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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

March 16, 2024

Whirlwind Offseason Sets Stage For Big Spring

By **BRADEN MOLES**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

A new starting quarterback. A new offensive coordinator. Another new offensive coordinator. It's been a hectic offseason for Ohio State, but as the calendar flipped to March 5, everyone was able to take a welcome reprieve from the insanity and shift their collective focus to one thing and one thing only: spring football.

It figured to be a significant offseason for the Buckeyes coming off a third consecutive loss to Michigan and a disappointing loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl, but it took time to actually begin that work to right those wrongs. While January and February are normally spent deep in recruiting and beginning early preparation for the upcoming season, Ohio State was instead mired in carousels of both the coaching and transfer variety.

In addition to high-profile transfers from the likes of former Kansas State quarterback Will Howard, Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins and Alabama safety Caleb Downs – all figuring to factor in significantly to Ohio State's pursuit of a national championship – the program pursued an experienced offensive coordinator who would take play-calling responsibilities off head coach Ryan Day's plate. The move would allow Day to embrace the ever-growing CEO mind-set that has become common throughout college football, opening him up to handle more big-picture elements within the program.

The Buckeyes thought they found an answer in longtime NFL and college coach Bill O'Brien, who was announced on Jan. 19 as the team's next offensive coordinator. But the ink had barely dried on O'Brien's contract with the Buckeyes when Boston College announced on Feb. 4 that it had hired



BACK TO WORK

SONNY BROCKWAY

SPRING HAS SPRUNG – Ohio State officially began spring practice on March 5, one of 15 practice sessions that will culminate in the annual spring game on April 13. Over the next few weeks, the Buckeyes will lay the foundation for what they hope is a championship season.

O'Brien – whose family lives in the area – to fill the head coaching position left by former Ohio State assistant Jeff Hafley.

"It was definitely the quickest kind of turnaround I think I've had in offensive coordinators," Howard said on March 4. "But

we totally understand Coach O'Brien had to do what he had to do. It made a lot of sense for him and his family."

Just hours after O'Brien's announced departure, the Buckeyes announced his replacement in longtime head coach Chip Kelly, who elected to leave his head coaching position at UCLA to become the offensive coordinator at Ohio State.

It was surprising due to Kelly's position at UCLA, but beyond that, it made sense given that Day and Kelly go back all the way to their days growing up in New Hampshire, and with Day later playing under Kelly at the University of New Hampshire and coaching under him in the NFL.

"He and I have always had a relationship," Day said on March 5. "Even when

I played for him or worked under him, we worked together and I don't look at it like he works for me. He works with me, and that's just the way I've always been. I love him and have for a long time, and I think he looks at it that way as well.

"We both want to reach a goal just like everybody else. We're fortunate to be around such a great program that has unbelievable tradition but in a place where you know we have what's in place to reach our goals next year, and I think that's what fires us both up, but everybody else on the staff as well."

With the transfers and coaching staff – including other new assistants in Matt Guerrieri for safeties and James Laurinaitis

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OPINION

OSU March Madness Focuses On QB Battle

With sincerest apologies to Jake Diebler and Kevin McGuff, who have turned their respective basketball programs into something worth watching this month, it's probably safe to say that the majority of Ohio State sports fans were a little more jazzed March 5 when spring football camp got under way.

Another safe bet is that while most fans expect the Buckeyes to contend for a national championship every season, anything short of hoisting the weird golden cylinder that passes for the College Football Playoff championship trophy next January will be seen as a failure. That's because Ryan Day harvested the cream of the crop from the transfer portal, coaxed more than a half-dozen starters into postponing their NFL careers, and brought former Oregon, UCLA and NFL head coach Chip Kelly to Columbus to coach his quarterbacks and run his offense.

It's not hyperbole to say the Buckeyes are loaded at nearly every position, and that includes the spot that garners the most attention every spring.

Day is in a bit of a unique spot in that, despite all of his portal gains, he lost his starting quarterback when Kyle McCord decided the pastoral, rolling hills of central New York were more to his liking than the white-hot spotlight of Columbus. Kelly, however, has no such problem. He starts fresh with a talented stable of quarterbacks, each of them eager to prove they can excel in Kelly's freewheeling scheme.

By now, most OSU fans know the cast of characters – Kansas State transfer Will Howard, holdovers Devin Brown and Lincoln Kienholz, true freshman Air Noland, and Alabama transfer freshman Julian Sayin. But what will be the pecking order once spring ball is finished and Day and Kelly begin to formulate their game plan for the Aug. 31 opener against Akron?

It's only my guess – as good (or bad) as anyone's – but I sincerely doubt Howard transferred to Ohio State to be a backup. In my estimation, only a failure to grasp the playbook or some kind of injury would prevent him from being the starter.

What kind of changes would that present from last year's offense? For starters, Howard is exceedingly more mobile than McCord. To be fair, McCord played much of last season on a bum ankle, and Day has become a coach reluctant to throw his quarterback in harm's way by running the ball.

Still, Howard is much more inclined to run with the football although he is unlikely to invoke memories of Justin Fields or J.T. Barrett. Despite being sacked 16 times last season, he managed to rush for 351 yards and nine TDs. Those stats tell me Howard does not have a run-first mentality but does have the ability to avoid danger.

As far as his passing is concerned, Howard appears able to do what his team needs him to do. Last season, his game totals ranged from 86 yards during a 38-21 romp at Texas Tech to 327 during a 33-30 overtime loss to Texas. He finished with 2,643 yards and 24 TDs in 12 games, modest numbers especially against most Big 12 competition – a conference not exactly known for its defense.

Standing 6-5 and weighing 242 pounds, Howard is what NFL scouts would typecast as a prototypical quarterback. The Buckeyes haven't had a starting QB who stood at least 6-5 since Cardale Jones, and they haven't had one that tall who could be considered mobile since Terrelle Pryor (who was 6-6) nearly a decade and a half ago.

Howard also brings some intangibles with him from Kansas State, such as knowing what it's like to take coaching from someone

who excels at running an offense. K-State head coach Chris Kleiman spent five seasons as head coach at North Dakota State before taking over in Manhattan in 2019, and four of those five seasons with the Bison produced FCS national championships. Two of those titles were won with Carson Wentz at quarterback, who became the No. 2 overall selection in the 2016 NFL draft.

formance that netted only 20 yards, along with taking three sacks, was certainly nothing that got anyone excited.

