

Ryan Day Pleased With Special Teams Performance Against Akron



Last season Ohio State was plagued by all kinds of special teams miscues, with penalties, missed assignments and an overall lack of production on kick-and-punt returns often putting the Buckeyes in inopportune situations that played a significant impact on the games.

These shortcomings forced Ohio State to make some massive changes to its unit, firing special teams coordinator Parker Fleming over the offseason and replacing him with a group of assistants to take on the job, assigning safeties coach Matt Guerrieri and linebackers coach James Laurinaitis to lead punt and kickoff units, tight ends coach Keenan Bailey and wide receiver coach/co-offensive coordinator Brian Hartline to lead punt and kickoff return and analyst Rob Keys, along with Day's guidance, to oversee the entire unit.

Ohio State's changed special teams philosophy, which Day previously said stemmed from an offseason conversation with former Buckeye head coach Jim Tressel, has made an early positive impact on the team, with the unit most notably showing more explosiveness on punt and kick returns, totaling 60 punt return yards on four tries as well as taking their single punt return 23 yards to start the season.

Day seemed to be encouraged by his special teams performance during his weekly press conference on Tuesday, saying that these successes stemmed from the hard work his entire team has put in during the offseason to improve the group.

"We worked hard in the offseason on special teams," Day said when asked about the group's performance. "Rob Keys is overseeing it and I'm a big part of it on a daily basis, now."

Day said one of the main areas of focus on special teams this offseason was being more aggressive on punt returns. He said that they told his returners to act quickly and pick up the ball from the turf rather than letting it roll towards the goal line, a shift in mentality that he thinks can prevent his team from being put in poor field position to start a drive.

"One of the studies that we did was (seeing that) every time the ball hits the ground on the turf field, there's an average of like 10 yards a roll there. So we want to make sure we're aggressive in fielding those punts. At the same time, we can't be foolish, because some of those punts, you put yourself at risk of a fumble.

“So the first thing we have to do is get the ball back, that’s No. 1. The second thing we’re trying to do is field it, especially, again, on a turf field when that ball can really roll. You’ve seen some of those poor punts just kind of take off on the turf. So we try to eliminate those.”

Day added that these changes were instituted well by sophomore punt returner/wide receiver Brandon Inniss against Akron, particularly on one punt where he prevented a ball from rolling and instead picked it up for a significant gain.

Inniss returned four punts for 60 yards on Saturday, good for a 15-yard average, a mark significantly better than the unit’s 4.4-yard average a year ago that ranked 111th out of 130 FBS teams.

“The one that (Inniss) returned... it was rolling down, probably inside the 10-yard line, and he stopped it and then returned it back,” Day said. “That was probably three or four first downs on offense. It’s a big deal. So we’re trying to educate our guys. But we’re also going to be sound so we can make sure we get the ball back.”

Despite Inniss’ punt return successes, Day said he was disappointed with some other things involving special teams, most notably on the 23-yard kick return from Ballard, which he thought could have gone for a bigger play had they executed it better.

“I was disappointed with the first kickoff return,” he said. “I thought we had the opportunity to pop that and we did not execute that well enough. Ultimately that’s on the coaches. That was disappointing, for sure.”

“There’s just little things all across the board that we need to improve. When you have a bunch of those things, it adds up.”