

My Thoughts: Confident Buckeye Defense Could Be In Line For Special Season



For most of spring camp, it seemed like all the talk and hype was centered around the freshman sensation wideout Jeremiah Smith and the now three-man quarterback battle between Devin Brown, Will Howard and the other freshman standout Julian Sayin.

While Smith certainly deserved the recognition and a quarterback battle will always dominate headlines, it seemed like a lot of people were forgetting about the sleeping giant that is Ohio State's defense, a Jim Knowles-led unit that has several starters from last season's dominant campaign returning for one final campaign.

Last season, Ohio State ranked within the top five nationally in numerous categories, including passing defense (first, 145.9 yards per game), scoring defense (second, 11.9 points per game) and third-down conversion percentage (fifth, 28.6 percent). Those numbers are truly impressive, especially for a defense that struggled at times in 2022, and it may only increase in 2024 with the returning Buckeyes coming in as motivated as ever and last year's SEC Freshman of the Year Caleb Downs joining an already loaded secondary.

But despite this dominance, the offense still garnered most of the headlines this spring. It seemed like there was a different Jeremiah Smith highlight-reel catch posted by the Ohio State official Twitter account each week which — again, deservedly so — was reposted by numerous media outlets and thus circulated throughout the sometimes toxic online sphere of college football.

Jeremiah Smith is legitimately unfair. pic.twitter.com/tM4ObnKqG2

— Buckeyes Network (@BuckeyesNetwork) April 10, 2024

Another day another Jeremiah Smith Highlight my goodness ☐. pic.twitter.com/y2j5tNPZ6q

— The Scarlet and Gray Podcast (@TheSG_Podcast) April 12, 2024

Another Jeremiah Smith highlight catch ☐ pic.twitter.com/BNVowSyNIA

— Swish (@swishxvibes) April 12, 2024

While it might not be fair for an elite defense to be constantly overshadowed by a single freshman wideout making plays over the group's top defenders, it's a role many within the unit seem to be embracing this offseason. Just ask senior cornerback Denzel Burke, who never is afraid to speak his mind on any topic.

"We definitely won. We definitely won," he said when asked whether his cornerback group got the better of the wide receivers this spring. "I know y'all see little highlight tapes, little clips of practice that always just show the receivers winning. But for the majority of spring ball, BIA, we were dominant. And we were dominant today."

To me, Burke's comments suggested that his secondary and entire defense were tired of the offense stealing their thunder, that they wanted to show the world what exactly they were capable of before the team parted ways until the summer. They certainly accomplished that during Saturday's spring game.

While the final score of 34-33 in favor of the offense does not suggest it, the Buckeyes' defense were the clear winners of the day, putting on a show in front of a nationally televised audience and displaying their unique depth at just about every position.

I thought it was clear that Knowles' unit was playing with a little bit more juice than normal early on in the scrimmage — when most of the starters were still playing on both sides of the ball — especially when the freshman Smith was targeted. While Smith did have two early catches for 12 yards, the Buckeyes' secondary did not let him come close to hauling in another highlight-worthy catch in the end zone, with both Davison Igbinosun and Jermaine Mathews Jr. blanketing him on catches that could have gone for six points, both of those occurring on the same drive.

Those two plays, along with some other instances of close coverage from Igbinosun and the defensive backs early on, showed to me the potential that this starting secondary possesses his season. And I didn't even mention the potential budding superstar Downs, who had a quiet day with just two tackles.

Then, it was the reserves time to make a statement, with youngsters Calvin Simspen-Hunt and Jaylen McClain each racking up an interception — McClain's coming against the highly coveted freshman Sayin — and true freshman Aaron Scott finishing with an impressive six tackles.

Second-year Ohio State QB Lincoln Kienholz is picked off by second-year CB Calvin Simpson-

Hunt.

Kienholz had started to build some momentum, but a bad pass spoils his second drive.
pic.twitter.com/2Xo4DuOMhi

— Andy Backstrom (@andybackstrom) April 13, 2024

On the money! 📺 @Jaylenmcclain08 with the read and interception for @OhioStateFB
pic.twitter.com/ZEvI29VHiv

— FOX College Football (@CFBONFOX) April 13, 2024

When the Buckeyes' secondary — from the starters to the reserves — is clicking on all cylinders, they are a nightmare for opposing offenses and quarterbacks, and they certainly showed that potential during the spring game.

I didn't think the defensive line and linebackers had as notable of a performance, but that could have just been due to the lack of tackling on designed quarterback/running backs runs. J.T. Tuimoloau and Tyleik Williams both did not reach the stat sheet, while starters Ty Hamilton, Jack Sawyer, Cody Simon, J.T. Tuimoloau and Tyleik Williams combined for just four tackles and one sack.

But just like with the secondary, I was impressed with the overall depth of those respective units. When the opportunity arose later in the scrimmage, players such as freshman defensive lineman Eddrick Houston (six tackles), senior defensive end Mitchell Melton (four tackles, one sack) and junior linebacker Gabe Powers (five tackles) took full advantage, with each of them making their case to earn some playing time in the regular season.

While it would not be wise to cast aspersions on an entire unit based on a glorified scrimmage, the unique depth and play-making ability Knowles' group displayed at every position certainly passed the eye test, putting the unit in line for a potentially special and dominant season in 2023.

And if they can channel that feeling of disrespect Burke and others had this spring and continue to play with a chip on their shoulder this season? Then look out. Because a motivated and talented group of both veterans and flashing youngsters can be set up to do some special things come fall Saturdays.

Again, just ask Denzel Burke.

"We're going to be amazing," he said. "We have a lot of new installs. A lot of new front slips. The guys moving around. We might have four or five DBs on the field. A lot of different looks, man. I'm really excited for what we're going to do. We're going to dictate what the offense can do this year."

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