

Ohio State Defensive Players Preview Matchup With Alabama In CFP National Championship



Coming off a 49-28 victory over Clemson in the College Football Playoff semifinals, the Buckeyes are amid preparation for a national championship showdown with the Crimson Tide, who defeated Notre Dame 31-14 in their semifinal game.

Ohio State fifth-year senior defensive end Jonathon Cooper, senior cornerback/safety Marcus Williamson, senior defensive tackle Haskell Garrett, senior linebacker Pete Werner, sixth-year senior linebacker Justin Hilliard, and fourth-year junior cornerback Shaun Wade spoke to members of the media via Zoom video conference Jan. 6, previewing the highly anticipated title game. What follows is a rundown of what each defensive player said:

Fifth-year senior defensive tackle Jonathon Cooper:

You guys have been pretty open just about how much of a grind this season has been, how much stress it's been. Now that you guys are nearing the end, how are you guys doing from a mental standpoint after going through everything you've gone through as a team to get to where you wanted to go all along, which was this game on Monday?

Yeah, obviously we haven't been silent about how hard it's been. You know, it's still tough, even though you've got to finish strong, and the message that we've kind of been saying as a team is we've got one more. There's nothing else after this. This is why you play football. This is why you come to Ohio State.

I feel like if you can't do it for one more, then what was the point of going through all that work in the beginning.

Can you evaluate the way you played in the Sugar Bowl? Is that sort of what the whole point was for coming back, that we know how well you were playing in August before that high ankle sprain a year ago? Was that the level of play that you had been building towards all along?

Yeah, I would say in some way, yeah. You know, I honestly came back for my teammates and I wanted to show the world the type of football player that I am. I feel like I played pretty well against Clemson. I definitely went back and watched the film, there's definitely some things I could get better at, but for the most part we got the job done and we won the game, and that's the whole entire goal.

I really came back to make it this far, to win a National Championship. Just got to finish the job.

I'm interested if you can define for us how you would define success. Obviously success is winning a National Championship this week, but you look at the Sugar Bowl, and by all accounts a really successful game. You gave up 400 passing yards, but it almost didn't really matter. What are the things that you guys look at to be able to say, yeah, we played really well, this was a successful day, and how are you applying that to your game plan this weekend?

I feel like when it comes to football terms, success is win. Winning that game, that's what it all comes down to.

At the end of the day it doesn't matter how it gets done. Doesn't matter what goes on throughout the game, plays missed, calls missed, penalties, tackles for loss, sacks, all those things. I feel like success is just when you win.

By all means, looking back at that Clemson game, a lot of the things that happened, they're a really good team, but we won that game, and that's what I would consider being a success or having some success in college football at least. So, yeah.

Clemson's offensive line came into the game, they had a lot of new players and you guys dominated them. That still may have been the best offensive line you've played, but this is going to be a whole different level. Can you kind of describe the challenge that you guys are going to face going against a line that won the Moore Award and obviously is a different level?

Yeah, first of all, Clemson's O-line is a very good offensive line, the same way Alabama — Alabama has a very good offensive line.

You know, we just have to come out and attack them the same way we do against every other opponent. Obviously it's a big challenge for us, our defensive line here at Ohio State. They've got some great guys, big guys across the offensive line.

You know, but when you come to play football, that's why you come to Ohio State, to play in these type of situations and to play against these type of opponents. You know, it's no different from I feel like going against our guys every day in practice. We compete against the best here at Ohio State, and obviously Alabama and Clemson both have amazing offensive lines.

I feel like we go against an amazing offensive line every day in practice, so I feel like it just makes us even more prepared.

As a local guy growing up in Columbus, just the thought of being on a team that wins a National Championship, what that would mean as a guy who grew up watching Ohio State, and how do you balance that with the football aspect of it, that you have a job to do and that's probably the first thing on your mind? What are your collective thoughts, I guess, this week?

Yeah, it's special being from here, growing up here, being an Ohio State fan, watching Troy Smith and all those guys and James Laurinaitis and all those guys do what they do.

But you know, the job is not finished here. I feel like I'll reflect on all that stuff later on, but right now my whole entire focus is on beating Alabama and playing our best game as a defense and being that leader for my defense and the team.

That's where all my focus and all my energy is towards. I feel like after everything is said and done, I'll reflect on actually playing in a game like that or being a Columbus kid and having this opportunity.

But for right now, our whole entire main focus and goal is on Alabama.

Obviously a good performance from the defensive line against Clemson. It seemed to be kind of clustered around a handful of guys. If you have to go deeper against Alabama, what is it you've seen from the depth of this defensive line that you feel like holds up well against what might be the best offensive line in the country?

