

Special Teams Shows Signs Of Improvement In Season Opener



The Buckeyes didn't want nor did they foresee themselves attempting many punts in their first game against Akron, but after a mistake-riddled first drive, Ryan Day unpredictably sent out sophomore walk-on punter Joe McGuire, instead of Nick McLarty, to take the first punt of the season, after naming McLarty the starter on Aug. 28. Day explained how his mind changed leading up to the game.

"Going into last week, I felt like Nick was ahead of Joe. Joe had a much better week of practice leading up to it, significantly," head coach Ryan Day said. "We felt like Joe's experience in the program, being here for a year was better. We probably could have given Nick one down the stretch. In hindsight, we probably could have done that and should have done that. But we wanted to go with the experienced guy in Week 1."

"If Nick can continue to grow and build and learn, then we'll get him in there because he does have a lot of potential and a big leg. But Joe, right now, is a little bit more consistent."

After a decent punting season from former punter Jesse Mirco in 2023, the Buckeyes hoped for better, and the punting battle between McGuire, McLarty and Buffalo transfer Anthony Venneri ensued. In the first bit of game action of his career, McGuire had a pretty good, but not great 42-yard punt to start the game. Sophomore wide receiver and new punt returner Brandon Inniss didn't get out to a perfect start either, returning a 60-yard punt from Akron Punter Avery Book just six yards.

Though the punting numbers weren't great, but serviceable in 2023, the punt return numbers were amongst the worst in the country. Averaging less than five yards a return, the Buckeyes ranked 111th in the country in average return yards.

The Buckeyes, who don't have a designated special teams coordinator in 2024, but instead a slew of coaches operating the unit, found their stride late in the second quarter.

McGuire boomed a 51-yarder that prompted an Akron fair catch, shortly after placekicker Jayden Fielding made his 40-yard field goal attempt look routine.

In the second half, Inniss had his first memorable moment as a punt returner, making the bold choice to catch a punt inside his five-yard line. Inniss flashed his speed and ball carrier vision, paying off his risk to catch the ball, with a 36-yard return, giving the Buckeyes good field position at their own 40.

Inniss had another productive return after a shorter 42-yard punt, returning the punt 12 yards into Akron territory, setting the Buckeyes up for another touchdown.

Inniss' standout punt return performance continued when for the second time he caught a ball inside his ten-yard line and easily returned the ball past the 20-yard line, to the Ohio State 31-yard line for a 27-yard return.

Inniss went for 81 yards in his four returns, which landed him a 20.3 average return mark, much improved from the team's 4.4 average from a season ago and among the best in college football through Week 1.

In his first start, McGuire had numbers to be proud of as well, finishing the game with three punts for 134 yards and an average of 44.7 yards per punt.

The Buckeyes will not play Akron every week, but the early results from the punt and punt return game are a strong sign of improvement.