

James Franklin Previews Battle Between Penn State Secondary, Ohio State's Receivers



It's hard to pin down one exact position on Ohio State's roster as the team's best given how many players have excelled this season, but there's certainly an argument to be made that the receiver room is both the deepest and highest-performing of the bunch.

Wideouts Marvin Harrison Jr., Emeka Egbuka and Julian Fleming have dominated this season, and the Buckeyes could see a return this week from Jaxon Smith-Njigba. Smith-Njigba played for a half in Ohio State's win over Iowa before exiting after reaching an unofficial pitch count, and appearing to tweak his leg against the Hawkeyes.

"We'll see. As the week goes on, we'll know more," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said of Smith-Njigba's availability against Penn State. "When you come out of games like that, you've got to keep evaluating and see how things go. But we'll keep figuring more stuff out and by the end of the week we'll have a better idea."

Even if Smith-Njigba doesn't play, Ohio State's receivers will present more than enough of a challenge against the Nittany Lions. Egbuka leads the bunch with 41 receptions for 735 yards, and Harrison has hauled in a team-high 10 touchdowns, followed by Fleming's six touchdown grabs.

"They've got a good scheme. They've got a bunch of weapons," Penn State head coach James Franklin said. "They've done a really good job, there's no doubt about it."

While Penn State's secondary will face a tough challenge, it's a group that may be able to answer the call. The unit has allowed 232.9 yards per game this season but has several notable playmakers, including cornerbacks Ji'Ayir Brown and Joey Porter Jr., and safeties Keaton Ellis and Kalen King.

Porter has been a standout for the Nittany Lions with 21 tackles and a team-high 11 pass breakups, which ranks fifth in the country. Brown, meanwhile, is the team's leader with 31 tackles and also had three interceptions on the season.

"That's a strength of ours for sure," Franklin said of the secondary. "We have a lot of confidence in those guys, and we are going to need it. But I also know that (Ohio State is) talented enough up front and at tight end and at running back that if you put too much of an emphasis on that, they can beat you

the other way, too, by running the ball.”

The most prolific offense the Nittany Lions have gone against was Purdue in the season-opener, and wide receiver Charlie Jones dominated for the Boilermakers with 153 yards on 12 receptions. Franklin cautioned that Ohio State presents any number of options that could turn in a game like that.

“There were some guys at Purdue we were concerned about, but I think everybody would agree there are probably more guys at Ohio State that people are aware of and concerned of before coming into this game,” Franklin said. “That’s the challenge, right?”