

Veteran Minnesota Offense Poses Challenge For Buckeye Defense



The Ohio State defense and Minnesota offense find themselves in a similar place entering their week one matchup, which is now just a few days away.

After electric 2019 campaigns for both groups, the 2020 season marked a significant fall back to Earth, with the former dropping to 43rd in points allowed per game and 122nd in pass defense, while the latter finished just 71st nationally in points per game and 92nd in passing offense.

Ohio State's pass defense, one of the nation's best in 2019, was suddenly a liability, just as the Gopher passing attack that had been so strong under Kirk Ciarocca was in 2020 despite much of the same personnel.

Now, as the two prepare to square off, both have to factor in both the struggles of the 2020 season and the likelihood of a bounceback year. Minnesota isn't entering the game expecting to see the nation's No. 122 passing defense, and Ohio State's isn't anticipating another seriously down season for one of the most experienced passers in college football in Minnesota's Tanner Morgan, who has started for nearly the entirety of head coach P.J. Fleck's tenure.

For both, experience, even if it hasn't always been positive, is a virtue and a strength entering the Thursday night matchup.

"It's a veteran team that has experience," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said of Minnesota. "Two years ago it was a top 10 team in the country and a lot of those guys are still on the team, including (Tanner Morgan) and (Mo Ibrahim) is a very good player. They're very well coached, P.J. (Fleck) does a good job there. They play hard, take care of the football, fundamentally sound. They make you earn it, and so it's a combination of all of those things, and then going on the road, to their place for the first game of the year (is tricky)."

Nowhere is that going to be more important for the Minnesota offense than in that dogged passing attack, which returns Morgan but has to find a replacement for star receiver Rashod Bateman. Chris Autman-Bell looks to be up to the task, but finding new contributors at receiver will take time, and there's nothing better in college football to provide time than a veteran offensive line and a veteran signal caller. The Gophers will lean heavily on both against the Buckeyes as it works new faces into the

fold out wide, and Ohio State is well aware of the strengths that it will have to counter in those veteran groups.

“He’s a veteran quarterback, savvy quarterback, makes great decisions with the ball,” linebacker Teradja Mitchell said of Tanner Morgan. “You can tell he’s been doing this for a while, it’s going to be a challenge for our defense.

“It’s a great offensive line they have there. You can tell they’re an older group, but we’re up for it. They’re aggressive, they can get running sideways, go from sidelines to sidelines blocking. Great o-line.”

These Gophers are big, too. The 2019 offense boasted one of the nation’s largest offensive lines, and the size up front this season has again caught Ohio State’s eye, led by 6-9, 380-pound tackle Daniel Faalele.

“They’re big, that’s the first thing I notice,” Zach Harrison said of the Gopher offensive line. “They’re all above 340, they move well, really fast, they move laterally and that’s definitely going to present a big challenge for us on the defensive line, but I feel like we’re an experienced defensive line as well so it should be a good matchup.

“Whenever I see a big tackle I always compare them to Dawand, see how big he’s going to be, and I’ve been playing against Dawand since my freshman year so it (certainly helps. Against big guys it’s) just relying on the fundamentals. Hand placement, make sure your pads are low and that your steps are in the right place because if they get on you and they get going it’s a big body and it’s hard to stop it.”

Although Minnesota has made improving through the air the focus of the offseason, Ohio State’s biggest concern may still lie on the ground, as it looks to break in new linebackers against one of the nation’s most prolific backs in Mohamed Ibrahim, who rushed for 1,076 yards in just seven games last season. Slowing him down is priority No. 1 for the Buckeyes, even as they hope to have their secondary up to the task that Morgan and the Minnesota passing attack can assign.

“We can’t go in arm tackling,” Mitchell said. “I think he’s one of the better backs in the country. It’s going to be a challenge, we have to come in there ready to play. No arm tackles, we have to wrap him up.”

“From what I’ve watched on film he’s an explosive guy, good at finding holes and good at finding little seams,” Harrison said. “That’s something that’s a challenge for us, we just have to keep our eyes disciplined and not let him have any lanes to run through.”

Whether the Buckeyes can slow the Minnesota offense may not ultimately determine the outcome in the W/L columns – given the presence of one of the best offenses in the country donning the scarlet and gray to keep the defense afloat – but it will go a long way in answering all of those offseason questions about coordinator Kerry Coombs’ second defense in Columbus. A strong showing against Minnesota in all facets of the game would bode very well for the Buckeyes, while more struggles would certainly indicate that little has changed in the nine months since Ohio State was drubbed by Alabama in the College Football Playoff title bout.

And now, after facing those questions all offseason, there’s no more waiting for the silver bullets.

“It’s time to play,” Day said. “I guess we could prepare for another week but I think they’re tired of

hitting each other - I mean, you've heard that year in and year out going into the first game but that's true. It's time to go play. I think that we're as prepared as we're going to be and now it's time to go put it on the field, come in the day after, make the corrections and continue to build."