

Recruiting Pitches Of Head Coach Ryan Day, Secondary Coach Tim Walton Draw Safety Caleb Downs To Ohio State



Coming off a spectacular 2023 season at Alabama where he became the first true freshman in program history to lead the Crimson Tide in tackles with 107 and was named the SEC Freshman of the Year, safety Caleb Downs was a hot commodity in the crowded 2024 transfer portal.

Regarded as the No. 1 transfer in all of college football, Downs said he received 102 phone calls — and answered about 80 of them — from teams interested in signing him in a span of seven or eight hours when he first announced his decision to leave Alabama on Jan. 18 amid the retirement of head coach Nick Saban.

“(The transfer portal was like) recruiting on steroids,” Downs said at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on Tuesday.

While the sheer amount of attention and interest on the freshman may intimidate any 19-year-old athlete, Downs said he instead stayed true to his principles and relied on the people who knew best to help him make a decision.

“You pretty much have to go silent,” Downs said. “You have to be able to control your circle in terms of getting your opinions from people that you trust and people that you count on. So that was the biggest thing for me, just being able to understand what the people around me were thinking and how I wanted to go about it.”

This was a strategy that ultimately led him to Columbus this winter, where he will join forces with a veteran Ohio State defense that finished the regular season ranked second in the nation in points allowed at 11.0. Speaking with the Ohio State beat for the first time since transferring to Ohio State on Jan. 19, the former Alabama safety said he made the decision to join the Buckeyes this season due to the trust and belief both secondary coach Tim Walton and head coach Ryan Day showed in him when they met with Downs earlier this month.

Downs stated that this was a similar takeaway he had about Ohio State when Day and the program

initially recruited him as a five-star recruit out of Hoschton (Ga.) Mill Creek High School in 2023, which allowed him to see the program as one he can put his trust in as he moves forward in his football career. Ohio State landed in the final three of Downs' high school recruitment alongside the Tide and Georgia, the latter who was also interested in adding the safety through the transfer portal this offseason.

"(Day) was the same person," Downs said. "He was very genuine when I was getting recruited in high school, and he was very genuine when I talked to him two weeks ago. (I understood) that he's about the people that he works with and he believes in the people that he's around. Just knowing that and knowing what he stands for, that means a lot."

"(Walton is a) very genuine person," he added. "He always keeps it straight with you. Everything that he says has come to fruition, so I can't knock him on anything. He's very close to my pops, too. They grew up together. So just knowing that relationship with him and our relationship together, I trusted him."

Aside from the cultural fit, Downs said he also saw himself meshing with the program from a football standpoint, where he will likely assume a starting role in defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' safety-driven 4-2-5 scheme. Downs told the media that while he anticipates himself playing more at the adjuster position — which was occupied by former Ohio State safety Josh Proctor in 2023 — he knows that Knowles will put both him and his teammates in the best position to succeed regardless of where he lines up in 2024.

"(He's) very intelligent, for sure," Downs said. "He sees a lot, and he has an answer for everything in terms of what teams can bring him. The different ways that he plays defenses, that will allow me to develop in different ways."

"I expect us to be one of the best (defenses)," Downs said. "I expect us to excel and be better than what they were last year. I expect us to be elite."

No matter what position he occupies at Ohio State, the former Alabama safety said he is confident in his ability to thrive in the Scarlet and Gray next season. This feeling comes from the years of preparation and practice he endured while growing up in a football family in Hoschton, Ga., which he thinks has positioned himself to do great things on the gridiron with the Buckeyes.

"(Ohio State has) the same expectations that I've had my whole life," Downs said. "The same expectations that we had at Bama. To win games and dominate every game and go win a championship."

"I've been training with my dad and my brother since I was four or five years old," he added. "So I don't want to say I was built for this, but at the end of the day, I've been doing this since I was a kid. So there's really been no change."