Yeah, I feel like with this defensive line, we have a lot of — I don't feel like it's just one guy. I feel like across the board we have great guys, great players, from first, second to third string.

We're all great players that we rely on, that we can put in the game, and I feel like that's what makes us different, is that you can sub guys in and you expect the same thing that you would out of a starter.

And going against an offensive line like Alabama's, I feel like that's key. They're big, strong, physical guys, and throughout the game you're going to have to keep rotating and getting guys in and play faster at the end of the game.

Obviously there's more to being a defensive lineman than just getting sacks, but when you're rushing the passer and you're dealing with a guy who kind of gets the ball out more quickly than most guys, what are some of the difficulties dealing with that?

I feel like the biggest thing is just — Trevor got the ball out fast, and I feel like we kind of have to attack this game the same way. Just put pressure on him in any way that you can, whether that's getting hands up, batting balls down, making him feel your presence, collapsing the pocket, really doing anything that you can to make sure the quarterback isn't very comfortable back there and just sitting there taking a lot of time away and finding an open man.

And that helps out our secondary, as well.

I just wanted to talk about you guys have a big game this week. Also, one of your former teammates, Chase Young, also having a big game this week, you know, him playing your position. What can you say about Chase Young that has maybe helped you get to where you are at this position, playing for a national title?

Well, first, Chase is an amazing player. Obviously you guys have seen him — everything that he's been doing in the league, and that's to be expected. He was doing that here for us at Ohio State.

I feel like I've learned a lot from a lot of defensive ends along the way, guys like Tyquan, Sam Hubbard who's doing really well, Jalyn Holmes, Nick Bosa, and Chase. Those are all amazing players that have

played here, and I've had the opportunity to be teammates with and I've seen how they all play and rush, and I feel like I've just kind of watched and learned from a lot of them and tried to apply it to my own game and tried to be the best defensive end that I can be.

But I feel like at the end of the day just kind of go out there and play my game and just take what I've learned throughout the years with those guys that I've played with and be the best that I can.

Senior cornerback Marcus Williamson:

Marcus, it's been an inconsistent year for the secondary, and I know a lot of that had to do with not having a normal off-season, not having the normal number of games. How have you seen this group evolve and specifically your play in the slot? How do you feel you've evolved as a player in that position?

I would say, like you said, it's been a weird year. But as a group and as a collective, we've really grown from — just as a unit entirely, coach to player, player to player, and I think it just really has to come down to trust, trusting each other out there, knowing your teammate and your brother is going to be there to help you.

And when you have such great players all around you, it really helps to just play comfortable and play free, and I think that's really helped us as a secondary and for myself personally this year.

What do you see in practice from Sevy Banks that has improved throughout the year, because he seemed like he was playing a little timid at the beginning of the year and not coming out and making plays, but now he seems to be finding his groove and getting into some guys out there on the corner? What have you seen from him in the last few games that make you think he's ready for a national title game?

First off, Sevy is just an amazing athlete, great person, smart player, and this being his first year completely starting, I think he's just reached a new comfort level and been able to trust his training, trust his body, his technique, and now you get to see the results on the playing field.

So we're excited to see Sevy on Monday make some plays and help bring a ring home.

What's it like preparing for these wide receivers with DeVonta Smith winning the Heisman and then the potential that Jaylen Waddle could be back, too?

It's extensive, preparing for these guys. Of course DeVonta just won the Heisman the other night, and just all around they're great players. Any time you're in the National Championship, there won't be bad players on the field.

Being able to get on the film, prepare for what we think they're going to do, it's been fun, as well. So just really excited to get out there and compete as a secondary against their group. Just ready to win.

Kind of along the same lines, how much do you guys relish this opportunity? You've taken some criticism as a unit, and now you're going to play the best. How much do you relish that? And just as a follow-up, what's your status for next year? You're a senior, but obviously you can come back if you want.

I guess to start off, I do plan on coming back next year. And then just as a unit, like you say, any time you have a group of competitors like I feel we are as a secondary, you do look forward to these opportunities. You're on the biggest stage in college football and I think we've grown a lot as a unit, and so to just go out there and show how much we've worked all throughout the year and to hopefully let the results be a win on Monday, you can't ask for more.

So we're really excited, like I said earlier, to have this opportunity to play against such a great unit that they have over there on the other side of the ball and to go show what we can do as Buckeyes.

What have you seen from Lathan Ransom over the last month or so that has allowed him to take on this new role?

