

Film Study: If Needed, How Would Ohio State Replace Master Teague?



Ohio State is going to be without presumed starting running back Mater Teague for the rest of spring practice at a minimum, following an achilles injury that Teague sustained at the end of Ohio State's opening spring practice. No timeframe has been formally released, though depending on the severity, Teague could miss a significant amount of time not just in the offseason, but even carrying into the season. Ohio State offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson seemed to as in the dark as anyone during a recent media session.

"I would think so," Wilson said when asked if he thought Teague would be back for the start of the season. "But time will tell. I think the worst thing you can do, and for years I've said, when someone says it's a six-month injury, what happens if some guys just heal slower? And then all of a sudden, that kid or that family thinks he's behind. It's a two-week ankle injury and all of a sudden it takes four. Some guys just heal faster. Their bodies recover faster. Sometimes they get treatment better than others. Sometimes the injury's a little bit worse than you think."

If that injury does end up being worse than initially thought, and Teague either can't play for an extended period of time or - more likely - isn't physically able to perform at a high enough level immediately upon his clearance, Ohio State will have some pretty big questions to answer at the halfback position, without any obvious choices. The Buckeyes have two scholarship halfbacks in Steele Chambers and Marcus Crowley currently on the roster, with a third in Miyan Williams arriving in June.

On top of that, there are several high school running backs on the roster, including Demario McCall and Jaelen Gill, though the latter has played almost exclusively at wide receiver during his time in Columbus. Cameron Martinez will also arrive in June and played plenty of running back in high school, but he appears to be headed for the defensive side of the ball upon arrival. That leaves the Buckeyes with four true options for replacing Teague if a long-term fix is needed: Chambers, Crowley, McCall and Williams.

When factoring in fit in Ohio State's zone-run scheme, along with the personnel compatibility with the rest of the projected starting lineup, which of those four would give Ohio State the best chance at cohesion and strength in replacing Teague?

Steele Chambers

Chambers is in a pretty unique position, because of the season that he had as a true freshman. Chambers carried the ball in just three games, entirely in garbage time, and while he put up strong numbers in those games, it's difficult to take too much from them. Backup defenders for Miami and Rutgers aren't exactly comparable to the kind of competition Chambers would have to face as the primary back for Ohio State, which means that the stats he accrued against them has to be taken with quite a few grains of salt, as do the plays that he put on tape.

Still, in style, Chambers seems to make sense. He's showcased solid athletic ability, and is the closest in build to Teague, if Ohio State wants continuity there. He's nowhere near the lateral mover that J.K. Dobbins was, which would mean trouble in a zone running attack, but he certainly has the talent and physical ability to play at a starting level.

He showed that off on this run against Miami. This is an outside zone, which is actually the primary concern with both Chambers and Teague, but he runs it well here. The hole is open from the start, so he doesn't have to do a ton of thinking, but he shows good speed and gets downhill quickly. The most impressive piece of running here actually comes after contact, where Chambers really gets to flash what makes him such an exciting prospect.

He absorbs the contact brilliantly, bouncing right off of the first hit and using some pretty excellent balance to add almost 10 more yards onto his run after being hit. Chambers' physicality and ability down the field is probably his most impressive trait, and something that will translate into any offense.

However, Chambers was still the fourth man on the field at running back last season, and that's something to be reckoned with. If Crowley is healthy (more on this later), he will enter fall camp having already won a battle with Chambers once, and in scheme fit, the advantage appears to be on Crowley's side.

Now, if Crowley isn't healthy, or if Chambers is the choice outright, Ohio State is probably going to suffer a bit in negative plays, at least relative to Dobbins, who almost never lost yardage, but it could also see a slight gain in explosiveness. That's to be expected with a young running back, though Chambers' approach to the game is going to make him a bit more volatile than his classmate.

Ohio State would also likely have to plan around some blocking issues, which is usually the last thing that a halfback is able to add to his repertoire. Chambers' vision and lateral movement may be better this season than it was last year, but his blocking is still likely to be below average.

