

Behind Enemy Lines: Clemson, Ohio State Carry On-Field Competition Onto Recruiting Trail



Behind Enemy Lines is Buckeye Sports Bulletin's newest series on how teams outside of Ohio State — but relevant to the Buckeyes through history or through skill level — are recruiting in the current cycle. Up next is Clemson.

Despite competing in different conferences and only facing off four times ever, there is no doubt Ohio State and Clemson have developed somewhat of a rivalry, albeit a one-sided one.

The Tigers have won all four of the all-time matchups with the Buckeyes, including three in the past six seasons. Ohio State most recently fell to Clemson at the Fiesta Bowl, 29-23, in heartbreaking fashion on Dec. 28

Dabo Swinney-led Clemson has become a national force, competing in four of the past five national championship games and winning two of them. It's no secret that the Tigers have built their program through incredible success in recruiting.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin caught up with Anna Hickey of 247Sports, who covers the Tigers and their recruiting full-time, to discuss some of the prospects Clemson and Ohio State have been battling for in the 2021 cycle.

Some of the Buckeyes top commits were Tiger targets, and vice-versa, while the two powerhouse programs continue to compete for a few of the nation's top prospects.

"I don't think it's so much, 'Hey, we played in this playoff and Clemson won, so we're going to hang our hat on that.' I think it's more that these two teams are recruiting at the highest level in the country," Hickey told Buckeye Sports Bulletin. "There's not anybody really recruiting better than those two right now. I mean, Georgia and Alabama are going to be up there. But, I think naturally these two teams are just going to go head-to-head for some guys because they're just recruiting the best players in the country."

Perhaps the Buckeyes' biggest victory over Clemson on the 2021 recruiting trail came in the form of the

commitment of the No. 1 running back in the nation, TreVeyon Henderson.

"Clemson was super interested in him, but they offered him as a DB to start off with, and that was when he was saying he wasn't really sure what he preferred to play in college, running back or DB," Hickey said of Henderson. "And Clemson went the DB route, and that ended up kind of hurting them in the end.

"He prefers running back, so then Clemson circled back around and said, 'Hey we're pitching athlete now, get on campus and we'll see where you fit. You can play both sides of the ball.' But at that point, there was already too much ground to make up and he visited Ohio State, kind of fell in love with it, and at that point, he was Ohio State's to lose. And Ohio State obviously is not an easy team to recruit against, so once Ryan Day and that staff pulled ahead there, that was the end of it."

While part of the reason the Tigers lost out on Henderson was because they pursued him as defensive back, Ohio State also beat them for a recruit who wanted to play DB in four-star commit Jakailin Johnson.

"He visited Clemson, liked it, but that was always going to be a really difficult pull, especially going head-to-head with Ohio State for a DB with Midwest ties," Hickey said of Johnson, who hails from St. Louis. "Ohio State is probably going to resonate with him a little bit more. Big-time DB, Clemson really liked him but that was just a case of Ohio State beating Clemson fair and square."

Another defensive player who chose Ohio State over Clemson was Ironton four-star linebacker Reid Carrico, who is the No. 3 inside 'backer for 2021.

"That was another one where Clemson came on late and tried to get him to hold off on making a commitment," Hickey said of Carrico. "He visited Clemson, but never met Dabo. So, they wanted him to come back down and kind of meet Dabo and he planned on it. At one point I thought something might actually pull this off.

"But, you know, an Ohio kid in Ohio - Ohio State got wind of that, that Clemson was gaining momentum and wanted him to come back down and they were able to kind of shut that down and get him locked up. But I know he had interest in Clemson and vice-versa. Brent Venables really liked what he brought to the table. But you know they just, they couldn't go into Ohio in that case and beat Ohio State in Ohio linebacker."

Henderson, Johnson and Carrico represent great wins for the Buckeyes in recruiting, not only because they're talented prospects but also because they did not allow Clemson to bring them in. The Tigers did not come up empty-handed when competing with the Scarlet and Gray for some of the other best recruits in the country, however.

Clemson was able to reel in Bellflower (Calif.) St. John Bosco four-star wide receiver Beaux Collins, who is the nation's No. 6 wideout and played with Tiger quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei in high school.

"D.J. Uiagalelei, his teammate and close friend in the class ahead of him is at Clemson at quarterback. He was already pretty familiar with the program and felt a comfort level because of D.J. and what D.J. told him about the coaching staff and how they did things there," Hickey said of Collins.

