

Buckeyes In The NFL: Cincinnati Is Suddenly An Ohio State Hotspot



Cincinnati wasn't always the epicenter of the Buckeye world in the NFL, playing home to more Ohio State football alumni than any other team. In fact, for years, it almost seemed to be a running joke in Columbus that any products of the OSU program were destined to be passed on by the local NFL teams, only to fall to AFC North rivals like the Steelers and Ravens, both of which have made a living in the past few decades drafting Buckeyes like Cameron Heyward and Ryan Shazier.

That changed, at least in Cincinnati, this offseason. The Bengals added three players that one donned the scarlet and gray: safety Vonn Bell, quarterback Joe Burrow and tackle Isaiah Prince to a roster that already hosted Sam Hubbard, Michael Jordan and Billy Price, moving the total number of former Buckeyes (yes, including Burrow) to six, more than any other team in the league, claiming the title once held by the New Orleans Saints.

So, why the change? According to Bengals team reporter Marisa Contipelli, it wasn't an active pursuit by the Cincinnati front office, but rather a focus on pulling more players from successful college programs, though it hasn't been a complete shift, in the way that other teams approach the draft and signings.

"I'm sure that went into the mix of when they were evaluating a player, but I know our coaching staff has also done a really good job of finding talented players who have come from smaller programs, Jessie Bates would be a great example," Contipelli told BSB. "Coming from Wake Forest, he's not as well-known as like a Clemson or a Georgia or an LSU or an Ohio State. But I mean, you look at the recent acquisitions, a lot of the new guys that are coming onto this team have come from more dominant programs, so it's definitely something to keep an eye on going into the future if they trend towards that way a little bit more."

In the case of one of the new additions, Bell, the move to bring him in was more about fit than anything else. The Bengals were in desperate need of a safety to fill out the back end of their defense, and Bell was one of the top players on the market, fresh off of a season that saw him start 13 games for the Saints, tying a career high for tackles with 89. He's expected to serve as a veteran anchor for the Bengals entering his fifth season in the league.

"The expectation is for him to go out there and start day one alongside Jessie Bates," Contipelli said. "They brought in Vonn Bell for a number of reasons, two of the big ones being his leadership and his track record. You look at just that the stats that he had when he was back with the Saints, he's a tackling machine. He's a ball hawk and a playmaker, and those are two really key things that the Bengals' defense was lacking a year ago, so he was such a big acquisition and a big upgrade that the secondary needs."

The other signing, Prince, is less about filling holes, and more about just hoping to hit on a high-ceiling, low-floor player at a high-value position. Prince didn't catch on in Miami, but Bengals offensive line coach Jim Turner is hoping to hit on an under-the-radar gem, with the only risk being that he doesn't ultimately make the roster.

"I think he's a guy that's definitely battling for a roster spot," Contipelli said of Prince. "The offensive line was a position of need for the Bengals team, but it's also one that's a little bit crowded. There's a lot of guys in there who are competing for spots and competing for playing time, but I expect Isaiah to come into camp and to try to earn one of those backup positions."

The move to Cincinnati could also bring a new position for Prince.

"I would love to see if they try to work him in at guard this camp just to see how versatile he could be, but I know this coaching staff liked that he just has that raw talent and he has those physical gifts that don't come around all that often," said Contipelli. "It'll be really interesting to see how he lines up when camp does get underway and to see whether he spends more time over at left guard, over at right guard, and to see, once you get into the second team, third team, where he lines up. A lot riding on this camp for Isaiah Prince in my opinion."

Prince is far from the only former Buckeye under Turner's tutelage this upcoming season, though all three players up front find themselves in wildly different situations. While Prince is fighting for a roster spot, Price, the former first-round pick, is fighting to prove that he still belongs, with his spot in the starting lineup in serious jeopardy after massive struggles and injury problems early in his career.

"I wouldn't necessarily pencil him in as a backup right this minute," Contipelli said. "I mean, there's still going to be a lot of competition at both left guard and right guard. The fact that Billy Price can play both guard and center just makes him so valuable to this team. He's someone that I wouldn't necessarily exclude him out of the conversation at right guard, even though the Bengals went out and signed Xavier Su'a-Filo.

"You still have to have those guys come in during camp and see what kind of chemistry, what kind of unity you're going to get with the five best players that you can get on that offensive line because that's a phrase that I've heard multiple times from both Zac Taylor and Brian Callahan, that they want to get the five best offensive linemen out there week after weekend. He would love to see Billy Price be able to come back from those two unfortunate injuries that he's had over the first two years of his career and really make those necessary strides that we all know he can make going into year three."

On the other end, Jordan finds himself as one of the breakthrough players of the 2019 season, a rare bright spot on the Bengals much maligned offensive line. After being selected in the fourth round of the draft following a difficult junior season that saw him move into an unfamiliar role at center for Ohio State, Jordan jumped at the opportunity to return to his usual spot at guard. He started nine games, including the last five of the season, and while his 43.1 PFF rating was far from good, or even average,

the Bengals seem optimistic about his potential.

“Zac Taylor has said that Michael Jordan has really made a lot of strides, and he’s kind of even penciled him in as the prospective left guard starter for week one,” Contipelli said. “I think he’s exceeded expectations early on. I don’t think there was any doubt about his talent and his ability and where he could get to as an NFL player one day, but for him to do it so quickly has been really impressive to see.

“The coaching staff is really optimistic about where he’s going to get to now, going into the 2020 season. It’s been something that both Zac Taylor and Jim Turner have complimented him on, just how much work he’s putting into this off season, and we even saw it last year in with just how much more confident he looked out there towards the back end of the season.”

Cincinnati will likely need improvement from Jordan and the rest of the line to keep Burrow upright, which could be the biggest challenge of the season.

On the other side of the football, however, Cincinnati has quietly built one of the better defensive lines in the league, thanks partially to Hubbard, one of the few Buckeyes on the roster without questions to answer this offseason. A former third round pick, Hubbard moved into a full-time starting role for Cincinnati in 2019 after contributing off the bench as a rookie, and took that promotion about as well as he could have. He recorded 76 tackles, 10 for a loss, and racked up 8.5 sacks.

Hubbard, who checked in with a good but not great 67.1 PFF rating in 2019, isn’t likely to become the next great edge rusher in the NFL, but the Bengals are banking on his consistency as a staple on the line, and with a good season, Hubbard could even be in for another potential breakout to get up into the double-digit sack total range.

“I feel like Sam’s done a really great job of coming onto the scene and really solidifying his spot on the right side of that defensive line,” explained Contipelli. “I mean, 8.5 sacks in his second year with the way the defensive played last year, it was just such an impressive number. I don’t think there’s question that he has the potential to become a 10, 12, 14-sack player at some point in his career. Could we see it this year? That would be wonderful.

“But Sam Hubbard has really just been one of those guys that Zac Taylor and this coaching staff have really started to rely on. He’s really began to solidify himself as one of those leaders in the Bengals’ locker room. I know the times that I’ve talked with Zac about it is he said that there would be times last year when Sam were start to break out and show a little bit more leadership, but he might’ve been hesitant because he was only a second-year player, but now going into year three, he’s really taking on that role and really starting to hone in and define those skills of being more vocal.”

While the Buckeyes on the offense for Cincinnati are still largely looking for their place, the defense will lean heavily on its Ohio State alums, as both Bell and Hubbard will look to lead, giving Ohio State fans plenty to root for on Sundays this fall.

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