First off, Lathan, like Sevyon Banks, he's such a great athlete. He's played and practiced at a lot of different spots throughout the year and he's really found a comfort level in his role now. He's just such a smart player to be so young. He asks a ton of questions. He's always trying to figure out more, how can I better myself here, how can I better myself there, and he's really just raised his value and helped us, especially during his first year in such a crazy year.

To do what he's done is truly remarkable. Really excited for Lathan to see what I know he can do on Monday and just help the team and help the unit. That's it.

How great has it been all the way to the National Championship game amidst the adjustments made to college football this season due to COVID?

Yeah, not just college football, all the changes of course, our season getting taken and brought back and all the craziness that we're all familiar with.

But this year as a whole has just been wild. To finally reach this point to where we're playing for it all, you can't write a better story than that.

So I think it brings a new level of excitement to our team, just knowing how much we've been through as a whole. I'm sure to the outside world maybe we won't know how much has really gone on in these walls, but we're all extremely excited to have something to show for all the perseverance that we've showed throughout the year.

Just really ready to get this thing rocking in Miami and come back with a ring.

A little bit of a different role for you in some ways in the Sugar Bowl with the safety time that you were getting. I'm just curious what did you like about that? Is there a way that you think that fits your skill set? And why do you think that was a good match-up for you?

I would just say Coach Coombs and our defensive staff, they came up with a great game plan for Clemson. It was a role that I tend to practice in at times. I kind of bounce around in practice, just making sure I'm knowing all the spots.

I think that's something that we cherish as a unit is everybody knowing every spot. And for this game plan, that just happened to be what was my best role personally for the team, and I think it worked out well collectively.

Just want to know if you could tell us about your decision to return for next season, kind of what factored into that?

I'm still enjoying being a Buckeye, man. This year has been just crazy. I know we've had a shortened season. We've lost games here or there, and I'm just ready to come back and help our unit get to the standard that we know we hold ourselves to and that we should be.

Like I say, I'm too happy to be a Buckeye, man. I'm not ready to leave yet. Still got unfinished business.

You kind of touched on this, but everything you guys have been through this year, how much have you had to check on your teammates' just kind of mental health and your own mental health with the different challenges and the stopping and the starting, just to get to this point to play a championship?

You know, these players on this team, myself included, have just been through so much this year, not seeing our families, many of us not being able to see our girlfriends, and just to be in this bubble and to just be around each other, it's been tough.

And to go through all that since June and then to have our season ripped away, there was a lot of grieving going on around these walls and these hallways.

To have it come back and to show up to work every day, putting in the hours that we do, it can be rough on your health and on your mental health. So having those brothers right there next to you and you know they're going through the same thing, I think it's helped a lot of guys, and I know personally it's helped me this year. It hasn't been easy personally and across the board.

Like I said, being able to have that brother that you can lean on to get through these tough times during this year has been great, and now that we're towards the end and have something to show for it, I think it made it all worth it. That's really all I've got.

Senior linebacker Pete Werner:

What's it been like to play alongside Justin Hilliard the last couple weeks? You've known him a long time and everything he's been through. How much does he mean to your unit?

Yeah, when you talk about Justin, he's a guy that kind of welcomed me into the university. He's a guy that we've had really fun times together. To see his improvements throughout the season and the way he's playing and operating on the football field is crazy to think.

You talk about all the injuries, everything through adversity he's gone through. To see the level of play he's going with right now, it's crazy to think about.

But credit the kid and his hard work and how much he loves this team. It's just great playing alongside with that.

I'm wondering what you guys have seen from Miyan Williams in the back half of the season. I think people might have been surprised to see him get some huge carries in the Sugar Bowl and the Big Ten Championship game, to jump a couple guys on the depth chart. What have you seen from him and how his game has evolved?

Yeah, he's a guy that's been working really hard in practice, and we've kind of seen it through him getting reps here and there and excel against our defense. When you run the ball like he does in practice you've got to put him in game situations. The times he has been in the game he's done very well.

If he continues to keep practicing as well as he has been and being that contributor for the offense, to be a backup, a really big backup spot, then he's going to keep excelling in the game.

You guys are obviously coming off of a performance where you contained Travis Etienne pretty well. Curious, any similarities or differences in the challenge you see now going against Najee Harris?

Yeah, so they compare pretty close. They're two of the top backs in the country. The thing to look more about Najee Harris is he's more of a physical guy, but then we have certain things to prep for that.

The guys are a little bit different, but as long as we do what we did for Etienne, then I think we'll be very good at stopping him.

Throughout the year this linebacking crew has gotten a lot of praise, but I think it's really increased the last few weeks. The Alabama guys we talked about earlier were talking about you guys' athleticism and whatnot. What do you think has been the main reason behind kind of the evolution and the continued development of you guys' group throughout the season?

