

Game Notebook: Bucks Get Ball To Playmakers



Part of the criticism against Ohio State after its stunning loss to Michigan was the lack of usage of the top-level talent in the wide receiver room. Carnell Tate finished that game with six catches and 58 yards as the Buckeyes' leading receiver, but five of those catches and 45 of those yards came in the first half.

None of Tate, Emeka Egbuka or Jeremiah Smith had a catch in the final 20 minutes of the game. All of that was while the running game gained just 77 yards on the ground with Quinshon Judkins' 12 totes for 46 yards (3.8 yards per carry) leading the way.

That performance had more than half of a month to stew in the minds of college football fans around the country, and it seemed to change the public perception of how good this Buckeye team really was. But whatever it was that got in the way of getting the ball in the hands of the playmakers against the Wolverines was not a problem when Tennessee came to Columbus for the first-ever postseason Buckeye game in Ohio Stadium.

"The first week (after the loss to Michigan) was an identification of the issues," head coach Ryan Day said after the win over Tennessee. "You don't just move on from the game. You have to identify what the issues are and have real conversations with the players, allow them to speak because they're vested in this. Then coaches have their two cents. Then you give it about a week, and you put a plan together on how we're going to move forward, how we're going to get these things fixed. Then you figure out who your opponent is. We found out it was Tennessee, and that's where the two weeks of work went."

It was obvious things would be different on the first drive of the 42-17 win over the Volunteers when the very first play was an 8-yard completion to Egbuka and the next play was an incomplete pass to the senior receiver. After a face-mask penalty on the Vols and a false start on the Buckeyes, Will Howard was able to find TreVeyon Henderson for a 21-yard gain, which led to the first score of the night.

Howard dropped back from the 37-yard line and found a streaking Smith down the left side of the field, who made an impressive diving catch in the end zone to begin the onslaught of 21 points that Ohio State had in the first quarter.

Smith found the end zone again in the third quarter from 22 yards out after the Buckeyes were scoreless in the second quarter, setting the tone for the second half as well on a fade to the left side to take a 28-10 lead. His six catches and 103 yards were enough to get him past the 1,000-yard mark for the season in receiving yards, becoming the 10th pass catcher in OSU history to reach that milestone in a season. He earned high praise from his quarterback after the win.

"I think all of us can agree that we're not surprised by how good (Smith) is now," Howard said. "He's a dude. I think he's the best receiver in the country. I think we've got the three best receivers in the country, but I'm a little biased. But you see what the kid does with the ball in his hands, and what he does with the ball not in his hands. He runs unbelievable routes. He's smart. He works hard. He's just everything you would want in a teammate and a receiver."

Howard being able to find those playmakers on the offensive side of the ball was also obviously a big part of the win. After playing what was his worst game in scarlet and gray against Michigan on Nov. 30, he came back out and had possibly his best performance of the year against one of the best defenses the Buckeyes have seen this year.

He finished the game 24 of 29 passing for 311 yards and two touchdowns while throwing one interception, but even the pick didn't upset his coaches since it happened due to his aggressiveness.

"There was a point there when we had a chance to go up 28-0, and he threw the interception - a great play, and I liked the call," Day said. "I liked how aggressive we were. That's part of it. When you're going to call the game aggressively, something like this happens, and you have to be the one to live with it. We had a chance to score and go up 28-0, and the game is pretty much in hand at that point, but they fought their way back in."

But Howard's preparation and ability to come back from such a devastating loss was impressive, and offensive coordinator Chip Kelly said as much, crediting the work ethic the fifth-year QB has at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center every day.

"The one thing with Will is he's consistent," Kelly said. "He's the same person every day. He's not too high. He's not too low. He's a lifelong learner. He's got a thirst for learning. He's in every day watching film and studying and trying to get a little bit better on a daily basis. There's a consistency to his approach and there's a consistency to how he is every single day in practice. He's not one of those guys that's low on one day and high on another. He's really steady in his approach in how he prepares for games, and that's what you see when he plays in a game like tonight."

In addition to Smith, Egbuka had five receptions for 81 yards, and Henderson had four catches for 54 yards to go along with his 10 carries for another 80.

Defense Continues Dominating

It wasn't just the offense that was firing on all cylinders for much of the first-round game, though. The defense had a big part in the win as well, beginning with allowing just 16 total yards in the first quarter from the Volunteers' offense while the Buckeyes' offense scored three touchdowns.

The game plan going in worked, according to defensive coordinator Jim Knowles. Tennessee was able to drive down the field for 16 plays and 79 yards for a touchdown late in the second quarter, but that was by design. The Buckeyes wanted to make sure that Tennessee's fast-paced offense wasn't able to come

up with a big gain on a single play, which was successful.

The longest play allowed by Ohio State before the second- and third-teamers came in for the latter half of the fourth quarter was a 21-yard pass in the second quarter, the only play over 20 yards they allowed outside of the fourth period.

