

Ohio State Expecting Denzel Burke To Turn Things Around As Season Progresses



It's not been the start to the season that anyone envisioned for sophomore cornerback Denzel Burke. He came on the scene as a true freshman for Ohio State last year, eventually starting all 13 games for the Buckeyes and leading the team with 13 pass breakups in addition to 36 tackles. For his effort, he was named a freshman All-American by several publications and earned third-team all-Big Ten honors.

Many expected him to keep that streak going into this year, as he was named to the preseason watch list for the Jim Thorpe Award, given annually to the top defensive back in the country. But through the first two games of the season, Burke has seen struggles in coverage.

The most notable miss was against Arkansas State, in which Burke allowed a 58-yard reception to Red Wolves wideout Champ Flemings, who stands at just 5-6 and 155 pounds.

Burke was matched up with Flemings on the outside, and a stutter step from Flemings gave him as many as five yards of separation before pulling in the reception. Burke then slid off Flemings on a tackle attempt, and it was only because of a shoestring tackle by safety Lathan Ransom that Flemings did not find the end zone.

Early season returns from Burke have not been positive, but the staff - including head coach Ryan Day — believe he will turn things around.

"Denzel is very, very talented. And you guys see what he's capable of," Day said. "I think that he's gonna keep working to get better, and he certainly has some plays he wants back, but we're all confident that he will and he's ready to make those plays. But at the same time, he's got to identify what those things are that got him jammed up on those plays, and make the adjustments from there."

Defensive coordinator Jim Knowles was more pointed in his assessment of Burke, and went to bat for his player.

"Denzel is fine," Knowles said. "Those guys at corner, they live on an island. It's something that 99.99

percent of the population could never do. It's a really tough, competitive situation. Sometimes you get into a little bit of a slump. You come out, reassess; he went back in and did better. So I think he's on track.

"When you're in such a high-pressure position, you're going to have some ups and downs," he continued. "And it's really natural. And he's got a great attitude. And we trust him."

Even if Ohio State was looking for another option at cornerback, depth in that position was thin entering the season, and especially so after Jordan Hancock was made unavailable for the Arkansas State game. Hancock is expected back this week, but in his stead, cornerback JK Johnson got some extended playing time in the second half against the Red Wolves.

"JK's done a really good job," Day said. "JK has a lot of skill. He can really run. It means a lot to him. He's practiced well, he's done a good job. I think that's one of the things that, whether it's preseason or during the season, the only way you get better is to practice.

"That sounds like a cliché from a coach, but it's true," he continued. "JK has practiced, and because of that, he's allowed himself the opportunity to get out there and earn some snaps. Now what he does with those snaps is going to be between him and (cornerbacks coach Tim Walton), but I think you see his capability."

Ohio State was also able to get freshman cornerback Jyaire Brown into the game for his first action, but the depth at cornerback is still a work in progress.

"We'd love to have Jordan back. I think he can really add to that. It is what it is," Knowles said. "We're working with the guys we have and they're giving us everything that they have and we're going to keep getting better."