Of course, social media quickly introduced Brown to the brand of withering criticism that likely sent McCord packing – except Brown has decided to handle it differently.

"Honestly, I think people are cowards," he boldly told reporters on the first day of spring practice. "I think people have this thought in their own heads that I'm going to leave and I'm a quitter, but that's never been me. These people live wherever – in their mom's basement – saying stuff about me and they don't know (bleep). Excuse my language, but they don't know anything. They don't know who I am, they don't know who I've been, and that's always who I've been."

"I have all the confidence in the world. I'll never doubt myself. I'll never have any wavers in anything like that. I'm always going to think I'm the best quarterback in the room and the best quarterback in the country, so I'm going to attack it like that."

You have to admit the kid's got moxie. But moxie takes you only so far. Right now, it's time to put up or shut up.

The Rest Of The Gang

Kienholz appeared in only three games last season and was therefore able to preserve his redshirt, giving him four more years of college eligibility. That fact apparently gives him no illusions about his place on the depth chart heading into 2024.

"If I come in and I'm (the starter), then great," he said. "But if not, then I have another year to build on that. I think we all have the mentality that we all want to come in and be the guy. But I mean, honestly like right now, I don't really have an order of who's going to be who. I'm just going to keep coming in and just keep working hard."

Kienholz barely got his feet wet last season, finishing with 111 passing yards, most of that coming in the Cotton Bowl after Brown was injured. His 6-for-17 performance for 86 yards and a QBR of 77.8 against Missouri was not exactly the stuff from which legends are made, but he should not be dismissed because of such a small sample.

Meanwhile, Noland and Sayin each enter the competition burdened by the expectations that accompany five-star prospects. A quick reminder regarding recruiting stars and their relative meaning: C.J. Stroud, Fields and Pryor were each five-star prospects. So was McCord. Joe Burrow? He only merited four stars from the so-called experts.

What I know about either of the current five-star freshmen is limited.

I know that Noland threw for 10,164 yards and 126 touchdowns at his Georgia high school, his given name is Prentiss Air Noland III, and his middle name came from his father, whose basketball exploits in high school reminded some of Michael Jordan. I also know the younger Noland is left-handed, and the Buckeyes haven't had a lefty start at quarterback since Steve Bellisari nearly 25 years ago.

Sayin threw for fewer yards (7,970) and touchdowns (86) in high school than Noland but also had 218 fewer career attempts. Meanwhile, he comes to Ohio State out of the transfer portal from Alabama, a program whose recent quarterback assembly line has produced the likes of Jalen Hurts, Tua Tagovailoa and 2021 Heisman Trophy winner Bryce Young.

If Sayin was good enough for Nick Saban and the Crimson Tide, he ought to be good enough for Day and the Buckeyes.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

Viewing a highlight reel of Howard in action shows a quarterback more than capable of throwing an accurate deep ball as well as sticking his back foot in the ground to hurl a fastball over the middle. He also seems to excel at the run-pass option that has largely been missing from the Ohio State playbook since Barrett played his final game in 2017.

Of course, highlight reels feature only a sampling of the best from Howard's four seasons at Kansas State. His lowly 90.4 QB rating and minus-23 rushing yards vs. Alabama in the 2022 Sugar Bowl or his three-interception game last year against Oklahoma State – those kinds of performances typically don't show up on highlight reels.

Nevertheless, Howard accomplished what he accomplished at Kansas State without the benefit of the weapons he'll have at his disposal at Ohio State, which will feature one of college football's best array of receivers even without Marvin Harrison Jr. Add to that his ability to run the football – something that tends to paper over shortcomings along the offensive line – as well as 33 games (including 27 starts) of college experience, and Howard would seem to me to be the one to beat for the starting job.

Talking The Talk

You have to give credit to a guy like Devin Brown, who seemingly walks to the beat of a different drum. I mean, how much more attention can you bring to yourself than insisting upon wearing jersey No. 33 in tribute to NFL legend Sammy Baugh, a quarterback whose playing career ended more than 50 years before Brown was born.

Brown, who threw for nearly 8,000 yards and 85 TDs while playing high school ball in Arizona and Utah, has been praised for his athletic talents by those who have seen him in practice. But it seems like every time he gets a chance, that athleticism betrays him.

Day devised a special short-yardage package for Brown last season – not much more than a red-zone Wildcat formation, really, but it produced a 2-yard touchdown run during a 41-7 win at Purdue. A week later, Brown rolled his right ankle on a 5-yard gain against Penn State and was sidelined for the remainder of the regular season.

Following McCord's departure after the loss to Michigan, Brown earned the starting assignment against Missouri in the Cotton Bowl but scarcely had time to prove anything before another ankle injury – this one on his left side – sidelined him early in the second quarter of what wound up to be an ugly 14-3 loss.

To be honest, Brown's performance in the bowl game was a mixed bag that likely had as much to do with an underachieving offensive line as anything else. But a 4-for-6 passing per-



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PUBLISHER
Frank Moskowitz

ASSISTANT PUBLISHER
Becky Roberts

MANAGING EDITOR EMERITUS
Mark Rea

EDITOR
Braden Moles

ASSISTANT PUBLISHER EMERITUS
Karen Wachsman 1944-1999

PHOTOGRAPHY
Sonny Brockway Terry Gilliam
Kevin Dye Josh Winslow

CONTRIBUTORS

David Breithaupt Mark Schmetzer
Bill Conley Steve Siegfried
Patrick Engels Jeff Svoboda
Rich Exner Mike Wachsman
Craig Merz Greg Wilson
Bob Roehm

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVES
Paula Serra Ron Friedman

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Howard Will Not Be Handed Starting Job

Continued From Page 1

for linebackers – finally in place, the long winter months culminated with the opening of spring practice on March 5.

“No pads, but good to see a bunch of guys running around,” Day said after the first of 15 spring practice sessions that will conclude with the annual spring game on April 13. “There was good energy out there and a continuation of the offseason, which I thought was excellent.

“You can see guys moving around with purpose, but different guys are in different phases of their career. Individually, each guy has different things that they are working on. Some guys are just figuring out what to do, like ‘Where am I going?’ (with the) young guys and some newcomers. And there are guys who have been veterans who have played a lot of football, so they’re working on other things. It was a good first day. Good energy.”

The talent on the field was evident. Along with the impressive incoming transfers, Ohio State’s plethora of returning players

from last season – led by the likes of cornerback Denzel Burke, defensive ends JT Tuimolou and Jack Sawyer, running back TreVeyon Henderson and wide receiver Emeka Egbuka, among others – made for a who’s who of college football on the practice field at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center.

