

Former Ohio State Players Baron Browning, Jonathon Cooper Make Positional Changes At Next Level



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Entering the 2020 season, both Baron Browning and Jonathon Cooper had something to prove. The two players entered their senior seasons at Ohio State as high-potential, former five-star recruits who had not yet put it all together for a full season.

Ultimately, Browning and Cooper were drafted to the Denver Broncos, in the third and seventh rounds, respectively. They shared their excitement about playing with each other once again in the NFL. The four-year Ohio State linebacker complimented Cooper's leadership, while also making note of how important it is to have someone to go through his rookie season with.

"It's a great feeling," Browning said on May 15. "He was a captain for us at Ohio State. He's a brother of mine and somebody I will do anything for. It's always a great feeling to have somebody you played college ball with take that new journey with you because you can lean on one another."

Browning was taken with the Broncos' fourth selection at pick No. 105. He was the sixth Buckeye selected and just the second on the defensive side of the ball, following fellow linebacker Pete Werner, who went 60th to the New Orleans Saints.

Browning - a former five-star linebacker out of Kennedale, Texas - finished his Ohio State career with 110 tackles, 18 tackles for loss, seven sacks, two forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries. Those are solid numbers, but ones that may fall short of expectations considering Browning's recruit ranking.

But George Stoia, Broncos writer at the Denver Gazette, told Buckeye Sports Bulletin that Browning's

athleticism and versatility both made him a major prospect on Denver's draft board.

"That was a guy that I believe they had a second-, early-third-round draft grade on, and then he dropped all the way to the last pick in the third round and they were lucky to get him," Stoia said. "I know he was a stud in high school. I mean one of the best players in the country coming out of high school, and I watched some of his tape and some of the things he did in high school. They would move him anywhere, wherever they needed him to play in certain games. I mean they played him at safety, they played him at inside linebacker, outside linebacker, and they even played him at corner in some games, which is absurd at his size.

"I know he went to Ohio State and maybe didn't get on the field as early as he had hoped, but I think you look at his tape, and again maybe his numbers don't pop, but the dude's a freak athlete. I think that's what the Broncos liked about him."

Though Browning made the switch to the outside in his final year with Ohio State, Denver's plan seems to be to move the 6-3, 245-pound linebacker back inside. Stoia said that transition is coming because of a need at the position as well as Browning's potential as a factor in pass coverage.

"Right now, they're going to play him at inside linebacker because that's where they need the most help, and honestly I think that's where he'll fit best," Stoia said. "I know last year he played outside for Ohio State and was pretty good in coverage, and Ohio State plays a little bit of a different defense than what the Broncos do (Fangio is a 3-4 disciple), but I think that they're going to have him at inside because they really want him to be able to cover.

"They've struggled in the past two years with linebackers having to cover tight ends. When you play (Kansas City chiefs All-Pro tight end) Travis Kelce twice a year, you need somebody that can be physical in the box and be able to defend someone without having to bring up your safety or your nickel back to cover. I think Baron really fits that role well."

But Browning is not the only Ohio State draft pick going to the Broncos who is changing positions. Cooper will be joining him in the linebacker room after five years of defensive end work for the Buckeyes.

This is a move that Cooper was prepared for, as he worked out at the position at Ohio State's pro day because that is what he had been hearing would be his best fit in the NFL.

"All the teams I've been talking to, they see me as an outside linebacker, Sam-type (strongside linebacker) position, which is my body type," Cooper said following his pro day. "I just wanted to make sure I show the scouts and everybody that I can play linebacker and that I feel really comfortable in space and that I'm ready for the next level."

That position shift, along with an injury history, may have led to Cooper's falling stock in the draft, even despite a strong 2020 season with 24 tackles, a team-high 3½ sacks and a forced fumble. The first six rounds came and went for Cooper, as did the first 10 picks of the seventh. But finally, with pick No. 239, the 6-3, 253-pound Buckeye captain was taken by Denver.

Stoia said, despite being the final selection by the Broncos on draft weekend, Cooper made quite the impression on him during the interview immediately after his selection.

"This is very cliché, but his smile was so contagious," Stoia said. "I mean he was just beaming. You could tell that it meant a lot to him that he got drafted and didn't have to go through the undrafted free agency process. In the interview I just thought he was so charismatic and outgoing, and it was only like a five-minute interview, but he was clearly by far, out of the Broncos' 10 draft picks, the best interview. You could just tell how much he loves football, how much he was happy to be a part of the Broncos organization, and you could tell he was really soaking in the moment."

Cooper is joining an outside linebacker room that is headlined by two of Denver's biggest names on the defensive side of the ball: Bradley Chubb and Von Miller. While they may not be competing for a starting role over those two, Cooper said he is excited to work with them to help develop his game as he transitions over to the linebacker position.

"It's going to be amazing," Cooper said. "I plan to pick their brains completely and see how they do everything. As a rookie coming in, you have great veteran guys who have been in the league for a very long time. I definitely just want to be able to learn and apply whatever I can learn to my game and become the best player that I can be for the Broncos."

Something Cooper clearly brings to the table is his ability to lead off the field. The former Buckeye was a two-time captain and the first honoree for the Block O jersey as the team's representative of its culture and fight.

These qualities are what make Stoia think that Cooper will not only make the 53-man roster, but that he can eventually fight for some major playing time in the next few seasons, despite being one of the final picks of this year's draft.

"He seems like a person that's going to fit in well in the locker room and one of those guys you just need to keep around," Stoia said. "He may be a seventh-round pick, a borderline undrafted guy, but I think that's a guy you keep in your organization for at least two or three years and give him a shot."