

Jelani Thurman Gaining Understanding Ahead Of Freshman Season



Ohio State's two freshmen who shed their black stripes in the spring were also the early-enrolled class of 2023 prospects who generated the most buzz during March and April for the Buckeyes.

The first was wide receiver Carnell Tate, who flashed exceptional potential working as a starter in the stead of Julian Fleming and Emeka Egbuka, both out for the spring. He leapfrogged a collection of second-year receivers to get there.

The other who dropped the dark strip of tape parting the middle of his helmet was tight end Jelani Thurman. Formerly the No. 3 tight end in the 247Sports composite rankings, Thurman has already been showcasing what he could be down the road for the Buckeyes — and he's starting to soak up the information he needs to develop.

"He's a high school graduate now, so that's a change," tight ends coach Keenan Bailey said, laughing. "I think in spring, it was, 'What do I do?' It was the what. What do I have on this play? What do I have to do on a Tuesday morning? What classroom building do I go to? Now it's the how and the why. How do I do my job? How do I become a successful student-athlete?"

"And then lastly, the why. OK, why do I need to be here 25 minutes before I'm supposed to? Why do I have to influence with my right step so that he steps down? So just progressing from the what, to the how and the why."

Thurman made many waves with his play during the spring, but he's unlikely to see much of the field in 2023 based on the sheer volume of experienced players in front of him.

Senior Cade Stover is written in as the team's starter at tight end in permanent marker, back after one of the best seasons the Buckeyes have seen from a tight end in recent memory. Stover caught more passes (35) from the position than any player since Rickey Dudley hauled in 36 balls in 1995.

Stover's two backups return from last year as well, redshirt junior Joe Royer and senior Gee Scott Jr.

With those three and Bennett Christian and Sam Hart in mind, Bailey isn't putting any standard on Thurman to meet this year in terms of playing time.

"I think when you start putting expectations on (how soon he'll play), that's when you start getting jammed up," Bailey said. "All I asked for him was to strain and learn our culture by the end of spring ball and learn to know what to do."

All that being said, Bailey isn't expecting Thurman to wait around to push for a role. He wants all his tight ends to be hungry to get on the field.

"They came to Ohio State knowing that everyone is a competitor, they came here to be a first-rounder," Bailey said. "I don't think there's any waiting for your time. I don't ever want to coach someone who's patient. So I hope they're all hungry to get on the field right now."

Regardless, with Thurman's progress through spring ball, Bailey is holding his training regimens and mentality to a standard expected of someone beyond his years. If nothing else, it will have an impact going into 2024 when Stover is gone, potentially, and Thurman is vying for a featured role in the offense.

"I'm challenging him, 'you're not a freshman anymore,'" Bailey said. "I know he still is. But after spring ball, you don't have a black stripe on, you're not a freshman anymore. So now I'm holding him to the standard of Gee (Scott) and Joe (Royer) and Cade and Ben (Christian) and Sam (Hart) and the rest of the guys. So it's only gonna get harder now that we're raising that expectation for him, if that makes sense."