But for all of the future NFL draft picks participating in spring practice, Day said it’s the intangibles outside of talent that will determine Ohio State’s future.

“You look at the guys and you see the potential and it gets you really excited,” Day said. “But then as much talent as we have, it’s going to be the issues (not related to talent) that actually help us reach our goals. Once we get on the field, that’s what we focus on.

“It isn’t seeing Jeremiah (Smith) run a go (route). That’s great, but it’s the discipline of knowing what to do, it’s the focus, it’s running to the ball, its effort, its energy. It’s all the things that again, take no talent. That’s going to be the focus. It’s not about the talent anymore. That was the last couple

months. Now we need to acquire the skill and discipline it’s going to take to reach our goals, and that’s what spring is all about.”

Of all those talented players, Howard is perhaps the most intriguing player to track in the coming weeks leading up to the spring game. While Howard brings a starting pedigree from Kansas State, having thrown for 5,786 yards and 48 touchdowns yards and rushing for 921 yards and 19 more scores over four seasons, Day made it clear that everything is earned at Ohio State.

“You don’t just walk into Ohio State and think you’re going to go become the starting quarterback,” he said. “It doesn’t work that way. There’s just too much pride here. What (strength and conditioning coach) Mick Marrotti and our strength staff does here in the offseason, there’s just a lot that comes with it. You don’t just show up in the weight room and then go home. There’s a lot of accountability that happens and our guys take a lot of pride in that, and so there’s only one way to do that and that’s to earn it through respect.”

It’s a tall task for Howard as he begins his first spring with the Buckeyes, but he is no stranger to high expectations. Despite being on campus for only a couple of months, he has fully bought into the team’s culture and is hoping to help lead the team to their goals, with that journey starting this spring.

“We embrace it every day,” Howard said. “We know how much is on the line, and we know how much we’ve already given to this season and how much we’ve invested in this team. I think we had a really, really good winter, just the way the guys were bought in, the leadership that we have on this team, the amount of guys that decided to come to this program. It’s exciting. We know what’s on the line. We’re chasing that one percent every single day, and we know that our main goal is to win and to win all of them, and that’s the bottom line.”

Switching Roles

The transition for Kelly from head coach to assistant coach, despite some strange circumstances, has been a smooth one. Mostly. “(Day) makes me call him sir, though,” Kelly joked during his introductory press conference on March 5.

Kelly was unusually jovial in his first media appearance with the Buckeyes, at least relative to what you would expect of someone who has been a head coach in the NFL and college ranks for 14 of the last 15 years. But as Kelly explained, the entire reason behind his departure was to regain that pep in his step, something he realized last season that he had lost.

“I do a lot of things other people don’t do,” he said. “I don’t know if that’s right or wrong. But I think it started when we were preparing for our bowl game (against Boise State). Ryan Gunderson, who is a great quarterbacks coach, left to go to Oregon State as the coordinator, so he wasn’t there. I actually coached quarterbacks during the bowl game.

“I hadn’t actually coached a position since 2008, and my wife remarked, ‘I haven’t seen you this happy in a long time.’ And, to me, the best part of football is football. I got to do football and not do some of the things that are involved with the head coaching deal.”

After UCLA’s 35-22 win over Boise State on Dec. 16, Kelly began thinking about his future. While simply quitting was never in the cards – even if Kelly appeared to be on the hot seat entering next season had he stayed – he began exploring opportunities to step back from the ever-growing list of responsibilities that comes with being a head coach at the college level.

“It would have been the right spot to go somewhere and just coach a position again and be back with that group, because I think as a head coach, you sit in on position meetings, but then you’re always getting pulled out,” he said. “There’s other things that are involved with being a head coach, and I think it’s more of a CEO operation right now. It’s the job and the landscape. As we all know, college football has changed.”

Kelly and Hafley – the latter departing for a defensive coordinating job with the Green Bay Packers – appear to be early adopters of a growing movement, with coaches relay-

PLAYERS ON THE SPOT

Redshirt sophomore quarterback Devin Brown: Brown’s second season at Ohio State did not go according to plan, when he lost the starting quarterback job to Kyle McCord and saw the field sparingly. Then, given the chance to start in the Cotton Bowl following McCord’s transfer, he played just a quarter before going to the bench with an ankle injury.

This spring offers a reset for Brown (6-3, 213), though he faces new competition in Kansas State transfer Will Howard, the presumed starter for the Buckeyes heading into the upcoming season. Brown has remained insistent that he will not leave Ohio State – and even if he were to leave, he wouldn’t be able to enter the portal until after the spring – so he will have a chance to show why he should be in the discussion for the starting job.

It will be a tall task for Brown to compete with Howard considering the two have comparable mobility, one factor that did separate Brown from McCord last season, but Brown could have a leg up given his time spent in the program. His attempt to push Howard for the starting job is one of the key storylines this spring for Ohio State.

Junior defensive end Caden Curry: The return of Jack Sawyer (6-4, 265) and JT Tuimolou (6-4, 271) complicates things for the development of the younger duo of Curry (6-3, 260) and redshirt sophomore Kenyatta Jackson (6-5, 258), but the spring will be of particular importance for Curry as he looks to avoid becoming a forgotten man on the depth chart.

He was one of Ohio State’s most impactful freshmen in 2022 with 14 tackles and 1½ tackles for loss but did little to build on that outing this past season with just nine tackles and 3½ tackles for loss in two fewer games played. He also finished below Jackson in snaps (176 to 166) and has one less season of eligibility between the two, with Curry not taking a redshirt.

With the talent in the room – including incoming five-star freshman Eddrick Houston (6-3, 269) – this needs to be a breakout season for Curry as he rotates in for Sawyer and Tuimolou, and the foundation of that has to begin this spring.

Junior linebacker C.J. Hicks: Entering his third season at Ohio State, the former five-star Hicks (6-1, 193) is set for a pivotal set of spring practices.

Despite his pedigree coming into Ohio State, Hicks has yet to get close to the starting lineup. There have been understandable roadblocks during that time, including veterans such as Tommy Eichenberg and Steele Chambers ahead of him on the depth chart, but

Hicks – especially with fellow junior Sonny Styles (6-4, 230) moving to linebacker – is still not a guarantee to see the field for extensive time this season.