I just think that we are a group of guys that love the game of football. Our knowledge for the game increases every single day, and our communication has increased so much to this point where you can put a lot of things on the linebackers and we're willing to get everything done.

Our communication, knowledge of the game, everything like that, if you look at the first game and then now, this game, we've improved so much because we've taken that coaching and we've gone with it.

We put more things on the table — the coaches put things on the linebackers' table, and a lot more towards the end of the season because they know that we're capable of doing it. I just credit our coaches and the other linebackers on the field because we're really capable of doing many things, and I think it's helped us show the country that the linebackers — our linebackers are a strength.

When you look at the year that (Najee) Harris had, it seems like he's almost underrated because of all the talent they have. You mentioned similarities to Etienne, but what really stands out about him and why he's been so successful?

I think that they have a great game plan on offense to get him the ball in a variety of ways. Their offensive line, I credit them a lot. But he's very patient. He's a very patient back and he finds the holes.

It might look cloudy at some times, but then you see him get six, seven, eight yards when he should have gotten zero. He's a very good back. He's good at making you miss, and they just do a very good job utilizing him in the run and pass game to make him a real threat from a defensive perspective.

Probably a pretty rare occasion where you have two high school teammates going against each other with you and (Alabama third-year sophomore offensive lineman) Emil (Ekiyor Jr.) out there in the National Championship on Monday. What are your memories of going against

Emil in practices and what makes him such a special player?

Yeah, so I remember Emil, his dad was our defensive coordinator. He was a D-line coach, so I'm really close friends with that family and Emil.

He's a guy — he's a good kid and he works really hard. You think he's big, this big guy, and then he can move super well. It's going to be fun playing against him because I never envisioned playing him.

But I'm excited and I'm ready to get after him. We've already — we've talked a little bit, so we're ready to get after each other.

How crazy is it, as you sit here in January, this is the game you guys wanted to get to way back in February of a year ago, and all you've been through and stuff. I know you've still got more one more game, but to get to this game, your parents fought for it, et cetera, I know you've reflected a little bit on maybe how this has come to fruition, 1 versus 2, Alabama, Ohio State, just like a lot of people thought it would be in the first place.

Yeah, you just think of everything we've gone through to get to this point. Coach has continued to talk about it day by day throughout the weeks of practice, but going back to Zoom meetings, telling us that our season is canceled, to all the practices that we've put in as a team, the fact that we've stayed together and united together as a group so well and the brotherhood that it's shown, I credit the guys.

We're just thankful to be in the position that we are in right now, but a lot of reflecting in positive ways going back to many things to get us to in point now. You've just got to credit so many different people and the guys staying together to really have one goal in mind, which is this.

We've just got to keep focusing, keep grinding together as a unit, and we'll be ready for Monday.

Alabama's offensive line just won the Joe Moore Award for being the best offensive line in the country, so what's it like preparing to go up against an offensive line like that?

You know, it's not anything different. We've seen it every single day in practice. We like to compare our offensive line to their offensive line, so it's going to be very similar. We butt heads with our offensive line, and I'm sure it was neck and neck with our offensive line and their offensive line.

I'd like to agree that they're very similar. But that being said, we've got to keep going against our guys. We've seen it. We know what it's like, so we're ready to get after them.

But I credit them. Very good offensive line, very disciplined, and very aggressive getting off the ball.

It seems like Alabama's offense gives teams a lot to look at in terms of motions and formation. What's the key when you're playing against a team that is going to have that sort of late motion at the snap, guys sort of flying toward the sideline, and stuff like that? Have you seen a team that does that yet this year, and what's the challenge of playing against it?

Yeah, so they do a good job of trying to get the defense out of place. We've just got to do a great job. Simply, we've got to do a great job of tracking the ball. We've got to be good tacklers and we've got to have our feet in the ground when they're trying to not get our feet in the ground with all the shifts and everything that they do.

We've got to get through it, got to keep practicing hard, and then we'll be ready.

Pete, I know you deal more with Al Washington than you do with Larry Johnson, but Larry has his fingerprints on the defense just in general. What makes him different, if anything, unique as a teacher, unique as a communicator?

He's very close with all of his guys on the defensive line. I know that from experience. I wasn't very close with him my freshman and sophomore year but I have gotten very close with him because of the 3rd down situations and things like that.

But he's a guy that really gets close to his players. You've got to build up trust with him. He's not a guy that he's just going to love you right when you get here. He's going to be a guy that takes a lot of trust to get him to like you, to know you, so you can go out and execute.

