

Previewing The Spring: Opportunities Abound At Defensive End



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.

Ohio State has several questions that will need answered at defensive end – and, accordingly, at the Jack, the hybrid defensive end/linebacker position – entering the spring, where returning players and some rising stars will all be vying for time on the field.

The Buckeyes' main objective is replacing Zach Harrison, who completed his fourth and final season in Columbus this past fall. He led Ohio State's defensive line with 34 tackles while adding eight tackles for loss, 3.5 sacks, four pass breakups, three forced fumbles and an interception, starting all 13 games for the Buckeyes. Ohio State is also losing Javontae Jean-Baptiste, who racked up four sacks.

Harrison is currently going through the pre-draft process as he prepares for his name to be called at the 2023 NFL Draft, but luckily for Ohio State, there's another future draftee on the roster in J.T. Tuimoloau, who is entering his junior season for the Buckeyes and primed for a big year.

Tuimoloau broke out last season with 10.5 tackles for loss and 3.5 sacks to go with a pair of interceptions – one returned for a touchdown – four pass breakups and a forced fumble and recovery. He started opposite Harrison but was able to garner plenty of headlines, including his performance against Penn State in which he totaled six tackles, two sacks, two interceptions, a forced fumble and recovery as well as the aforementioned touchdown.

His status as the top dog for Ohio State's defensive line is certain, but there remain several questions behind him on the depth chart. Most notable is the status of Jack Sawyer, who repped most of last season at the Jack, finishing with just 24 tackles (6.5 for loss) with a team-leading 4.5 sacks.

Sawyer never seemed to take hold at the position, unable to take the same jump that Tuimoloau, a fellow sophomore, saw playing on the edge. Given that Ohio State is looking to replace several true edge rushers, defensive line coach Larry Johnson said it's a possibility that Sawyer moves back to defensive end, but either way, he'd like to see Sawyer settle at one position.

"We're going to try to slow that down a little bit," Johnson said. "Get him in a position where he can go

hone his skills. If that means Jack or playing regular defensive end, I think we've got to make that decision and go for it. I think we'll do a little bit in the spring, just try to get him a home and let him go play."

The first choice behind Tuimoloau or Sawyer - whether at defensive end or the Jack - is sophomore Caden Curry, who nabbed 14 tackles and half a sack in his freshman season while appearing in all 13 games. Much of the spring is projecting what Ohio State's depth chart will look like, but Johnson was clear on Curry's standing.

"Caden will go into the offseason at number two on the depth chart at defensive end. I don't want to move him," Johnson said. "I want him to learn how to play that position and play it well. I think he's got a good chance to really be a factor for us now as he settles in going into the second year."

So while Curry could factor in at defensive end or the Jack, Johnson hopes to keep him strictly at defensive end. Johnson pointed to Curry's motor as the biggest reason for his rise.

"You've seen all the JTs and the Jacks play, but one guy I am excited about is Caden Curry," he said. "I'm excited to see what he does. He's a guy that stands out to me as a really good player."

Outside of Curry, a pair of redshirt freshmen round out the remaining depth at defensive end. Kenyatta Jackson and Omari Abor played sparingly last season, with Abor rehabbing a knee injury for most of the year, but Johnson saw flashes from both as they look to break into the rotation for the Buckeyes.

"I really like KJ," Johnson said. "KJ's done a great job for us (and) has some really, really good pass rush ability. Omari's really strong, really physical guy. He's up to 265 (pounds), came in at 240."