"And then I just think the way Clemson's recruiting wide receivers - I mean, they have a very high

success rate at that position, just because of the success that they've had putting guys in the NFL. Dabo really is involved in that position and so I think that played a huge part of it.

"I also will say I know Ohio State recruited him hard, but I don't think they ever made him feel like he was their No. 1 top-of-the-board guy, because I don't think he was. I mean, I think they liked his skills and they liked what he brought to the table, but I think Clemson prioritized him a little bit more."

Perhaps the tougher loss to the Tigers to swallow for Ohio State on the recruiting trail came when Suwannee (Ga.) North Gwinnett four-star cornerback Jordan Hancock committed to Clemson. He is the nation's No. 7 corner and No. 83 overall prospect.

"It was just the culture, really resonated with him. It resonates with some kids and it doesn't with others," Hickey said of Hancock. "What Dabo Swinney has built is obviously focused a lot on faith with his guys and that really resonated with Hancock. And then the way Clemson is recruiting DBs, I mean, they're no slouch either, especially in 2020.

"They've been getting some big-time guys, going back to Mackensie Alexander and Trayvon Mullen, A.J. Terrell, and then Andrew Booth was a five-star. And then kind of building up with Fred Davis last cycle and now they're looking like they might be the leader right now for Nyland Green, another big-time guy out of Georgia. They're getting corners and developing them and putting them in the league, and I think that's only going to help them go forward."

Each program can boast important recruiting wins over one another, and there are still a handful of elite prospects who remain undecided with interest in both places. Two of the biggest targets for both schools at wide receiver are Troy Stellato and Emeka Egbuka.

Clemson is the favorite to land Stellato, who is the nation's No. 22 wide receiver and No. 129 overall prospect, and is deciding between his final two programs in the Tigers and the Buckeyes.

"Part of it is Clemson is making him their utmost No. 1 priority at the position. They've made it very clear to Troy that he's their No. 1 guy right now and they're kind of putting all their eggs in that basket," Hickey said of Stellato. "And then when Jeff Scott moved to South Florida and took that job, that transition to [wide receivers coach] Tyler Grisham - he really sunk his teeth in and made Troy his guy. I remember at the playoff this year, Grisham was stepping on the field before they played Ohio State and then before they played LSU and still with a suit on, had just gotten off the bus from the drive to the stadium, and the first thing he did was whip his phone out and FaceTime Troy on the field, just to show him what the playoff atmosphere would be like.

"He also got back on campus this spring for a pretty lengthy visit with his father, and Clemson was able to kind of go through more things in depth and not just show them a gameday experience, and that resonated a ton. But at the end of the day, though, I really think it was Dabo Swinney and the culture that they're selling has really resonated with him.

"And I don't think it's a done deal by any means, but I do think that he could still end up in Columbus. Ohio State is still recruiting him hard, and it's also been interesting with visits not being able to take place. I think had they been able to take place he would have been back in Columbus, by now and then, you know, maybe we're talking about it being a tighter race, so to speak, and maybe going back and forth and not really sure where things are going to be headed from that point. But unless he gets back to Ohio State, I really think that he's Clemson's to lose right now."

With Egbuka, who is the nation's No. 1 wide receiver and eighth-highest rated recruit, the Buckeyes seem to be in better shape.

"I'm not totally sure if Clemson's going to take three or four receivers this cycle, it depends on personnel and skillset, and numbers elsewhere in the class, but Stellato's the priority. And then I think they'll probably figure out things from there, because I don't think Emekas's set on making a decision anytime soon. I think he'd like to get back to a few places like Clemson, like Ohio State.

"I know he was considering Washington, maybe a few other West Coast schools, but I think Ohio State as the edge there, I know at one point maybe there was some chatter that Clemson might be his favorite. But that was still so early in the process I think kind of the dust has settled a little bit and I think it's totally fair to say that Ohio State's kind of the team right now."

Beyond the wideouts, Clemson is also favored to land North Gwinnett linebacker Barrett Carter, who is a high school teammate of Hancock and the nation's No. 4 outside linebacker. Carter is definitely someone high on many prospect boards, such as Auburn, Georgia and Ohio State, but the Tigers are expected to land the No. 56 recruit in the country.

"This is one that I thought was going to go Georgia's way, if you would've asked me a few months ago, but that was premature. And he's Clemson's to lose at this point." Hickey said of Barrett. "Clemson is the clear-cut leader here.

"I think Auburn might be second, Ohio State third, Georgia fourth, not totally sure on that pecking order. But I am comfortable saying that Clemson is first. I don't think it'll be that much longer before we hear about a decision."

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