His play has not been particularly inspiring in his rare appearances on the field, either, which is why this spring – with more starting reps at Will linebacker up for grabs than Hicks’ past two springs – will be an important one as he tries to find his spot in the lineup. That could be as a starter at Will linebacker, a backup to Styles or at the Jack, which new linebackers coach James Laurinaitis said Hicks could be a candidate to play.

Sophomore offensive lineman Luke Montgomery: The left side of the offensive line is set – and center, with the addition of Seth McLaughlin (6-4, 305) – but questions remain on the right side. One of the answers for Ohio State could be Montgomery (6-4, 302).

He factored in more than most expected during his freshman season, coming in on jumbo packages and part of the second-team offensive line. While a shift for Josh Fryar from right tackle from right guard was discussed, he opened spring practice at right tackle, which means Montgomery – at least as it stands now – will have a chance to factor into things at right guard alongside Tegra Tshabola (6-6, 322).

Many view Montgomery as an eventual tackle at the college level, so this may not be the end of Montgomery making a push for Fryar’s job on the right side. Regardless, Montgomery will have the opportunity to compete for a starting job this spring.

Junior linebacker Sonny Styles: All others on this list will be fighting for starting jobs, but that is not the case for Styles. The question he does face, however, is where exactly he will line up.

Styles started at free safety last season, but that position will almost certainly be filled by incoming transfer Caleb Downs, the reigning SEC Freshman of the Year. It’s a more natural fit for Downs, which leaves the next-best position for Styles at Will linebacker, a move that coaches have talked about since Styles arrived on campus and was confirmed when spring practice began, with Styles starting practice with the linebackers.

His talent is not in question, as it has been evident dating back to his freshman season when he got in against Georgia in the College Football Playoff. But after spending most of his time at Ohio State in the secondary, this will be an important spring for Styles as he takes his first significant snaps at linebacker.

— Braden Moles

COVER STORY

ing that the game is becoming too much to keep up with amid the transfer portal, NIL, the general proliferation of money into the sport and the increasing independence of student-athletes.

"I think sometimes everybody wants to make a narrative of it's either this or that," Kelly said. "It's never that. It's never all ball. It's never all recruiting. It's never all boosters. It's a mixture of everything. As this position as a head coach keeps moving on, if you look at a lot of them, they all become CEOs. I can't tell you how many coaches that have called me since I made this decision that said, 'I'm two years behind you, brother, that are thinking the same exact way.'"

But the chief priority for Kelly and his family was simply his happiness, with the entire experience giving him a new perspective as he enters the next stage of his coaching career.

"There's a story about John Lennon when he was a little kid," Kelly recalled, "and he had an assignment of, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' He said, 'I want to be happy.' Then his teacher said, 'I don't think you understand the assignment.' His mom (responded), 'I don't think you understand life.' So I just want to be happy."

"I'm really happy coaching a position. I'm really happy to be at this place. It would have taken a special place for me to leave UCLA because I love those players and I love that coaching staff. But to be here with Ryan, we've had a great relationship. I've known Ryan since he was a little kid, so I think a lot of things just fell into place that way."

Some may view it as a strange dynamic, with Day – the previous subordinate under Kelly at New Hampshire and with the Philadelphia Eagles and San Francisco 49ers – now calling the shots with Kelly by his side. But Kelly has no problem stepping back from the limelight, with no confusion about who sits at the head of the table.

"I certainly understand my role. I'm not Al Haig," he joked. "I'm not in charge here. But I understand that and I actually kind of relish it, because I love the scheming part. I love the individual part. I love being in the meeting room with the quarterbacks and trying to gameplan."

"But everything we do here is collaborative. The one thing that really struck me when I walked in this place is there's an amazing coaching staff here. If you get a chance to talk to Larry Johnson about football or Tim Walton or Jim Knowles or Brian Hartline or any of these guys that are on the staff here, it's a very collaborative effort. I think everybody's on the same page. It's not our offense and their defense. It's Ohio State. It's Ohio State vs. the 12 opponents that we're going to play during the regular season and then beyond."

And while neither Day nor Kelly opened up about how play calling will ultimately work in games with Kelly as the offensive coordinator, Kelly did offer up an easy explanation regarding which coach is behind a certain call.

"I still think the play-calling part will be a collaborative effort," Kelly said. "By that, I mean that if it's a good play, I called it, and if it's a bad play, (Day) called it."



SONNY BROCKWAY

STEPPING BACK — New offensive coordinator Chip Kelly (front) — a longtime head coach at both the NFL and college level — is relishing his new role as an assistant coach with the Buckeyes.

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Linebacker, O-Line Among Biggest Battles

By PATRICK ENGELS

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Since being named Ohio State's head coach in 2019, Ryan Day has been blessed with a boatload of talent at his disposal.

From explosive offensive playmakers such as quarterbacks Justin Fields and C.J. Stroud, running backs J.K. Dobbins and TreVeyon Henderson and wide receivers Marvin Harrison Jr., Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson to disruptive defenders like defensive end Chase Young and cornerback Jeff Okudah, this collection of future NFL players has allowed Day to build a sustained juggernaut in college football.

While all but one of these players are no longer on Ohio State's roster, Day may ultimately be fielding the deepest and most talented team of his tenure in 2024. With several starters returning for their fourth or fifth seasons instead of entering the NFL draft and the team welcoming a multitude of high-level transfers and freshmen who are poised to make an instant impact, the program seems blessed with an embarrassment of riches at nearly every position, a luxury Day and his staff acknowledged after the team's first spring practice on March 5.

"During our workouts and mat drills, or seeing some of our team runs is when you think about those types of things," Day said. "You look at the guys, and you see the potential, and it gets you really excited."

"The one thing after day one, I can tell you that there's a lot of skill set out there," offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach Chip Kelly added. "That's what gets you excited. You jump out of bed in the morning and you're excited to go to work because of the talent that you get. But the one thing that's the most impressive is the work ethic that goes along with that. It's not just empty talent. You have some kids – all of them, since I've been here – that want to work, so that's what gets you excited."

With this depth and talent, however, also comes competition. With spring practice in full swing and Ohio State's spring game on April 13 quickly approaching, many players within crowded position groups will be looking to separate themselves from their teammates and jockey for a starting role in 2024.

While some of these competitions may spill into the summer, Buckeye Sports Bulletin is diving into three key position battles – linebacker, offensive line and wide receiver – that could go a long way in determining the direction of the program this season. For an extended look at the brewing quarterback battle, check out page 12.

