

Javontae Jean-Baptiste Quietly Builds Physically, Technically On OSU DL



For the past year now, a lot about Javontae Jean-Baptiste has been unknown.

From his National Signing Day commitment last February, where Jean-Baptiste reportedly decided on Nebraska before he had a change of heart that switched him to ink a letter of intent with Ohio State, a redshirt season in 2018 allowed the four-star defensive end recruit to develop behind the scenes.

While the Buckeyes' defensive line rotated four freshmen — ends Tyler Friday and Tyreke Smith, plus tackles Tommy Togiai and Taron Vincent — the soft-spoken Jean-Baptiste waited in the wings and worked on his craft from the summer and through the fall, not entirely sure of what to expect.

"I really didn't (know what to expect)," he said. "But as things got going, it was just me putting pieces together."

As he continues to sort through the scattered pieces of his puzzle spread out before him, an imperative part of Jean-Baptiste's blossoming includes an ongoing weight transformation.

When he arrived to Columbus last June for summer enrollment from Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic, where he was the 247Sports composite's No. 219 overall prospect and No. 6 player in New Jersey for his cycle, Jean-Baptiste carried just 215 pounds on his 6-5 frame.

Six months later, when December closed, Jean-Baptiste packed on 20 pounds of muscle — with room for much more planned prior to spring camp.

"It's just about eating every day and working out," said Jean-Baptiste, who is listed at 235 pounds on OSU's updated roster and hopes to hit the 250-255 range by March. "It's easy to put on weight in the winter vs. over the summer with camp and practices."

Because of Jean-Baptiste's length, some scouting services projected a move to outside linebacker, but he said his spot in 2019 would remain at defensive end.

While the position is crowded, from fellow his freshmen to veterans such as junior Chase Young and senior Jonathon Cooper, Jean-Baptiste turned some heads as he caught on.

Cooper, who had to develop physically and work up defensive line coach Larry Johnson's depth chart as he eventually earned his place on Ohio State's two-deep.

"(Jean-Baptiste) came in and he was a little bit smaller guy, smaller than the normal defensive end size, and he had to put on some weight before he could play," Cooper said. "But seeing him grow throughout these couple months with him, he's definitely matured. I feel like he's going to be a great player for us, and he's got something special in him.

"I relate with Javontae because I came in and I was like his weight. Credit he is taller than me, but I was his weight and I was going through what he's going through. That's my little bro. I'm proud of where he's at right now and how much he's improved and how much he's matured as a player and as a person."

One comparison assistant athletic director for football sports performance Mickey Marotti has made, according to Young, is the link between Jean-Baptiste and former New York Giants (2005-13)/Oakland Raiders (2014-15) defensive end Justin Tuck.

"(Jean-Baptiste) definitely developed and got a lot stronger and bigger," Young said. "Coach Mick says he reminds him of Justin Tuck, came in about that same size, grew to about 250, 255. I think Javontae is going to be a real good pass rusher. That's a lot what he works on."

Also at 6-5, Tuck reached 265 pounds as a two-time Pro Bowl selection and one-time All-Pro pick after he completed his college career with Notre Dame (2001-04), where Marotti spent 1998 through 2005 as the Fighting Irish's director of strength and conditioning.

The Giants selected him with the 74th overall pick in the third round of the 2005 NFL draft and won two Super Bowls during his time in New York, thanks to a violent pass rush that he fueled.

"Just because the way that Justin Tuck came in, we have similar builds and how (Marotti) sees how he turned out," Jean-Baptiste said, "he envisions I can turn out like that, too. ... It was just something that he had seen at the beginning and let me know that. It's just something that I work at."

Johnson sees something in Jean-Baptiste, evidenced by individual instruction after fall practices.

Jean-Baptiste stayed in the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on constant occasions for extra work as he continued to develop his pass-rush technique.

Among other aspects, Jean-Baptiste knows where he needs to get that aspect of his game.

"The goal there is to work my pass rush because pass rushing, it's not that easy," Jean-Baptiste said. "But then just working on my skills is just trying to take it up.

"At pass rush, I feel like I've grown a lot. I've gotten better at my hands and getting off the ball some more. Focus on the great get-off. When you're in the pass-rush situation, you've got to work your hands and flip your hips."

While two of Jean-Baptiste's primary recruiters, former head coach Urban Meyer (2012-18) and former

defensive coordinator Greg Schiano (2016-18), are no longer with the program after Meyer's coaching retirement and Schiano's NFL departure, Johnson continues on head coach Ryan Day's staff.

As he perfects his craft on the field under Johnson and attacks the 250-pound range in the weight room with Marotti, Jean-Baptiste focuses on those next steps.

Until he takes care of his short-term goals, Jean-Baptiste puts expectations for the 2019 season on the back burner.

"I really don't know (about next year)," Jean-Baptiste said. "I just work hard and see if I can put on some weight. Just go 100 percent."

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