

Knowles Anticipating More Safety And Linebacker Rotation In 2023



Outside garbage time and instances when players were hurt, Ohio State stuck with the same group of linebackers and safeties throughout the 2022 season.

Tommy Eichenberg practically never came off the field at one linebacker spot, and Steele Chambers almost always stood as his running mate in the other. Lathan Ransom burst on the scene in the boundary safety position and claimed that role while Ronnie Hickman served as the team's field safety and Tanner McCalister played nickel.

Sure, others factored in at those spots at times. But when push came within eyesight of shove, those were the five when all were available.

This year, defensive coordinator Jim Knowles might be taking a different approach, spelling players on the field as much as Chambers and Eichenberg are.

"That's my vision, so that we can have a really nice rotation there — which, when you're playing 14, 15 games, is going to help us at the end of the year. It really is," Knowles said.

Keeping the top end of the rotations fresh isn't the only reason that Knowles is thinking about rolling more players, it's also to build depth and get the team's younger talent on the field.

One of the most important spots where Knowles felt the depth hurt last season was at nickel. McCalister — who has now exhausted his eligibility — dealt with lower-body issues over the course of the season and so did his backup, Cam Martinez. Martinez is competing with Syracuse transfer Ja'Had Carter for the starting spot in 2023, and other safeties could slide down if needed, but Knowles is also looking into some of the team's cornerbacks for options.

Second-years Jyaire Brown and Ryan Turner were the two primary names he mentioned. Having a

coverage specialist in the spot could be beneficial in certain situations.

“We look at what that guy has to do in terms of how it fits to our opponents and everything that that position has to do, and we think a corner can do it,” Knowles said. “It’s not a place where you have to be a hard, tough run defender and we can involve our corners there more, and we think that will give us more depth as the season goes on.”

With the competition that exists at the other two safety positions, players like Ransom, Josh Proctor, Sonny Styles and Kye Stokes could find themselves rolling through as well.

Cody Simon acted as the team’s third linebacker when it moved from a 4-2-5 to a 4-3 look against run-heavy teams or in short-yardage situations, spelling Chambers for the occasional rep. He could look to have more of a role at the position this season, however.

“Cody is now able to play in that (starting) role,” Knowles said. “He’s having a great spring.”

A pair of top 50 recruits that are both entering their second season at Ohio State are also making their own pushes for playing time. Former five-star C.J. Hicks has a burst and overall athleticism that stands out to graduate assistant and former OSU All-American linebacker James Laurinaitas, and the versatility to also factor in at the “Jack” position when it returns this fall.

His classmate Gabe Powers has been turning some heads this spring, however. He had a standout performance at Ohio State’s scrimmage March 25.

“Gabe’s getting better,” Knowles said. “He’s establishing that respect with his teammates. We’re encouraging him to compete, he’s getting better with his hands and his feet. He’s improving. Expectations are high for him, so I’m staying after him.”

“You have to show that, No. 1, you can dominate with the twos,” Knowles said. “If you can dominate with the twos, now we can mix you with the ones. And you show you hold your own with the ones, now it’s up to me to find more positions and opportunities for you. But you’ve got to win. You’ve got to kick ass with the twos first.”

It will be interesting to see the extent to which Ohio State rotates its back-end defenders come fall.