In total, Chambers is the low-risk, medium-reward pick. He's the only fully healthy, true running back with experience on the roster, and while that experience isn't particularly impactful, it is there. He can work in Ohio State's offense despite not being a perfect fit, and has the talent to make plays that some of his counterparts may not be able to. If Ohio State is willing to sacrifice scheme fit for health and talent, Chambers is the pick.

Marcus Crowley

Every part of the Crowley evaluation has to be qualified by the ACL injury that he suffered against

Maryland, along with the same “poor competition” note that Chambers got. ACL injuries are tremendously damaging to any athlete, but especially one responsible primarily for making defenders miss and running through tackles. It can kill lateral movement and completely end a career if the rehab isn’t complete and thorough, which means that Crowley’s projections this season are very clouded.

If he is fully healthy when fall camp rolls around (if fall camp rolls around), he would be the best healthy, true running back on the roster, and a better fit for the offense than Chambers or Williams.

A lot of that is because of his play style, which is way closer to Dobbins than it is to Teague, though he isn’t quite as shifty as Dobbins was. Primarily, Crowley is a much lower runner than either Chambers or Teague, and is able to get a bit more bounce in his jukes because of it. He also showed off some pretty good vision and patience in year one, but again, it’s hard to take too much from that because of who he was playing against.

Here, for example. He’s playing against Northwestern’s backups at the end of a blowout, but the run itself is very nice. He does a good job of locating the gap that he’s supposed to be hitting on this inside zone split, and gets low when he sees that he’s going to have to make a quick cut to hit that hole on time. Because he cuts in stride and keeps his legs churning, Northwestern’s incoming cornerback is trapped, still expecting the run to go in the gap that Crowley was eyeing initially.

With that containment player off balance, Crowley just has to use his speed to get to the outside, and from there he flashes some very good open field vision to turn what could have easily been just a 10-yard run into a 53-yard chunk play. He doesn’t have great straight line speed, but big runs can be created with good vision and blocking, and Ohio State is certainly going to have the latter. With Crowley, it could have the former.

He shows it off on outside runs too. His patience isn’t tested much here because the hole is there immediately, but he still has the very deliberate running style, announcing his intentions to defenders before a cut to really throw them off. It’s a lot like a well run route. He uses his body language and eyes extremely well for such a young back, and it makes up for some athletic limitations. That isn’t going to go away with an injury, and he’s only going to get better at.

That style isn’t something that can just be taught. Some guys have it, some don’t and Crowley is lucky to be in the former. Ohio State is lucky to have someone like that, because if fully healthy, this style of halfback is just about as perfect a fit in the Buckeye offense as you’ll find. His receiving and blocking is questionable, but for efficiency, the consistent threat of turning a regular run into a chunk play with his vision, and the most natural running back on the roster, Crowley is the choice. This is the medium-risk (because of that injury history), high reward choice.

MIYAN WILLIAMS

This feels like the most unlikely of the bunch, because Williams isn’t just a freshman, he’s a freshman that isn’t going to arrive in Columbus until the summer. However, we’ve seen freshmen halfbacks burst onto the scene before, and if there’s a position that can make it happen, it’s usually one like running back, where pure talent can make up for some technical flaws.

He’s a low to the ground runner like Dobbins and Crowley, but he’s much more of a bowling ball than

those two, almost like Maurice Clarett, though he's not as big as Clarett was, and likely wouldn't be after just one fall camp in Columbus. Instead, he's a tweener right now, with enough speed and burst to make defenders miss, but more power than expected from a 5-10 halfback.

While that could make for some exciting play, it does make Williams a bit of a weird fit in Ohio State's offense. A power back like him would have made a lot of sense in Urban Meyer's offense circa 2013 (see: Carlos Hyde), but in Wilson's rushing game, that straight line, downhill running style can only get you so far. He'd be able to make some plays because of how good Ohio State's offensive line is expected to be, but in terms of creating space and making something out of nothing, it doesn't seem like Williams would be able to do much as a freshman.