And that's what you've got to do, is you've got to execute to get on his good side. He's just a great coach, and as you can see, he's produced a lot of guys at the next level. He's a really good coach to have. His knowledge of the game has translated to me personally, to help me be a better player.

But yeah, he's an excellent coach, just a great guy to be around, although I'm not around him as much as Al Washington.

Senior defensive tackle Haskell Garrett:

Haskell, all year, especially later in the year, we've really seen how talented this defensive line is. How has practicing against a talented front every day helped you guys progress throughout the season?

You know, it's a great opportunity and it's a great look to go against the best. Iron sharpens iron, and going against guys like Wyatt Davis and Josh Myers, Harry Miller and those guys, our attack with Thayer Munford and Nick Petit get us ready for games and to play in big-time moments.

Kerry Coombs said one of the things he's loved about this season is just how resilient you guys are. What's that been like as one of the team's leaders to know the guy next to you might not be there each week and somebody might be coming back? How do you maintain the leadership ability that you've been known for?

You know, every week me and Coop — as long as me and Coop are okay and we keep the spirits high in the defense and in our unit, that's all that matters really. We know if we're okay, the rest of the guys are okay, and they feed off of us. We be the Energizer Bunnies for the — not only for the defense, but for the guys in the room. Whether a guy goes down due to injury or COVID, next guy is up and we're coaching those guys, those young guys, and so it's always been — it's not about replacing, it's about reloading.

How far have you seen Taron Vincent come over the last six, seven games? I know it took a while for him to get on the field, injuries and stuff like that, but what's he giving you guys now?

Taron (Vincent) is giving us his all. Everything that he was in high school, he's better now. I don't think anybody has really realized that Taron came off an injury and started playing right away. He had a

major surgery in the summertime, and then literally had a little time to get ready and rehab and got ready for it.

Taron is doing a great — an outstanding job in my opinion at that position.

Haskell, you guys are coming off another good performance against the run and you really kind of bottled up Travis Etienne pretty well. How is the Najee Harris challenge similar and how is it different as far as trying to stop him?

Najee is a great running back. I remember seeing him in high school when we were at the opening. Great, dynamic running back, very powerful, big running back, great speed.

Like, again, we have a challenge ahead of us. When you get into this March Madness your talent is going to equate, and so it's just how well you're going to execute, like Coach Day says, and be able to execute the game plan.

We have a great challenge ahead of us and he's a great running back, and he brings a lot of different versatile dynamic to their offense.

This offensive line just won the Joe Moore Award for the best offensive line in the country, and you may disagree, it sounded like Pete did, but the challenge of going against an offensive line that is that good, is that something that excites you guys as a defensive line, gets you going? Not to take away anything from other guys, but just to play against what is considered the top offensive line in the country? Does that give you a little more animated for this game?

You know, we've got to play our best. This offensive line that we're playing, if they're the best, they're the best. That just makes me more excited. You want to play the best.

They're a great offensive line, very athletic, very fast, very big O-line. I'm more than excited.

I don't think there's anything to motivate yourself that you need to be motivated to play a great offense and offensive line.

With the line of scrimmage, and obviously that was such a big key for you guys in beating Clemson in the semifinals, how big do you think that is once again here to have a chance to beat Alabama?

It'll be won in the trenches, no doubt. Games like this will be won up front. If you can't move offensive and defensive lines then you have no chance at winning in my opinion.

You know, offensive linemen and defensive linemen are unsung heroes, so we might not get the glamorous, the flash, but it's won up front. The better front is going to win this game.

Could you speak to the communication skills and the ability to teach and what makes Larry Johnson unique that way?

What do you mean by —

Well, there's coaches and coaches. What makes Larry Johnson a good teacher? I'm assuming he's a good teacher and good at teaching technique especially, communicating.

I'd say each year it's something different. He puts his flavor on that D-line he has that year and what he wants to get done. The way that he teaches is very clear. It's very straightforward. He doesn't do all the rah-rah. He touches your soul.

What do you mean by that?

He touches your soul as in like when you give — it's to the point where like I trust him in anything and I believe in it. Once you believe in him and everything that he is telling you and teaching you, it'll make your game excel, and I think that it's a true testament to who he is.

When he gives you his word and you trust in it, the sky's the limit.

Knowing what you went through before you even got into a game this year and what you had to come back from, does you and the Buckeyes making it this far make it even sweeter for you personally this year?

Yeah, not only as the team faced adversity, but I myself — every guy has faced different adversities and has a different path within themselves and us as a team. Everybody's sacrifice and willingness to go through trials and tribulations this season alone will make it all worth it.

I want to ask you about Tyreke Smith. He's always been a guy who's flashed and shown that ability, but it seems like the last — late in the season he's really become more consistent and a dominant force. What have you seen in him and his development?

