My Thoughts: NFL Draft Exposes Ohio State's Defensive Deficiencies

Six former Ohio State football players saw their NFL dreams realized this past weekend after being selected in the 2023 NFL Draft.

It was the second-consecutive year that head coach Ryan Day sent six players off to the NFL, furthering Ohio State's typically fruitful pipeline to the professional ranks. However, the Buckeyes' draftees in each of the last two seasons have primarily come on the offensive side of the football, with just a pair of Ohio State defenders coming off of the board in 2022 and 2023: defensive ends Tyreke Smith, who was selected in the fifth round of the 2022 NFL Draft by the Seattle Seahawks, and Zach Harrison, who went to the Atlanta Falcons in the third round of the 2023 NFL Draft.

Producing 12 draftees in two years is undoubtedly still impressive, regardless of whether they come on the offensive or defensive side of the ball. Still, Ohio State's lack of defensive draft selections is another stark reminder of the unit's struggles in recent seasons.

Ohio State has seen a steep defensive decline since the reign of former defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley in 2019. Hafley helped turn around a porous Buckeye defense from the year before into one of the most feared units in the country, holding opponents to 259.7 yards per game — the best mark in the country. In the 2020 NFL Draft, the Buckeyes sent seven defensive players to the professional ranks — including three first-rounders — and while players such as Chase Young and Jeff Okudah had already cemented themselves as top-end talent, the emergence of players such as Damon Arnette and Malik Harrison catapulted OSU's draft efforts to new heights.

But since then, Ohio State has seen diminishing returns from its defense both on the field and in the draft. Kerry Coombs' two-year stint as defensive coordinator saw Ohio State's total defense slip to No. 59 nationally in 2020 and 2021, while the Buckeyes dropped several games due to their defensive deficiencies — including the 2021 College Football Playoff National Championship and a 42-27 rivalry loss to Michigan in the 2021 regular season.

At the conclusion of Coombs' first season at the helm of Ohio State's defense, the unit saw five players get drafted. The group included linebackers Pete Werner and Baron Browning, defensive tackle Tommy

Togiai, defensive end Jonathon Cooper and cornerback Shaun Wade, and it marked the last time an Ohio State defensive player that wasn't a defensive end was selected.

Smith was the lone selection in Coombs' second and final year, while the Buckeyes went 1-for-3 on draft prospects with Haskell Garrett and Antwaun Jackson latching on to teams after the draft. Garrett is currently a free agent after signing with the Tennessee Titans after last season's draft, while Jackson is playing for the Seattle Sea Dragons of the XFL.

Ohio State filled the void of Coombs' departure with Oklahoma State defensive guru Jim Knowles, and the Buckeyes showed immediate improvement in 2022. Knowles' aggressive style of defense helped Ohio State hold the No. 13 total defense in 2022, holding opponents to 321.5 yards per game. However, the Buckeyes lost steam in the two biggest games of the season, allowing more than 500 yards and 40 points to both Michigan and Georgia to end the campaign with back-to-back losses.

Again, just one defensive Buckeye was drafted as a result in 2023 with Harrison coming off the board with the No. 75 overall pick. Ohio State was 1-for-6 in regard to draft-eligible defensive players, including safety Ronnie Hickman, who appeared in mock drafts as high as a fourth-round selection in the lead-up to the draft. Ohio State was well-represented on the UDFA market, with five former Silver Bullets inking contracts, including Hickman and safety Tanner McCalister to the Cleveland Browns, cornerback Cameron Brown to the Los Angeles Chargers and defensive tackles Jerron Cage and Taron Vincent to the New Orleans Saints and Buffalo Bills, respectively.

Although Ohio State has seen a steep decline in its defensive output on the field and in the draft since Coombs took over in 2020, and didn't see much of an improvement under Knowles from the draft perspective in his first year, the future shines bright for the unit.

Ohio State has several potential high-level draft picks on the defensive side of the ball this upcoming season. Along the defensive line, J.T. Tuimoloau, Jack Sawyer, Mike Hall and Tyleik Williams all carry draft potential. Linebackers Tommy Eichenberg and Steele Chambers also returned to Ohio State with the goal of improving their draft stocks, although Eichenberg, and Chambers to an extent, could have possibly gone off the board this year. In the secondary, cornerback Denzel Burke and safety Lathan Ransom will have the opportunity to reclaim the moniker of "DBU" for Ohio State.

Certainly, Ohio State's defensive struggles both on the field and in the draft have been stark in recent seasons, but the Buckeyes have the pieces in place for another major improvement in both categories under Knowles in Year Two. It's just up to Knowles to put those pieces together.