

Column: Alabama's DeVonta Smith Presents Toughest Challenge For Ohio State In College Football Playoff National Championship



The Buckeyes have shown a tendency of making good wide receivers look like Heisman Trophy winners against them in 2020.

Now, they meet the actual Heisman winner in the national championship in Alabama senior standout DeVonta Smith, who became the first receiver to win the award since Michigan's Desmond Howard in 1991.

Smith leads the nation with 105 receptions for 1,641 yards and 20 touchdowns through 12 games. The 6-foot-1, 175-pound receiving stalwart also added a rushing score to give him 21 scores from scrimmage to rank fourth nationally.

There is not much more to be said about Smith - who was rated 21 spots below former Ohio State receiver Trevon Grimes in the 2017 recruiting class - that has not already been said. He is the best wideout in the country, and the Buckeyes may be in trouble.

First of all, Ohio State allows 281.1 yards per game through the air, which is No. 116 out of 127 programs in the Football Bowl Subdivision. The Buckeyes allow a passer rating of 133.06, which is significantly better than their yardage allowed at No. 57 nationally but still far from elite.

The Scarlet and Gray have surrendered 11 passing touchdowns across seven games, which may not seem like a massive total, but a closer look raises concern. Of those 11 touchdowns, eight were caught by three talented receivers who looked like NFL superstars against Ohio State.

In the second game of the season, Penn State's Jahan Dotson hauled in eight receptions for 144 yards and three touchdowns in a 38-25 loss to Ohio State. Dotson - a talented junior - averaged 5.5 catches for 92.5 yards and 0.63 touchdowns per game outside of his outburst against the Buckeyes, so that game clearly stood out.

A few weeks later against Indiana, Ohio State gave up a career day to senior wide receiver Ty Fryfogle. The former three-star prospect, who was rated No. 243 among receivers in 2017, snagged seven receptions for 218 yards and three touchdowns in a 42-35 loss to the Buckeyes. Outside of that jaw-dropping performance, Fryfogle averaged 4.3 receptions for 71.9 yards and 0.57 touchdowns per game.

The issues with allowing solid receivers to star like Heisman finalists could not be written off as early-season woes after the CFP semifinal game against Clemson. Even though Ohio State won 49-28, the Tigers' fifth-year senior receiver Cornell Powell erupted for eight receptions for 139 and two scores. In his 11 prior games, Powell averaged just 4.1 catches for 67.5 yards and 0.45 touchdowns per game.

The fortunate fact for the Buckeyes is that they were able to win each of those games where an opposing wideout torched them. The unfortunate fact is that Dotson, Fryfogle, and Powell are not DeVonta Smith.

Smith has been the best in the country all season, and quite frankly, should already be in the NFL. As junior in 2019, Smith put up 274 yards and five touchdowns on 11 catches against Ole Miss, and 213 yards and two scores on seven snags against future CFP national champion LSU. Nick Saban somehow convinced him to return, and Alabama must be fortunate he did.

Matching up with Smith will likely be Ohio State standout Shaun Wade, who returned for his fourth-year junior season when he could have left for the draft as well. Wade earned consensus All-American accolades this year, but he also drew plenty of criticism, largely thanks to the performances of Dotson, Fryfogle, and Powell.

No sport is more of a team sport than football, and defending wide receivers in man-to-man coverage is one of the toughest tasks imaginable, but Wade vs. Smith will be the biggest one-on-one matchup to watch in the title game.

And unlike Dotson, Fryfogle, and Powell, DeVonta Smith is the Heisman Trophy winner.

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