“No explosive plays,” Knowles said about the Buckeyes’ game plan. “I think the one drive, it was like a 16-play drive. And we had our shots and a really suspect quarterback-roughing penalty. Make them go the distance on us. I thought we had a great plan. Early three-and-out, score – that got us out in front.”

But that drive still worried Knowles, and he made sure that same thing wouldn’t happen in the second half when Ohio State got back onto the field.

“I got after them pretty good at halftime. I did, to be honest with you,” Knowles said. “Because I felt like we were rolling at the beginning of the game, and we took our foot off the gas a little bit. So I got after them at halftime and challenged them. Because I knew the way the game was going that as long as we did our job, everything was going to turn out all right. So I thought they came out strong in the second half.”

A big part of that success was the defensive line, and the two senior edge rushers being able to get a lot of pressure on Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava, who finished the game with just 104 passing yards on 14-of-31 passing while running for a net total of 47 yards and two touchdowns as well.

Jack Sawyer and JT Tuimoloau finished the contest with a combined 13 tackles, four for loss, 3½ sacks, a forced fumble and three passes broken up.

“We knew (Sawyer and Tuimoloau) were going to have a good game,” Knowles said. “The set of (Tennessee’s) quarterback was a lot different – it was a lot tighter. We thought we would be able to change up coverage enough to make them hold the ball. So we expected that they were going to have a good game.”

It wasn’t a perfect performance from Knowles’ unit, but that type of game can’t be expected playing against a top-12 team in the country. However, with both sides of the ball playing like they did against the Volunteers on Dec. 21, it’s going to be hard for any team to beat the Buckeyes.

“They’re playing with confidence, and coming off of the last game, they felt like we had to go win the game,” Day said about the defense. “But now when the offense is playing to their potential like they were today, now it’s complementary and we can end up with a game like we had tonight.”

Patchwork Offensive Line Performs Well

One of the biggest issues against Michigan was the Buckeyes’ offensive line and how that front five didn’t have a full season of experience playing together since they were playing just their second game without center Seth McLaughlin after he tore his Achilles tendon.

With Austin Sierveld at left guard and Carson Hinzman at center for the Indiana game, the Buckeyes were able to win 38-15, but Day thinks that win might have been a bit deceiving in terms of how the offense actually performed.

“When you go back and look at the season – we talked about it coming into the game – we were a

different team when we lost Seth. We played that Indiana game, and we got that punt return, looking back we got that turnover in the red zone - we really didn't play great on offense in the Indiana game," Day said. "Then we went into the last game, and we still didn't know what the ramifications were of everything that was going on, based on who we had up front. There were a lot of things that played into that game, but certainly one of them was that we called this game more aggressively. There's no question about that."

But when faced with the fact Michigan's defensive line didn't allow the Buckeyes' front five to get any push, Day and OSU had to attack the issue if they wanted the offense to be able to get back to the way it was performing before McLaughlin went down, and he left many options open before the game.

The solution ended up being the same front five starting the game - Donovan Jackson at left tackle, Austin Siereveld at left guard, Carson Hinzman at center, Tegra Tshabola at right guard, and Josh Fryar at right tackle. But there was a lot more rotation at the guard positions. Luke Montgomery was able to prove his worth in the win by rotating at left guard while Tshabola also got breaks in the game with Siereveld playing on that side as well. Day and Kelly were both extremely pleased with what they saw.

"When you don't notice the guards, they're doing pretty well," Day said. "I noticed Luke's energy, toughness and edge. I've got to watch the film and see how he did, but we blocked much better in this game, and (the Volunteers) have a good front. We got some of the gap schemes going, some good double teams. It wasn't all perfect by any means, and we'll have to continue to diversify going into the next game, but we at least focused on the things these guys could do well, and now we have to build on it. They played with confidence. They played with energy. You could see after we scored a couple of touchdowns that they were jacked up and coming off the field with good energy."

"I think our line played outstanding tonight," Kelly said. "That defense, coming in I think they were fifth in the country in total defense and fifth in scoring defense, so we know how difficult they can be. You watch their games, and they got after everybody they played, but credit to our offensive line for keeping Will clean. Will knew if he could be clean and go through his reads and get a chance to go through his progressions that we would have a shot at beating these guys. Our offensive line did an outstanding job tonight in protection for Will."

Tennessee's strong defense left the game with no sacks and just two quarterback hurries, while the Buckeyes were also able to open gaps for the run game as well, finishing with 156 yards on the ground and four touchdowns as a team.

But with three more games remaining if they want to win a national championship, the celebration for this game isn't going to last very long. Now the attention is all on the Rose Bowl and a rematch against Oregon on Jan. 1.

"There is a lot of football ahead of us," Day said. "That was a great win, but we're going to enjoy this for 24 hours and then it's on to Oregon."