

Previewing The Spring: Starting Cornerbacks Still In Flux



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.

Entering spring practice, perhaps no position on Ohio State's roster is less settled than at cornerback, where the Buckeyes have several notable contributors fighting for just two starting jobs under defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and cornerbacks coach Tim Walton.

Ohio State's roster features seven players on scholarship entering the spring, including juniors Denzel Burke and Jordan Hancock, sophomores Jyaire Brown and Davidson Igbinosun, redshirt freshman Ryan Turner and true freshmen Jermaine Mathews Jr. and Calvin Simpson-Hunt. Igbinosun, who transferred to Ohio State from Ole Miss, as well as Simpson-Hunt, will both join the team in the summer.

Burke is the lone returning starter for Ohio State after Cameron Brown departed for the NFL after this past season, but in the spirit of competition, Walton said nothing is locked in for anyone - including Burke - regarding a starting role.

"He's a returning starter. Nothing's locked in," Walton said. "He's been playing for a couple years now, so he's the guy that has the most experience in the room. But you know how that is. You have to keep growing and building on that."

Burke saw struggles throughout his sophomore season, especially in the first half of the year, as he dealt with injuries and general inconsistency after a stellar freshman season for Ohio State. Despite the early challenge, Burke recovered to turn in a fine season for the Buckeyes, and was the least of Ohio State's problems on defense over the final few games.

"He did a good job toward the end of the year, started doing a little better," Walton said. "Obviously he had the stuff that he had to work through. But that's part of it. It's a tough sport. It's what we sign up for. We've just got to try to manage and help navigate it."

And while Burke is the only returning player to start the majority of games last season for Ohio State, he is not the only cornerback in the room that brings starting experience. Brown and Hancock were both forced into action last season and started several games for the Buckeyes, making them both contenders to potentially take a starting role opposite Burke.

“He’s growing,” Walton said of Brown. “He’s in a good mental space. You just have to now go continue to grow with it and put that into action.”

But the most likely contender to start opposite Burke is Igbinosun, who started 10 games last season for the Rebels. He was named a freshman All-American after recording 37 tackles and five pass breakups, and while he’ll be arriving at Ohio State later than other cornerbacks in the room, his starting experience gives him a leg up over the competition.

While Walton was unable to speak directly on Igbinosun on Feb. 1 since he had yet to enroll, he said the additions Ohio State makes out of the portal are all to boost competition within the room.

“You try to bring the best guys in, and you try to bring guys in with high character, great competitors, great work ethic, the love for the game, want to play at the highest level, and then it always sorts its way out,” he said.

Ohio State is also welcoming in an exciting pair of freshmen in Mathews and Simpson-Hunt, and with Mathews joining the Buckeyes as an early enrollee, he’s already made an impression as he pushes for playing time in his first campaign.

“He just he just has it,” Walton said. “He has that ‘it’ factor of playing the game. So now go develop it, groom it, get it ready for the next level because it’s a different step, but he has a natural confidence and a natural knack for the ball and being able to be a football player. Looking forward to working with him.”