Linebacker

Defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' defense is stacked with returning starters, leaving perhaps the lone question mark in the entire unit at linebacker.

Ohio State is losing its two starting linebackers in Steele Chambers and Tommy Eichenberg, who have both begun preparation for this year's NFL draft after serving as stalwarts of the defense for the last two seasons, combining for 355 tackles and 5½ sacks during that span. Those two departures leave a gaping hole at the position heading into spring, one which can be – at least partially – patched up by fifth-year Cody Simon.

Simon, who announced his decision to return for another year on Dec. 12, is in line to assume the starting role at the Mike this season after a productive senior season in which he earned a few spot starts and ranked fourth on the team in tackles with 57 stops. He said on March 7 that he is embracing his new role as the veteran leader of the room.

"It's been a long time coming, but I feel honored," Simon said. "There is a lot of respect and effort that goes into being a linebacker at Ohio State. It's a great honor. I want to honor the guys who came before me, but also play my own way, be a great defender and lead the defense."

Simon will provide a much-needed veteran presence to the middle of the defense, as Ohio State's Will linebacker position will be occupied by either C.J. Hicks or Sonny Styles, both of whom have yet to start at linebacker for the Buckeyes.

Hicks may have the edge, at least for now, in terms of experience at the position. Styles is converting to linebacker after spending his first two seasons at safety – including last season where he spent time starting at both nickel and bandit – to make room for the transfer portal addition of former Alabama safety Caleb Downs.

This reality was reflected in Ohio State's first two spring practices, where Hicks – who is a true linebacker but has garnered mostly special teams reps in his first two seasons, recording just 14 tackles – assumed first-team reps over Styles.

Knowles said on March 7 that Styles' switch to linebacker is permanent, but it may take some time this spring for him to fully adjust to the new position. Knowles is still confident that Styles can make those necessary adjustments this spring, though, because he possesses many traits – mainly his football IQ – needed to excel at lineback-



SONNY BROCKWAY

BATTLING IT OUT — Ohio State linebacker Cody Simon (right) is a certified starter for the Buckeyes entering this spring, but who will line up next to him in a battle between juniors Sonny Styles and C.J. Hicks is still up for debate.

er, potentially putting him in line to jump Hicks and emerge as the front-runner for the starting job after he gains more reps this spring.

"It's a change for Sonny, because he's playing in the box from a low position instead of dropping in," Knowles said. "So things happen a lot faster. But he's reacted superbly. He's a guy that has football intelligence. He understands the scheme, has played a lot of positions."

"I think he's going to be great, because one of the biggest parts of being a linebacker is you have to know all the pieces around you so you can play fast. And Sonny has shown a lot of that in the first two days."

Day doubled down on Knowles' praise of Styles, saying on March 5 that he is confident he can thrive at linebacker due to his unique versatility and athleticism. These are traits that Hicks also possesses, which could allow him to potentially move to the hybrid linebacker/defensive end "Jack" position if Styles starts at linebacker.

"We want to put guys in position to be the most successful they can be," Day said. "And Sonny has wanted to do whatever he can to help the team. We know that his skill set is versatile, and we're going to continue to work on that."

Offensive Line

Offensive line was one of Ohio State's most glaring weaknesses last year in large part due to the group's overall inexperience and lack of chemistry, and the unit enters 2024 with a similar set of question marks.

The left side of Justin Frye's offensive line seems intact heading into spring, with senior left tackle Josh Simmons and senior

left guard Donovan Jackson both set to reclaim their respective starting roles. But the same cannot be said for the right side. With Matthew Jones departing for the NFL after serving as Ohio State's starting right guard for the last two seasons, Frye and the Buckeyes will look to fill that hole with another veteran.

The first spring practice had senior Josh Fryar remain at right tackle, where he started last season, and sophomore Luke Montgomery taking first-team reps at right guard. But there has been discussion of moving Fryar to right guard, and Day said on March 5 that Fryar has the tools needed to thrive if he were to shift inside.

"He's very athletic," Day said. "He's somebody who, to me, is very skilled in a lot of areas. We think he has a very, very high ceiling. He played tackle last year and did some good things, and we think he can still play some tackle."

"But we also really want to look at him at guard. One, because that's sort of an open spot right now. And two, we also think with his quickness, he can get on guys quickly, and he can bend, and that's very, very important in that position."

If Fryar were to move inside, it would open up an opportunity for either Montgomery or junior Tegra Tshabola, who took second-team reps at tackle behind Fryar to open spring practice. But if Fryar stays at tackle, Montgomery would be the favorite to line up to his left. Though he would be a first-time starter for the Buckeyes at either position, he was used often last season as a sixth offensive lineman in short-yardage situations.

But Ohio State is hoping to experiment



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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL/ROSTER