You know, I mean, I think we've become more tight knit as a D-line. The ends are kind of — they do their thing and they have their own check-downs, but I feel like just overall — usually me and Tommy are on the same page, and now the ends have become more tied in with the inside guys, whereas there used to be kind of a disconnect because they have their own reads.

But now almost every guy knows every position, even the inside guys. So the connection there has allowed us and allowed him to play faster. His knowledge of the game has enhanced, and he knows when he has one-on-ones, when he doesn't, and what is behind him and where his hope is.

I feel that with more games go on he's becoming more dominant. It's a true testament to how he's playing.

Sixth-year senior linebacker Justin Hilliard:

As you guys get ready to go against Najee Harris, how important is it to spend that little split second from a read standpoint, trust your eyes, et cetera, and how well do they use him in that regard of getting the defense to hesitate maybe just a little split second that can sometimes spring open those wide receivers?

Yeah, I think it's obviously not a secret that Najee Harris is one of the most dynamic running backs in college football, and it's something we haven't taken lightly. I think the biggest thing this week is just discipline and focus. We need guys staying in their gaps. We need guys running to the ball. And like I said last week, if we get 11 guys running to the ball every play, I think we'll be all right.

How much more special is the opportunity to play in the National Championship game at this

stage in your career kind of at the end of this long Ohio State tenure for you as opposed to if you would have had the chance to play in the National Championship game even last year or in your first couple years?

Yeah, I think this year especially it just means so much more. It kind of came full circle for me. When I first was being recruited by Ohio State in 2014, they were coming off a National Championship win, and then six years later in my last year here, we're right back here.

In that regard it is special, just for me playing in my last game, this being my last week of preparation. A lot of these seniors and a lot of the other guys are well aware that this is our last game and we're pouring everything we have into it.

You mentioned Harris at the beginning there. It almost feels like he's kind of somewhat underrated because of all the talent they have. What do you think of him as a player watching film and just how dynamic he is?

I mean, I'd be surprised to say he's underrated. I think he's one of the most respected running backs in college football. I mean, he puts that on film. He's done it — he can make guys miss, he can run with power, he can catch out of the backfield, and obviously we haven't taken that lightly this week in our preparation.

As athletes when guys get hurt, as you unfortunately well know, your teammates feel sorry for each other, but you also know that that guy just physically can't get out there on the field. I'm curious from a mental standpoint this year when you guys have encountered these COVID absences, is that a different kind of mental grind on a team, kind of the sympathy you feel for each other knowing a guy could physically get out there and play but isn't allowed to because of the circumstances?

Yeah, I think with this year especially it's a lot different because of the COVID stuff. Guys feel like they're able to play but they can't play just because they have COVID, so it's real tough.

I think the biggest toll it has on a team is getting guys to focus and getting guys to know they have to step up. I think that is something that we've done a great job of this year is our leadership, and our younger guys know that when someone goes down it's next man up, and they have to be at that level or even better when they come in.

You chose to stay closer to home and go to Ohio State. I was wondering what it would mean to you to bring home a National Championship.

Yeah, so much. When I was getting recruited, I think that was the main thing that went into my decision is that I wanted to stay in Ohio. I wanted to be near my family. I wanted to be near my friends. Yeah, that's one of the main motivators on how I stayed here so long and how I pushed through, is the family, the friends, the teammates I have here in Ohio, and I think it would be so special to bring one back again.

You've said it a couple times that this would be the last game on Monday night. Is there no part of you that's intrigued by year seven?

I'm so surprised I'm getting a lot of these questions. Even some of my family asked me recently if I'm

staying for a seventh. I mean, at this point I'm completely have the intentions on this being my last game. It's been an incredible journey, but I just don't know how much more I can give to Ohio State.

Reflecting on your time at Ohio State, what's your biggest takeaway as a student-athlete leading up to this moment?

Biggest takeaway? I would say the things that I've learned here is just perseverance, leaning on others. I think when I got here I was kind of all to myself and refused help sometimes. Honestly, I don't think a lot of people would be in this situation where they are here if it wasn't for coaches, for teammates, players, family to push them through. I have so many people to thank after this year is over with.

Yeah, I've learned so much. I can honestly say I think a lot of us that are leaving here are not the same man now that they were when they came in.

I'm not sure how much you played in the first quarter of the Clemson game or not, but seems like you got in there in the second quarter and made an immediate impact, hit Rodgers on the slant pass, and that was a key point in the game for you guys. You got some stops, didn't allow them to score, and the team went from down 7 to up 21 at halftime. Do you feel like you created a spark for the defense and helped kind of turned the tide in that game? That was the critical part of the game where you guys took the lead and you had stops in the second and third quarter that stopped drives for them. What's your thought about what you brought in that critical part of the game where your defense played its best ball?

