

Tony Alford Praises Depth, Competitiveness Of Running Back Room



In his first seven years as Ohio State's running backs coach, Tony Alford has molded a plethora of pro-ready talent at the position, guiding players such as Ezekiel Elliott, Mike Weber and J.K. Dobbins to 1,000-yard seasons in the Scarlet and Gray.

Now, as he enters his eighth season with the program, Alford is tasked with leading what he said is "without a question" his most gifted group of tailbacks to date.

Speaking with the media at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on Saturday, Alford praised the unique combination of talent and character that exists "from top to bottom" within the Buckeyes' 2023 running backs room, a five-man group that consists of TreVeyon Henderson, Miyan Williams, Chip Trayanum, Dallan Hayden and Evan Pryor. According to the leader of the group, this quality of players will have a positive impact on the team as Ohio State progresses throughout the season.

"It's exciting," Alford said. "It's great to have depth. Everybody wants depth. And how that gets dispersed, we will figure that out as we go. But it's good to have depth. And it's good to have guys. And it's good to have good players, improving players. And how we manage it, and how we get guys on the field, that'll play itself out."

Although he declined to mention the specifics behind what each of the five Buckeyes offers to the team, Alford said having a plethora of capable tailbacks on the roster will have the strongest impact in the running back room itself, as it will help cultivate a competitive culture that brings out the best in each player.

"Competition makes everybody better," Alford said. "Because you know if you don't do the job, the next guy coming in is very, very capable of doing the job. Again, those reps matter. And what you put on tape is what it is. So if you're making mistakes and you're not doing well, and the next guy is, there (goes) your opportunities."

According to Henderson, who is entering his third season with the program after an injury-plagued sophomore season where he rushed for just 571 yards in eight games, this effect has been best felt in practice this fall, where the quintet of Buckeye backs have challenged each other each day to raise their level of play.

"You just have to compete," Henderson said. "I knew, when I committed here, I knew what I was getting myself into. That's why I chose The Ohio State University. Because I know they bring in the best talent each and every year. So I'm always just trying to compete, compete and just get better. Having that depth in that room, they're pushing me harder. Every day, you have to work. Every day, it's a grind. You can't take any days off, can't get complacent. You just have to work each and every day."

For Alford, his players' consistent attempts to push each other in practice, as well as the maturity and professionalism they have shown off the field, have compelled him to utilize all five running backs throughout the year. This can help serve as a safety blanket for Ohio State if they endure a similar significant period of injuries as they did in 2022, where they were forced to play without both Henderson and Williams for a combined seven games.

"You get what you earned," Alford said. "And, in my eyes, they've earned an opportunity to show themselves. They're earned an opportunity to get reps...You earn it every single day, by how you walk in this building, how you carry yourself, really outside the building as well. You earn it by how you sit in meetings and how attentive you are in meetings. How intentional you are about every single rep, because every single rep matters...If you do well on rep one, chances are you will get a second or third rep. If you don't, then chances are you won't. And that's the life that we live in."

While some collegiate running back rooms may grow resentful of one another due to the splitting of reps throughout the season, potentially compelling them to flirt with the idea of entering the transfer portal, Alford said his players instead intensified their commitment to the program and its values and have embraced their roles on the offense. This level of loyalty, according to the now-eighth-year coach, is a trait that makes Ohio State's culture special.

"It comes back to the locker room, it comes back to the brotherhood, it comes back to the love of one another that they have," Alford said. "I know it may sound cliché, but it's real. Why do you say it's real? Because they're all still here. That has nothing to do with Tony Alford and the coach, it has everything to do with the love of one another in that room."

"I know we talk about that a lot, the brotherhood, but it's real," Alford continued. "And that's a testament to them. Because they all had opportunities to do other things in other facets. But they all decided to stay together as a unit and stay bonded. So it's a testament to the type of kids we have in that room, the type of kids we have in that locker room."