

Harrison A Key Piece Of Atlanta Falcons' Effort To Strengthen Defensive Line



During his four seasons at Ohio State, defensive end Zach Harrison was a versatile presence on the Buckeyes' defensive front.

Harrison's speed and length made him a difficult assignment for any opposing offensive tackle, while his ability to impact passing lanes gave quarterbacks fits. While Harrison was an impactful player both against the run and pass while at Ohio State, he also fit into the exact mold of what the Atlanta Falcons were looking for along the defensive line.

Enamored with his physical gifts and his versatility on the defensive front, the Falcons selected Harrison with the No. 75 overall pick in the 2023 NFL Draft on Friday. Harrison was the first defensive Buckeye off of the board in the draft.

"We love the way today went," Falcons general manager Terry Fontenot said of his team's haul on Friday. "We wanted to go up and get (Syracuse offensive lineman Matt Bergeron), and that worked out. We were excited about a bunch of guys at 75 and were happy to end up with Zach."

The addition of Harrison followed a trend for the Falcons this off-season. In an effort to shore up their play in the trenches, the Falcons added a trio of defensive linemen during the offseason — including former All-Pro defensive tackle Calais Campbell — and Harrison was another complementary piece of their overhaul of the unit.

"We value the line of scrimmage, and we also made investments in free agency because the right guys were able," Fontenot said. "We never go into a draft stating we need a certain number of players here or there. We want to take guys we have a clear vision for, guys who are going to make an impact."

Harrison's versatility was a defining trait for the Falcons. Atlanta recognized Harrison's ability to both play on the edge and at the three-technique, while his athleticism and length made him a tough cover in

passing situations, helping him cause pressure and swat passes. Harrison finished with five pass breakups and an interception to go along with his 3 1/2 sacks last season.

While Harrison fits into a defensive line packed with solid veterans in Campbell and standout defensive tackle Grady Jarrett, Falcons head coach Arthur Smith said that he'll also be surrounded by a solid support system that will help him integrate into the NFL.

"He's a smart guy and eventually, as his game evolves, we can play him in both spots," Smith said. "Early on, on early downs, you can develop him off the edge. There's a lot of veterans he can learn from in that [meeting room]. As he gains experience, his game can expand."