Yeah, I'm not going to sit here and say that I was the main reason for that spark in our defense, but every time I get in the game my mindset is to make an impact, make an impact wherever I can. I'm glad to say that I have teammates like Shaun (Wade), I have teammates like Haskell (Garrett), I have teammates like Zach (Harrison), I have teammates like Pete (Werner), Tuf (Borland), who are also out there playing as hard as hell and running to the ball and making our jobs a lot easier.

As a veteran you've been through the coaching change and you've spend a lot of time with Urban, with Coach Meyer, and a lot of time with Coach (Ryan) Day. Why do you think Coach Day was a good change of pace, a good replacement, for Coach Meyer? What was different about his leadership style that maybe was a good complement or built off of what Coach Meyer laid?

Yeah, Coach Meyer and Coach Day are two elite, elite coaches. They're not the same. They have their own approach, and I think that's what makes them such strong coaches. Coach Meyer in a lot of ways laid the foundation for the culture we have now, and a lot of those things, a lot of his sayings and teachings still are here today, like the 4680 been getting guys — so first when they come on campus, the first emphasis is getting guys to go hard, and that's still in our culture here today.

Then I think Coach Day even more so brought an atmosphere of love, an atmosphere of brotherhood I think to Ohio State that's special right now, and I think that only enhanced our culture in the last couple years.

You talked about the possibility of bringing a national title home to Ohio. Obviously when you're sitting there going through some of those injuries you went through, how often did the thought cross your mind of, okay, maybe this isn't for me; maybe I won't get these type of opportunities? And how glad are you that you stuck with it, persevered, and got to this point

where you're a key contributor heading into this game?

Yeah, my journey here has been, I guess, so interesting. I've had so many times where, like you said, I didn't know if I was going to be able to push through.

I think the first three years here at Ohio State were probably the toughest, because year after year I had a biceps tear on my right and then biceps tear on my left again. After that, after injuries started stacking up, I had those thoughts in my mind was I going to keep playing. I think a lot of times when you hear like three- or four-, six-month season-ending injuries, a lot of people usually call it quits.

Yeah, I thought about that, but I'm so thankful for the teammates I have here, for the coaches, Coach Meyer especially. I think in that time I was going through a lot of those injuries he was pushing me through. All my position coaches, D-coordinators in the past, I'm so lucky to have them, because honestly, if it wasn't for some of those conversations I had with them and with my family and teammates, I honestly probably wouldn't still be playing.

Fourth-year junior cornerback Shaun Wade:

You and Patrick Surtain are considered among the best corners in the nation. Does the fact that he's going to be on display out there, too, add motivation to you to play the game of your life on Monday?

Really no. I'm just worried about winning this game and that's all. That's the motivation right there, is trying to win a National Championship.

What have you seen from Sevn as the season has gone on? It seems like he just keeps getting better and stronger in coverage with every game that he plays.

Yeah, Sevn just keeps on getting better and keeps on working on his craft every day. That's what we've been doing at practice. Sevn is going to be a great player in the future and he just keeps on getting better, so really proud of him.

When you committed to Ohio State it was pretty soon after they won the national title in '15 and beat Alabama. How monumental was that win by the Buckeyes over Alabama and your decision to commit?

I remember that. I remember that whole day. That was very special, that day, winning against Alabama and everything and just committing on that day. It seems like history repeats itself. We had a freshman from — not a freshman, but a native out of Jacksonville just committed, and now I'm in the same situation. And he plays cornerback. It's just crazy how everything works, and just really looking forward to this game.

Mac was talking earlier about you two playing 7-on-7 together. Just kind of curious what you remember about him in high school. I know people have said he was always super confident. Any kind of specific memories of practices and stuff like that?

Yeah, Mac knows how it is, my guy, playing against him — I mean, not playing against him, but playing with him 7-on-7 in high school, it's just a blessing in disguise both of the places that we chose. And just us playing against each other in this game, it is a blessing.

I've been knowing Mac for a long time, Money Making Mac, that's what we called him. He is a confident guy in just how he is. He's a hard worker and great quarterback, and really looking forward to playing against him this week.

In what ways have you seen Lathan Ransom prove himself in the role he's taken on the last couple weeks?

Lathan is going to be a great player here in the future. A couple weeks ago — not even a couple weeks, last week for the Clemson game he texted me. He was like, Can we go over some stuff in the nickel position, stuff that you did last year? We came up here, it's like 6:00 in the afternoon, just me and him. I'm just preaching to him, man, you're going to be a great player. Just play with confidence. You're going to do some great things.

