

Previewing The Spring: Defensive Tackles Looking To Step Forward



Buckeye Sports Bulletin is previewing every position on Ohio State's roster leading into the beginning of spring practice, which is set to begin on March 7. Check back every week day for a new breakdown on how the spring might play out for the Buckeyes.

As Ohio State's defense in general looks to take a jump in 2023, its centerpieces up front will look to do the same.

It wasn't a bad year for the Buckeyes' defensive tackles in 2022, but with key players back healthy and a couple intriguing rising sophomores the depth of the group provides plenty of talent and intrigue.

"I think the inside guys played great (in 2022). I really do," defensive line coach Larry Johnson said Feb. 1. "I thought they really played physically at the point of attack. They moved the line of scrimmage. They attacked. I thought they were factors in a lot of games the way they played inside."

Taron Vincent is the biggest departure from the room, one of its regular starters who collected 25 tackles, 2½ tackles for loss and half a sack last season. Jerron Cage, who picked up 12 tackles in rotational duty, has also exhausted his eligibility.

Perhaps the biggest name returning will be junior Mike Hall Jr. Hall exploded onto the scene in 2022 in week 1 against then-No. 5 Notre Dame, with four tackles, three of them for loss and a sack. He followed that up with a three-TFL, one-sack performance against Arkansas State the next week.

Injuries limited Hall the rest of the year. He collected 2½ sacks despite playing just seven snaps against Michigan State. He never reached 20 snaps in any of the team's final four games, indications being that a shoulder injury limited him.

Questions also still linger about whether he'll play one-technique (outside shoulder of the opposing

center) or three-technique (outside shoulder of an offensive guard) defensive tackle for Ohio State in 2023, or both. The majority of his production came while in three-technique last season, and he told BSB during the year that it's where he preferred to rush quarterbacks from. He appeared in the one-technique a majority of the time in the back half of the year, however.

"He struggled with (the injury)," Johnson said. "We tried to bring him back, get him to recover a little bit. But it's an ongoing thing when that happens and hopefully we get him healthy now in the offseason so he'll play a full season."

"Mike is a different dimension, what he can do. We'll figure it out, but I think Mike's a starter somewhere. We've just got to find a place to get him on the field."

When Hall was limited, Ty Hamilton filled in, and the redshirt junior should be a factor going forward for Ohio State. His numbers weren't as great as Hall's, recording less tackles, tackles for loss and sacks despite playing more snaps over the course of the season, but coaches were a fan of his technique and gap integrity. Particularly against the run.

"Ty's like a cold-blooded gentleman, I guess I would say," defensive coordinator Jim Knowles said in November. "Quiet, good smile, but he's just really tough inside and he's athletic. I've seen him use his hands and get off blocks and make plays. Not only hold point, but I've seen his hand skills really developing. He's earned more playing time."

Junior Tyleik Williams will be right alongside Hall and Hamilton competing for a starter's share of the snaps. As the biggest of the three at 318 pounds, he could be the most obvious candidate for one-technique.

As a freshman Williams rarely played but made impressions when he did in 2021, picking up five sacks, second-most on the team. In 10 games last campaign he made 21 tackles with 2½ going for loss and one sack.

Two rising sophomores will also be looking for playing time. Caden Curry could factor in at either three-technique defensive tackle or defensive end, and he picked up 14 tackles in garbage time last season. Hero Kanu redshirted but was a prospect Johnson thought very highly of out of high school and the combination of his athleticism and a 6-4, 305-pound frame is intriguing.

"I'm excited to see what happens with the young guys as they progress," Johnson said.

Ohio State's defensive tackles will start the competition for improvement and playing time with the rest of the team March 7.