

Column: Evan Pryor Should Be Ohio State's RB2



There wasn't much I took from Ohio State's spring game, but I learned a few things: spring games aren't as fun as I remember, in-person attendance at sporting events is dead, and Evan Pryor needs to be Ohio State's backup running back.

Before diving into the controversial third claim, let me explain the first two.

CLAIM NO. 1: WHERE DID ALL THE FUN GO?

Saturday's Team Scarlet vs. Team Gray matchup acted more like a simulated scrimmage than a real game. The offense (Scarlet) featured traditional scoring with touchdowns, field goals and extra points, while the defense (Gray) received points from touchdowns, takeaways, three-and-outs, sacks and forced punts.

Huh?

I remember when backup quarterback Kenny Guiton marched into Ohio Stadium in 2013 and beat a team that featured Braxton Miller, Cardale Jones, Michael Thomas and others. Or when Dwayne Haskins, Joe Burrow and Tate Martell went head-to-head in 2018.

The 2022 iteration of the spring game felt more like an "everybody wins" scenario where competition between teammates and positional battles didn't *really* matter except for a few spots (more on this later with Pryor). That could be because the Buckeyes already have an idea of what they want the depth chart to look like next season — at least on offense. I hope Ohio State can return to a more competitive format in the future that rewards both the team and the fans for their efforts.

CLAIM NO. 2: IS IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE AT SPORTING EVENTS DEAD?

This is a short claim, and therefore deserves a short warrant. There was once a time when Ohio State spring games had over 100,000 spectators. It was a premier event in Columbus. On Saturday, only 60,007 spectators spent \$7 or less to attend the inter-squad scrimmage.

Before the pandemic, that kind of number at any event related to the school's football team would be unimaginable. However, the COVID-19 pandemic showed fans that the best seat in any arena or

stadium is the couch in your living room — the place where you don't have to fight John Doe for room on a bench, you can always see the ball and there's (kind of) free food and alcohol readily available.

Last season, Ohio State athletics struggled to bring fans to campus for their sporting events, especially basketball and football games. Will the same happen in 2022?

CLAIM NO. 3: EVAN PRYOR SHOULD BE RB2

Ohio State had three scholarship running backs take snaps in the spring game, including TreVeyon Henderson, Miyan Williams and Evan Pryor. It's clear that Henderson will be the Buckeyes' starting running back in 2022. But who will be his backup?

Pryor made his case on Saturday afternoon.

Henderson had a lighter workload, collecting three carries for 12 yards and catching one pass for five yards. Williams operated as the primary backup, receiving more touches than any other Buckeye that didn't wear a black jersey. The Cincinnati native toted the ball 15 times for 101 yards, including a 36-yard run where he stiff-armed multiple defenders and kept his balance near the offensive sideline. He also added two catches for two yards.

Pryor took the reins as Ohio State's third-string running back in the contest. He recorded nine carries for 62 yards and a touchdown and added four catches for 44 yards through the air. His longest run was a 22-yard scamper that caused defensive tackle Ty Hamilton and linebackers Reid Carrico and Teradja Mitchell to fall on the fading turf without a tackle.

Later on, Pryor added another big play with a 35-yard catch off of a wheel route from the backfield. He would've run for an uncontested touchdown had quarterback Devin Brown thrown the ball in front of him. Instead, Brown left the pass short, which caused Pryor to adjust, allowing linebacker Chip Trayanum to bring him down.

Pryor's performance impressed head coach Ryan Day, who said the second-year running back brings a unique versatility. He admitted that the coaching staff would look for excuses to put Pryor on the field next season, realizing his explosiveness could significantly affect Ohio State reaching its aspired balance between running and throwing the football on offense.

"He has had a very good spring," Day said of Pryor. "He has a lot of wiggle. He can change direction in short areas, and he's good with catching the ball out of the backfield. He gives us a little wiggle in there, which is nice. It's a bit of a change of pace with the offense, and if he continues to grow and can hold onto the ball, he's going to impact the offense this year."

Next fall, Henderson will maintain his workhorse role out of the Ohio State backfield. After all, there aren't many freshman ball carriers that rush for 1,248 yards and 15 touchdowns in their first collegiate season. Williams performed well as the team's second running back last season, taking his 71 carries for 507 yards and three scores. The Buckeyes also used Master Teague III and Marcus Crowley in spots.

Last season, Pryor's role looked quite different from his teammates. After taking snaps in only four games against Akron, Rutgers, Maryland, and Indiana, the former Cornelius (N.C.) William Amos High School four-star received a redshirt. That wasn't indicative of his lack of skill, rather a gesture that Ohio State would like to keep his eligibility as long as possible.

Pryor expects this fall to be different than his first-year experience. With Henderson, Williams and Pryor all performing well within the offense, he thinks all three backs can complement each other if Day, offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson and running backs coach Tony Alford can scheme accordingly.

"A lot of people see three running backs and ask if there are enough carries or if all three can fit into the system," Pryor said. "I feel like we all complement each other well, and throughout the season, you'll be able to see that. All three of us are gonna eat."

Day feels confident in the room's production, holding no praise from the three scholarship running backs who performed in the spring game. He also made a note of a Memphis (Tenn.) Christian Brothers four-star Dallan Hayden, who will join the program this summer.

"I think we have three really good running backs," Day said. "We have a fourth coming in this summer with Dallan Hayden. They've had a good spring, and I feel solid about that room."

I think Williams is a fine running back. He effectively uses his size and strength, bursting through the offensive line while he picks up speed with each step. However, the former three-star is limited by a lack of quickness when he changes direction. In some ways, Williams feels like a slight upgrade of Teague, which made him an excellent backup to Henderson last season.

Still, it's time that the Buckeyes evolve.

Day wasn't afraid to move off of Teague as Ohio State's starting running back. In the Buckeyes' 2021 national championship run, Teague had been an All-Big Ten running back next to Heisman Trophy contender Justin Fields. Day realized Henderson's ability could bring his team to another level one season later. This year, it's time for him to make a similar decision, offering Pryor a more significant role behind Henderson.

That's not to say Williams can't still be an integral part of Ohio State's success. Pryor believes this team can have a three-headed monster in the backfield, and I think that's true. All I want is a bigger share of touches from the running back wearing No. 21.

The NFL might still be two years away, but the combination of Henderson and Pryor — both NFL Draft eligible after 2023 — could become the Buckeyes' version of Javonte Williams and Michael Carter from North Carolina. In 2020, both running backs shared carries and receptions behind quarterback Sam Howell, with Williams becoming a second-round pick to the Broncos and Carter a fourth-round selection to the Jets.

Whether Henderson and Pryor could both become future pros is still to be determined, but it's an exciting proposition nonetheless. If Ohio State wants to get a headstart on making that future a reality, it would be best to start now, putting Pryor in a position with breakout potential as the team's RB2.