That just hit him in a different way he told me after the game. I already know he's going to be a great player. He works hard. He's always in the film. Always asking just to do extra stuff and different things like that, so the sky's the limit for Lathan, and I'm really looking forward to his future.

I'm curious what you've seen of Alabama's John Metchie on film and what challenges will he present to you guys and the Ohio State defense.

He's a great player, another freshman out of Alabama. Great player. He's bigger than a lot of receivers that I see. He reminds me of Waldo a little bit about how the hair is and their body size and everything.

But he's a great player, very quick step, fast, will block, so you've got to get off blocks with him. He's a great player and he's going to have a good future for him, too.

Every cornerback measures himself by what they can do one-on-one. Out of all those players at Alabama, who do you want? Who do you want a chance to go up against?

You already know who I want to go up against at the end of the day. But at the end of the day we're just focused on this win and the way of getting the win. At the end of the day, what Coach Coombs says every day is we've got to win by one point to get the National Championship.

That's the obstacle. At the end of the day we've got to put the best on the best and just go from there, play different things, and just go from there.

I'm assuming that's DeVonta you want to go against.

Yeah.

How much do you want to — look forward to that challenge of going against the Heisman Trophy winner in the National Championship game? And just a quickie on Marcus Williamson. He said he's going to come back. What do you foresee for him next year?

DeVonta is a very great player, quick and shifty and fast. You see it on his highlights. He can do everything in the book as a receiver, and just really looking for that match-up at the end of the day. Just want to win that game.

And then with Marcus just coming back next year is a good thing for him and that DB group, just having a leader and somebody that's older that's been through the program so many years, just leading them

boys with him, as them being the older guys in the room.

Going back to your time playing with Mac Jones in 7-on-7, he said you really had his back at that time. I know for a while he wasn't highly recruited. What can you kind of expound on in terms of having his back, and what did you see from him then that told you he could be a guy that could come to Alabama and do what he's done now?

Mac always knew we had his back at the end of the day with that whole 7-on-7 group. We always took care of him because he was the guy that went to Bolles, and everybody else was the guy that went to either the Raines or the Ribault or the lower schools in the local Jacksonville area.

We made sure that Mac was — everything was good with him. We made sure everything was just good with him.

From 7-on-7 we always knew that Mac was a great quarterback. He put the ball in the right spots just like he's doing now, strong arm. He's going to talk. Just that's how Mac is. Just really, really looking forward to seeing him Monday and just playing against him.

All season you've been lined up against some of the top wide receivers in all of college football, but every day at practice you got to line up against Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson and some of those guys. How have some of those guys helped you prepare for some bigger match-ups like DeVonta Smith and guys like that?

Just the comparison, Olave is one of the greatest in college football in my opinion. A lot of people probably don't talk about him like that, but in my opinion he's one of the greatest receivers in college football in these decades.

Just going against him and competing against them every day, I feel like Olave and DeVonta have some similarities in height and length and stuff like that.

But just them making me better, I'm making them better, and we just keep on competing.

Obviously you guys, you gave up a couple touchdowns early against Clemson, and then you guys kind of straightened things out. What do you think enabled you guys to do that, and how important is it for you guys to be able to do that again against an Alabama offense that's this explosive?

Really we just focus on getting our stops at the end of the day. Playing against teams like this, they're going to end up scoring. That's a part of game. You see it in the NFL. Everybody scores. You barely see a game where a team scores zero points.

So just playing games like this, you just got to get your stops, and make sure you get to your stops on 3rd down, so that's what we focus on. We focus on just playing every play, playing each play one at a time and not focusing on the next play in the past. Just play the play that's there right now.

I was just wondering, in the last several games especially it seems like Josh Proctor has come along as the straw that stirs the drink for you. Have you seen that evolution by him, and how big a role do you see him playing on Monday night?

Josh is going to play a big role on Monday night being that safety in the back end for us. Like I've always told you, Josh is a playmaker. He's made plays. He's a ballhawk. He's always around the ball, and that's the type of safety a lot of people want in this generation that we're in.

Really looking forward to Josh making some plays on Monday and just being Josh, and that's what we need him to be is just be Josh and that's all.

You mentioned DeVonta. He's obviously had a great, great year. Nobody has stopped him. Especially when you look at what he's done recently, it's just been off the charts. What is your confidence level that you can at least contain him or slow him down?

Really all I care about is winning the game, and if we win by one point, that's all I care about. That's all I care about is just winning by one point at the end of the day and just getting this National Championship.

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