

Special Teams Still A Place Of Pride For Buckeyes



One of the first things that Urban Meyer preached when he arrived at Ohio State back in late 2011 was a focus on special teams. Meyer used special teams as a proving ground of sorts for young players during his entire tenure in Columbus, with essentially every defensive skill position player, most receivers, and even running back Ezekiel Elliott cutting their teeth on special teams. He frequently called the special teams his baby, and made a point to help out with it whenever he had the chance, emphasizing that if a Buckeye wanted to play, he had to work on special teams first.

Even with Meyer no longer around the program, and quite a few new coaches on staff, Ohio State's focus on special teams remains strong this fall. Per linebackers coach Al Washington, very little has changed with the way Ohio State treats special teams.

"Matt Barnes has done an unbelievable job, and obviously it's well documented that coach Meyer had that as a staple of his program for years, and coach Day is going to keep doing that," Washington said. "Coach Day is involved with special teams, every meeting, every phase. I think that keeps feeding into that. If I'm a young player, and I see these Ohio State legends playing special teams, doesn't matter what position, receivers, running backs, sign me up. That's the attitude our guys have towards special teams."

When asked about that culture, and about the impact that special teams culture has had on his two freshmen linebackers, Craig Young and Cade Stover, Washington didn't mince words.

"It's huge. If you're a freshman linebacker, you've gotta play on special teams, because the skillset marries up so well with what you're doing on a play to play basis," Washington said. "Take kickoff for example, you have to be able to defeat blocks, finish on the ball. You take punt block, you take any of them. For those, historically, that's been a right of passage."

While the practical improvements and obvious translation to a natural position that can come from playing special teams are obvious, it seems that the Buckeyes may value the sense of pride and the right of passage that comes with playing on special teams for young players. Washington indicated that playing on special teams can feed into the hunger to play for those younger players, and provided an example with his aforementioned freshmen.

“Those guys are chomping at the bit,” Washington said. “You could tell those guys that ‘we need you to do this’ and they’d be here right now. That speaks to the culture, special teams culture.”

Will the special teams be exactly the same? Certainly not. Meyer’s ideas about short field kickoff coverage, Australian punters, and safety at punt returner rather than playmaking could remain, but we won’t know that until the Buckeyes take the field in week one against FAU, and even then, we may not have a definitive answer on how that culture and strategy has changed, if at all.

What is guaranteed, however, is that the special teams culture serving as a right of passage at Ohio State isn’t going anywhere under new management. Linebackers, cornerbacks, wideouts, running backs, no matter the star rating, will still see their first playing time on kick coverage, punt block, and anywhere they may be needed on special teams, just as those that came before them did.

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