Position Battles Looming At Safety

The position that drives coordinator Jim Knowles' defense has some unanswered personnel questions as Ohio State enters spring.

Two starters are gone, multiple veterans return, some highly-anticipated youth is seeking playing time and a transfer portal acquisition looks to factor in.

After racking up 152 tackles over the past two seasons, former captain and "adjuster" safety Ronnie Hickman has departed from the OSU secondary to pursue his NFL dreams. So too is nickel safety Tanner McCalister, the Oklahoma State transfer who had the most experience in Knowles' scheme.

The above-mentioned "adjuster" position functions as a free safety in Knowles' scheme, responsible for a lot of over-the-top coverage. One of the presumptive favorites to take the spot over this season is fourth-year Lathan Ransom, who played OSU's boundary safety or "bandit" position in 2022.

Ransom collected 74 tackles in 2022, the most of all the team's defensive backs, adding an interception, three pass breakups and two blocked punts.

Each of the Buckeyes' safeties learn each of the three safety spots in the team's defense. That being said, the only player returning who spent most of his time at adjuster in 2022 is rising second-year Kye Stokes. Stokes made a huge impression in last year's spring game with 10 tackles and two pass breakups, but didn't see much in the way of action during the regular season.

Stokes could make a push for playing time in 2023, however, especially if Ransom stays at bandit. If Ransom does slide over, however, there's a long list of candidates to replace him.

Rising second-year Sonny Styles is a former five-star recruit who left high school a year early to kickstart his development. After arriving in the summer, he progressed enough over the course of the 2022 season to play meaningful snaps in the College Football Playoff semifinal game against No. 1 Georgia.

That saw him play down in the box almost like a third linebacker, showcasing the versatility the central Ohio product possesses. It could allow him to play at any of the three safety spots, but bandit seems his

most natural.

Another important factor to mention at both adjuster and bandit is graduate Josh Proctor, who used his COVID-19 waiver to return for a sixth and final year in Columbus. Proctor showed promise at free safety in Ohio State's defense in 2021, picking up 10 tackles in two games and change, before a broken leg cost him the rest of the season. He started at bandit for a series against Notre Dame last season, but missed a tackle and was immediately usurped by Ransom. Proctor still saw meaningful reps as the season progressed, however, ending with 21 tackles and two pass breakups.

Rising fourth-year Kourt Williams also returns at bullet after an injury cost him his 2022 season. A one-time captain, it'll be intriguing to see if he can factor into the competition for a starting spot when fully healthy.

That leaves nickel, where Syracuse transfer Ja'Had Carter looks to step in for McCalister. Carter picked up 36 tackles and three interceptions for the Orange while playing more than half his snaps in the slot in 2022, though he also saw run at cornerback and deep safety.

Rising fourth-year Cam Martinez started at nickel last season when McCalister was injured and still got some meaningful reps when both were healthy, picking up 15 tackles.

There's a lot to shake out at safety for the Buckeyes in 2023, and getting the right combination of players on the field could make a big difference for the defense.