No.	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.	Hometown/Previous School							
	Davison Igbinouson	CB	6-2	193	Jr.	Union, N.J./Mississippi	46	Jace Middleton	TE	6-4	235	Sr.	Lewis Center, Ohio/Olentangy
1	Quinshon Judkins	RB	6-0	219	Jr.	Pike Road, Ala./Mississippi	48	Ryan Rudzinski	SAF	6-4	213	So.	Columbus/Bishop Watterson
2	Caleb Downs	SAF	6-0	205	So.	Hoschton, Ga./Alabama	49	Max Lomonico	LS	6-3	212	Sr.	Pickerington, Ohio/Central
2	Emeka Egbuka	WR	6-1	205	Grad.	Steilacoom, Wash./Steilacoom	50	Alec Delsington	LB	6-1	225	So.	New Albany, Ohio/New Albany
2	Kourt Williams II	SAF	6-1	228	Grad.	Harbor City, Calif./St. John Bosco	51	Luke Montgomery	OL	6-5	308	So.	Youngstown, Ohio/Cardinal Mooney
3	Ja'Had Carter	SAF	6-1	205	Sr.	Richmond, Va./Syracuse	52	Josh Mickens	DE	6-3	233	So.	Findlay, Ohio/Findlay
3	Lincoln Kienholz	QB	6-3	207	So.	Pierre, S.D./T.F. Riggs	53	Will Smith Jr.	DL	6-4	288	So.	Dublin, Ohio/Coffman
4	Jeremiah Smith	WR	6-3	215	Fr.	Opa Locka, Fla./Chaminade-Madonna Prep	54	Toby Wilson	OL	6-2	298	Sr.	Lewis Center, Ohio/Olentangy
4	Lorenzo Styles Jr.	CB	6-1	195	Sr.	Pickerington, Ohio/Notre Dame	56	Seth McLaughlin	OL	6-4	305	Grad.	Buford, Ga./Alabama
5	Dallan Hayden	RB	5-10	205	Jr.	Memphis, Tenn./Christian Brothers	57	Jalen Pace	LB	6-0	232	Sr.	St. Louis/Mary Institute & Country Day
5	Aaron Scott Jr.	CB	6-0	185	Fr.	Springfield, Ohio/Springfield	58	Ty Hamilton	DT	6-3	295	Sr.	Pickerington, Ohio/Central
6	Sonny Styles	LB	6-4	225	Jr.	Chandler, Ariz./Chandler	60	Caden Casto	DL	6-1	268	St.	Strongsville, Ohio/Robert Morris
7	Kyion Grayes	WR	6-0	190	Jr.	Suwanee, Ga./North Gwinnett	61	Caden Davis	DE	6-4	238	So.	Mason, Ohio/William Mason
7	Jordan Hancock	CB	6-1	195	Sr.	Tucson, Ariz./Salpointe Catholic	62	Josh Padilla	OL	6-4	295	So.	Huber Heights, Ohio/Wayne
8	Lathan Ransom	SAF	6-1	210	Grad.	Massillon, Ohio/Washington	62	Bryce Grater	DL	6-1	270	Sr.	West Lafayette, Ohio/Ridgewood
9	Jayden Ballard	WR	6-2	195	Sr.	Phoenix, Ariz./Saguaro	63	Julian Goines-Jackson	OL	6-1	315	Jr.	Zanesville, Ohio/Youngstown State
10	Denzel Burke	CB	6-1	193	Sr.	Carlsbad, Calif./Alabama	65	Zen Michalski	OL	6-6	319	Sr.	Floyds Knobs, Ind./Floyd Central
10	Julian Sayin	QB	6-1	203	Fr.	Dayton/Archbishop Alter	66	Enok Vimahi	OL	6-4	310	Grad.	Kahuku, Hawaii/Kahuku
11	C.J. Hicks	LB	6-3	233	Jr.	Hollywood, Fla./American Heritage	67	Austin Sierveld	OL	6-5	320	So.	Liberty Township, Ohio/Lakota East
11	Brandon Inniss	WR	6-0	203	So.	Fairburn, Ga./Langston Hughes	68	George Fitzpatrick	OL	6-6	313	Jr.	Englewood, Colo./Cherry Creek
12	Air Noland	QB	6-2	192	Fr.	Cleveland/Glenville	69	Ian Moore	OL	6-6	309	Fr.	New Palestine, Ind./New Palestine
12	Bryce West	CB	5-11	196	Fr.	Chandler, Ariz./Basha	70	Josh Fryar	OL	6-5	320	Sr.	Beech Grove, Ind. Beech Grove
13	Miles Lockhart	CB	5-9	193	Fr.	Zephyrhills, Fla./Wiregrass Ranch	71	Josh Simmons	OL	6-5	310	Sr.	San Diego/San Diego State
13	Bryson Rodgers	WR	6-2	185	So.	Suwanee, Ga./Lambert	72	Deontae Armstrong	OL	6-6	298	Fr.	Lakewood, Ohio/St. Edward
14	Kojo Antwi	WR	6-0	194	Jr.	Fairburn, Ga./Langston Hughes	73	Devontae Armstrong	OL	6-5	303	Fr.	Lakewood, Ohio/St. Edward
15	Jelani Thurman	TE	6-6	258	So.	Dublin, Ohio/Coffman	74	Donovan Jackson	OL	6-4	320	Sr.	Bellaire, Texas/Episcopal
16	Mason Maggs	QB	6-2	224	Jr.	Silver Spring, Md./Good Counsel	75	Carson Hinzman	OL	6-5	300	Jr.	Hammond, Wis./Saint Croix Central
17	Mitchel Melton	DE	6-4	261	Grad.	Chicago/IMG Academy	76	Miles Walker	OL	6-5	317	So.	Greenwich, Conn./Brunswick
17	Carnell Tate	WR	6-3	191	So.	Downingtown, Pa./Kansas State	77	Tegra Tshabola	WR	6-6	327	Jr.	West Chester, Ohio/Lakota West
18	Will Howard	QB	6-4	237	Sr.	Rahway, N.J./Seton Hall Prep	82	David Adolph	WR	6-5	209	Jr.	Dublin, Ohio/Jerome
18	Jaylen McClain	SAF	6-0	190	Fr.	Dublin, Ohio/Scioto	83	Joop Mitchell	WR	6-1	180	Sr.	Wyoming, Ohio/Wyoming
19	Chad Ray	QB	6-3	212	Grad.	Cleveland/Glenville	84	Joe Royer	TE	6-5	252	Sr.	Cincinnati/Elder
20	Arvell Reese	LB	6-4	238	So.	San Antonio/Veterans Memorial	85	Bennett Christian	TE	6-6	260	Jr.	Acworth, Ga./Allatoona
20	James Peoples	RB	5-10	203	Fr.	Hillside, N.J./St. Peter's Prep	87	Reis Stocksdale	WR	5-10	188	Sr.	Morrow, Ohio/Little Miami
21	Jayden Bonsu	SAF	6-2	207	So.	Waxahachie, Texas/Waxahachie	88	Ge Scott Jr.	TE	6-3	243	Sr.	Seattle/Eastside Catholic
22	Calvin Simpson-Hunt	CB	6-0	204	So.	Chicago/Marist	89	Zak Herbstreit	TE	6-2	240	Jr.	Nashville, Tenn./Montgomery Bell Academy
23	Nolan Baudo	WR	5-10	180	So.	Sunbury, Ohio/Big Walnut	89	Will Kacmarek	TE	6-6	260	Fr.	St. Louis/Ohio University
23	Garrett Stover	LB	6-1	220	Fr.	Cincinnati/Winton Woods	90	Eric Mensah	DL	6-3	308	Fr.	Stafford, Va./Mountain View
24	Jermaine Mathews	CB	5-11	189	So.	Pickerington, Ohio/North	91	Tyleik Williams	DT	6-3	337	Fr.	Manassas, Va./Unity Reed
24	Sam Williams-Dixon	RB	5-11	203	Fr.	West Chester, Ohio/Lakota West	92	Kaden Curry	DE	6-3	260	Jr.	Greenwood, Ind./Center Grove
25	Malik Hartford	SAF	6-3	194	So.	Northville, Mich./Northville	93	Hero Kanu	DT	6-5	305	Jr.	Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif./Santa Margarita Catholic
25	Kai Saunders	WR	6-3	212	Jr.	Titusville, Fla./Cocoa	94	Jason Moore	DL	6-6	305	So.	Ft. Washington, Md./DeMatha Catholic
26	Cedrick Hawkins Jr.	SAF	6-0	185	So.	Hubbard, Ohio/Hubbard	95	Casey Magyar	K	5-11	185	Sr.	Dublin, Ohio/Kent State
28	T.C. Caffe	RB	5-10	215	Jr.	Jersey City, N.J./St. Peter's Prep	95	Tywon Malone	DT	6-4	301	Sr.	Jamesburg, N.J./Mississippi
30	Cody Simon	LB	6-2	235	Grad.	Hopewell, Va./Hopewell	96	Eddrick Houston	DE	6-3	270	Fr.	Buford, Ga./Buford
32	Tre'Veyon Henderson	RB	5-10	208	Sr.	Stuebenville, Ohio/Stuebenville	96	Collin Johnson	LS	6-1	215	Sr.	New Albany, Ohio/New Albany
32	Brenten "Inky" Jones	SAF	6-2	205	Jr.	Gilbert, Ariz./Corner Canyon (Utah)	97	Kenyatta Jackson Jr.	DE	6-6	258	Jr.	Hollywood, Fla./Chaminade-Madonna Prep
33	Devin Brown	QB	6-3	212	Jr.	Pickerington, Ohio/North	98	Kayden McDonald	DT	6-3	326	So.	Suwanee, Ga./North Gwinnett
33	Jack Sawyer	DE	6-5	260	Sr.	Medina, Ohio/Medina	98	Austin Snyder	K	5-7	194	Sr.	Groveport, Ohio/Findlay
34	Brennen Schramm	WR	6-0	191	So.	Lucas, Texas/Lovejoy							
35	Payton Pierce	LB	6-2	223	Fr.	Marysville, Ohio/Marysville							
36	Gabe Powers	LB	6-4	242	Jr.	Clayton, Ohio/Northwestern							
37	Nigel Glover	LB	6-3	221	So.	League City, Texas/IMG Academy							
38	Jayden Fielding	K	6-0	175	Jr.	Dearborn, Mich./Wayne State							
39	Hadi Jawad	P	5-11	185	Sr.	Columbus/Michigan							
39	Joey Velazquez	LB	5-11	226	Grad.	Melbourne, Australia/ProKick Australia							
42	Joe McGuire	P	6-2	212	So.	Phoenix, Ariz./Arizona State							
43	John Ferlmann	LS	6-3	228	Sr.	Lima, Ohio/Senior							
43	Dianté Griffin	CB	5-9	185	Jr.	Edgewood, Wash./Eastside Catholic							
44	JT Tuimolou	DE	6-5	269	Sr.								

