

Three Question Ahead Of Ohio State-Utah



1. How does Ohio State answer the noise?

There are perhaps more questions entering this matchup than there has been all season around the Buckeyes. A season bookended by rough losses covered for a season filled out in part by blowouts that came and went without much in the way of intrigue. For much of the season, the Buckeyes looked nearly untouchable, and there's just not that much to ask about an untouchable team.

Granted, the loss to Oregon in the early season presented plenty of questions, but Ohio State was asking them against Tulsa, Akron, and then the trio of Rutgers, Maryland and Indiana. Not exactly the strongest group in the world.

Now, for the first time in the Ryan Day era, we get to see Ohio State squaring off with a good team fresh off a loss, and coming off of nearly a month of discourse around the toughness and the pride of the program. There's a lot of noise around Ohio State right now, and the Buckeyes have a good chance to quiet it (there's probably no outright silencing option available until late November 2022) against the Utah Utes.

How Ohio State answers to those new questions and that noise around the program from just about every angle will go a long way to determining the winner Saturday evening in the Rose Bowl. A distracted or frustrated Ohio State team could risk being mashed by Utah's physical approach to both sides of the ball. A Buckeye team with something to prove, though, is a hard group to beat.

2. What can the youngsters do?

The Buckeyes will be without quite a few of their veteran contributors against Utah, including the four opt-outs from Haskell Garrett, Nicholas Petit-Frere, Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson, and unknown issues expected to hold Sevyn Banks, Antwan Jackson and Cody Simon out of play. That means inexperience in the OSU lineup, but it also presents an opportunity for young players in the depth chart to break onto the scene.

Namely, the Buckeyes are on the look for two starting receivers, a starting left tackle, two defensive tackles, a starting middle linebacker and a No. 3 cornerback. That's a lot, even for a team with blue-chippers in every single reserve spot across the board. And just about every position has an underclassman that's been nipping at the starting lineup all season, ready to break through.

At wideout, Julian Fleming has been all but penciled in as a starter, and Marvin Harrison Jr. looks primed to fill the second outside receiver role, with Emeka Egbuka working in as needed. Jaxon Smith-Njigba is the unquestioned leader of the room, but he can't possibly snare every pass, so those young players will need to be ready for the Buckeye offense to click.

Up front, the fix seems simple enough. Ohio State is kicking senior Thayer Munford back out to tackle, and filling his vacant guard spot with Matthew Jones.

Defensively, the vacancies at tackle open up space for Ty Hamilton and Tyleik Williams, both of whom have seen some time this year but could be due for more snaps, and could even offer space for a player like true freshman Mike Hall. Jerron Cage and Taron Vincent remain in there as well as veteran leaders, but the opportunity for new faces is obvious.

Beyond the line, Ohio State seems to be set on Tommy Eichenberg in Simon's spot, but tight end Cade Stover has been working at linebacker throughout practice and is expected to see time at the position he was originally recruited to.

And in the secondary, head coach Ryan Day has raved about both JK Johnson and Jordan Hancock, and like Jeff Okudah in the 2017 Cotton Bowl, each player could prove themselves as a likely rotation player next season with a strong showing against the Utes.

3. Do the Bucks have enough juice left?

Through all of this, a question of desire remains a constant hanging over Ohio State's head. The Buckeyes were beaten badly in their final game of the regular season by their hated rival, knocking them from the Big Ten championship and, in turn, the College Football Playoff. Several top players are sitting out and the Rose Bowl, for all its beauty, has lost its luster in the national conversation where Ohio State wants to live.

The question of desire has to be there, given the circumstances. And Ohio State knows it will not be able to beat a good Utah team without full commitment and buy-in, and until it takes the field and proves otherwise, that will continue to hover in the background of this matchup.