Now, that isn't to say that Williams is a statue. He has good bend for his size, and can make defenders miss, just not as well as Crowley will. He shows a lot of potential in open space, and seems to have good vision even behind the line of scrimmage, which is a good sign moving forward.

However, his lack of speed relative to the other options, paired with his inexperience, make Williams a difficult choice to justify. If he shows up for fall camp and dominates, he would have a case, but going off of film, it should be a few years before he's expected to star in Columbus. Once he develops his vision and patience more and learns how to really cover for the lack of elite, top-end speed, he should be a strong option. Until then, however, he's a high-risk, relatively low reward pick for Ohio State, and a pick that would be pretty shocking to see the Buckeyes make.

DEMARIO MCCALL

Wildcard! There isn't a more polarizing figure on the entire team than the fifth-year senior, who, despite his explosive potential, has never been able to find the field consistently through his first four seasons. It feels like every year is *the year* that McCall will put it together, but after being mismanaged early and forced into an H-back position that doesn't actually exist, the time has just never come for the North Ridgeville (Ohio) product.

Ohio State has tried to get him on the field at both receiver and running back in recent years, but neither seemed to stick. he was rumored to be the leader for backup behind Dobbins in 2019, but Teague's rise knocked him down the depth chart as he fell back into a familiar position as the tantalizing prospect that just can't quite pull it all together.

The Buckeyes made another shift this spring, moving him back to wide receiver, but it appears that that experiment ended with Teague's injury. If McCall is back at running back full time - as he should be - there's a very real case to be made for Ohio State to embrace chaos and roll with one of the team's most talented playmakers at halfback, eschewing safer choices in Chambers and Crowley.

McCall's ability to make things happen is the primary case in his favor. With an offense absolutely loaded with talent, including a quarterback that can be relied on, three of the best young wideouts in the country and what could easily be the nation's best offensive line, some inconsistency at halfback can be covered, especially if the highs are as high as they are with McCall. He'll bring with him quite a few more negative plays than someone like Crowley would, but if Ohio State is confident in the rest of that offense, as it should be, the occasional loss really shouldn't be a huge deal.

Neither should a lack of pass protection from the running back slot, which seems to be the No. 1 thing

keeping McCall off the field. He's never going to be Ezekiel Elliott in pass protection, but with a line like this and excellent blocking tight ends in Jake Hausmann and Luke Farrell, is elite running back blocking really necessary?

On the other side of the coin, McCall is able to do things like this that, frankly, none of the other halfbacks can do. The combination of athleticism, pure speed and vision that McCall has is rare, and make for one of the most electrifying open field runners in the country, just as it has for the entirety of his career at Ohio State. There's a reason that McCall seems to make a play every time he touches ball, and it's because this kind of talent is almost impossible to contain.

With Justin Fields in the backfield with him, and with McCall running out of Ohio State blocking schemes, it would take a Herculean effort for just about any defense to slow the Buckeye rushing attack down.

He has that patience too, the kind that none of the younger backs have fully developed yet. If Ohio State wants to stick with the outside zone running that worked so well last season, it could do it well with Crowley. It could probably do it with Chambers and Williams, though there would be a serious drop off. With McCall, that outside running that Dobbins found in 2019 isn't just replicated: it's improved on. McCall is *the* fit for this scheme. He's the prototype. He even has the receiving ability that Day has said he wants from a halfback.

If Ohio State is willing to put up with the risks of starting a smaller back like McCall, and willing to cover for his faults, the potential is there for something very, very special.

That's the question. With one year left of Fields, Chris Olave, Wyatt Davis, Thayer Munford and Josh Myers, does Ohio State want a safe pick, or does it want someone that has the potential to build off of what Dobbins was doing with the outside rushing attack, and add a big play threat into the rushing attack that, frankly, wasn't there consistently in 2019 (not that it mattered). McCall is the high-risk, high-reward pick.