Coaching staff – Ryan Day, head coach; Chip Kelly, offensive coordinator/quarterbacks; Brian Hartline, co-offensive coordinator/wide receivers; Jim Knowles, defensive coordinator; James Laurinaitis, linebackers; Tony Alford, assistant head coach for offense/running backs; Justin Frye, associate head coach for offense/offensive line; Larry Johnson, associate head coach/defensive line; Tim Walton, assistant head coach/secondary/cornerbacks; Matt Guerrieri, safeties; Keenan Bailey, tight ends; Mickey Marotti, general manager – player personnel; Tony Johnson, advisor/analyst; Brent Zdebski, quality control – defense; Rob Keys, quality control – kicking; Sam McGrath, quality control – defense; Joe Lyberger, quality control – defense; LaAllan Clark, graduate assistant – defense; Mike Solenne, graduate assistant – offense; Sean Binckes, graduate assistant – offense; Riley Larkin, program assistant – offense; Gunner Daniel, program assistant – special teams; Devin Jordan, program assistant – offense; Gerren DuHart, program assistant – defense; Joshua Chorba, program assistant – defense

with the lineup over the next few weeks to figure out not only the best five on the offensive line, but where those five belong.

“With some of the schemes we’re going to be running, we think Fryar has the skill set in order to do it,” Day said. “Now, he just needs the reps to go prove he can do it. I think we’ll come up for air (after the spring) and figure out what kind of progress has been made, evaluate it, and then go from there.”

The Buckeyes also have a potential battle to consider at center this spring, with sophomore Carson Hinzman and Alabama transfer Seth McLaughlin competing for the role.

Much like in the quarterback room with Will Howard, many on the outside believe the starting center role is McLaughlin’s to lose. The veteran, who started each of Alabama’s 14 games last season, was brought in this offseason after Hinzman – who started every game at center during the regular season – was held out of the Cotton Bowl for undisclosed reasons.

Despite the tough end to his 2023 season, Hinzman was back taking first-team reps for the Buckeyes at center during Ohio State’s first two spring practices, with McLaughlin trailing behind. Day said that Hinzman has worked hard this offseason to

improve his game and is in line to compete with McLaughlin this spring, setting up an intriguing battle.

“He had a really good last couple of months,” Day said. “He was excellent with (strength coach Mickey Marotti). I think having that year of experience has really helped him. His numbers in the weight room are very, very good. So the combination of having a year under his belt and having a good offseason allows him a great opportunity to go compete this spring.”

“Again, pads aren’t on. So with the offensive line, we won’t know anything for a little while. But we’ve seen strides for him. Improvement, combined with the fact that he played last year a bunch, and we won a bunch of games with him in there, that matters. So I’m fired up to see what he looks like here as we head into the middle of spring.”

Wide Receivers

Ohio State wide receivers coach Brian Hartline is known for having a revolving door of NFL-ready wideouts in his arsenal every season, and it is no different in 2024.

Despite Harrison leaving for the NFL draft – where he will likely be the first non-quarterback taken – the wide receiver room still oozes talent, with senior Emeka Egbuka and promising sophomores Bran-

don Inniss and Carnell Tate all returning.

While Egbuka, Inniss and Tate are all expected to make a significant impact this season in Kelly’s offense, Hartline may already have his next superstar waiting in the wings, that being consensus No. 1 overall prospect in 2024 and former five-star wide receiver Jeremiah Smith.

