown pass worth two yards, and it must continue to succeed in that aspect in South Bend, Ind.

“We have to be able to rise to the challenge,” Day said. “We have to be aggressive. But we also have to make sure that we’re running to the ball and giving great effort and avoiding big plays, all those types of things.”

"I'm confident we're staying on type of things," Knowles said. "We're staying on top of things, keeping it in front, and limiting the explosive plays. And that's a big deal."

While Knowles is confident in his secondary's ability to limit explosive plays, he also indicated that his team must be aware of the poise and maturity Hartman exhibits on the field each week, a trait that has allowed him to emerge as one of the college football's most productive quarterbacks since he arrived at Wake Forest in 2018. These attributes, according to both Knowles and Day, have translated to success on the field this year, causing the veteran gunslinger to dominate opposing defenses with 1,061 passing yards, 13 touchdowns and zero interceptions through his first four games.

"You can tell that Hartman is a veteran," Day said. "He's been around, he's played a lot of football. (He's) accurate, very intelligent, a lot of good attributes for a quarterback. He's very good. (He) won a lot of games at Wake Forest, and obviously he's 4-0 now."

"Decision-making is huge, Knowles said. "Leadership from a quarterback (is also huge). Obviously, (Hartman) is an impressive guy, to be able to come in there and be a captain as a transfer. So I think it's that decision-making and leadership that he brings to the table that makes him different."

With Hartman's unique intangibles in mind, Knowles said his defense must enter Notre Dame Stadium on Saturday night with an even heightened intensity and focus if they want to perform under the lights in what he says is the team's steepest challenge yet.

"It's a matchup game, so the intensity level increases," Knowles said. "But it still always comes back to habits. What kind of habits do you have, and your training. But it's different every week, and this is certainly a huge test."