Smith, who enrolled early at Ohio State after racking up a gaudy 177 receptions for 3,116 yards and 46 touchdowns in three seasons for Opa Locka (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep, has already turned heads this spring, with many of his teammates lauding his combination of athleticism and humility that will put the freshman in prime position to make an instant impact.

“(Smith is a) freak athlete,” Egbuka said on March 4. “One of the quietest dudes I’ve ever met, not a man of too many words. But he came in and put his head down and he worked. I say this every time to freshmen who come in. All you have to do is shut up, put your head down and work. And that’s something he understands.”

“There’s nothing he really can’t do. He runs fast. He jumps high. He’s strong. He’s a natural pass catcher. I mean, he’s a freak.”

“Jeremiah Smith, watch out for him,” cornerback Denzel Burke added on March 7. “This might be a big statement, but just

the way he handles himself, the way he moves and the potential he has, I feel like he might be the next best receiver to come through here. I’m really excited to see what he can do. The sky’s the limit for him.”

Smith’s rare traits could allow him to assume meaningful reps in his first year with the program, but it also raises the question of whether he already has enough talent and intangibles to usurp time from some of the returning wideouts on the depth chart.

While Egbuka is the clear No. 1 in Hartline’s room, Inniss and Tate still need to prove they are worthy of emerging as the second or third options for Ohio State’s next starting quarterback. Tate experienced the most production out of the two, ranking fifth on the team in receiving yards with 264 while also finishing with one touchdown. Inniss was less of a factor, hauling in just one catch, though it was a 58-yard touchdown against Purdue on Oct. 14.

With Harrison gone, the door is open for Smith to take the wide receiver room by storm and quickly ascend atop the already crowded depth chart that also features junior Jayden Ballard, third-years Kyion Grayes and Kojo Antwi and sophomore Bryson Rodgers.

SPRING PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

Howard, Brown Jockeying For Position At QB

By GREG WILSON

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

It became obvious in the Cotton Bowl on Dec. 29 that the quarterback position could be a potential problem for Ohio State going into 2024 with less-than-stellar performances from then-redshirt freshman Devin Brown and freshman Lincoln Kienholz, and it was swiftly addressed on Jan. 4 by adding graduate transfer Will Howard from Kansas State.

But as it stands, this will be the second straight spring the Buckeyes do not have a definitive starter as Howard continues to acclimate in Columbus. For now, all five quarterbacks in the room – with freshmen Air Noland and Julian Sayin in the fold – are taking a share of the reps with the starting team so they each have a chance to show what they can do.

“We’re going to let them compete,” head coach Ryan Day said. “It’s hard for us to say to someone like Julian Sayin, Lincoln or Air, ‘Hey, you’ve got to come in here and compete,’ when the first thing they do is take a bunch of reps with the threes. We want to roll you in whatever drill. You’re getting reps with everybody so you can show what you can do.”

While Howard has not been named the starter – and has yet to even lose his black stripe – he is approaching spring practice as if he is the top signal caller since he’s in his final season of eligibility, and he is doing that by trying to learn the offense as quickly as possible.

“I’ve got one more year. I didn’t come here to be nervous or to be timid or anything like that,” Howard said on March 4. “I’m ready to go. The fact of the matter is it might not all be perfect. I might make a few mistakes, but that’s how I’m going to learn, and that’s how we’re going to learn as a team. Nothing’s too big for me. Nothing’s too big for this team, certainly not spring ball. It’s going to be a lot of learning across the board, but I’m excited.”

He is also working hard to make sure he fits in the locker room and keeps the team chemistry since he knows how important that is for the leader of the offense, especially because he’s new in the building. Gaining that trust of his new teammates has been a priority since he arrived on campus.

“A lot of it has to do with hanging out outside the facility, and even in the facility chopping it up with guys I wouldn’t normally talk to,” Howard said. “(In the



SONNY BROCKWAY

FITTING IN – Ohio State quarterback Will Howard (right) is entering the spring as the presumed starter for the Buckeyes but will have to earn his position by impressing the likes of offensive coordinator Chip Kelly (left).

past) I’m probably not going to hang with the defensive linemen that much, but I’m trying to hang out around JT (Tuimolou) and Jack (Sawyer) and developing those relationships.”

It’s something of which coaches and teammates are taking notice. Senior wide-out Emeka Egbuka said he and Howard have already become good friends in the short time they have known each other.

“He’s a funny dude, a very likable guy,” Egbuka said. “We hit it off instantly. I’m excited to see what he can do this spring. I feel like he’s a phenomenal talent, a really smart quarterback. And he’s a veteran guy, so I’m hoping he can bring some experience.”

Despite the praise, Howard was behind

Brown when it came to first-team reps in spring practice sessions open to the media on March 5 and 7, so he will need to start proving himself on the field like he’s already been doing off it, and Brown isn’t planning to make that easy.

When Brown spoke before spring practice, he said he wasn’t thinking about transferring and doesn’t care who’s in the quarterback room with him. He’s there to win the spot because he thinks he’s the best guy in there, and competition won’t scare him away.

“I’ve said it before – through and through, I’m a Buckeye, and I’m here to compete no matter what,” he said.

It would not be the first time that an Ohio State quarterback has transferred out after insisting they would stay for a competition – look no further than Tate Martell in 2019 – so whether Brown will stay or not is yet to be seen, but he is adamant that he will be in Columbus and doesn’t appreciate the people who think he won’t stay to fight for the spot.

It’s the type of attitude that Day wants all of his quarterbacks to have. He said that competitiveness Brown showed leaked into the first spring practice they had, and he hopes it continues no matter how the quarterback battle goes.

“I was impressed with how he practiced today,” Day said. “He had a good de-

meanor. He had that same conviction out in practice today. If he keeps building like that, he’s going to have a hell of a spring.”

The battle between Kyle McCord and Brown last spring lasted into the regular season. McCord started the first two games against Indiana and Youngstown State, but Day held off on publicly naming him the starter until a few weeks into the season. When Brown was asked if he would like to know who the starter is by the end of spring, he said it’s not that important to him, and he doesn’t think it hurt the team last year when that battle continued into the season.

“I don’t think it really matters at the end of the day,” Brown said. “If you’re getting reps, that’s all that matters. How we did it last year, we were still taking one rep and two reps, just working with everybody and being able to build a relationship with everybody. It didn’t feel like it was anything that harmed us.”

One thing that Day did say he wants in the quarterback this year is the ability to be a threat to run the ball. It forces defenses to account for that and can open up other options, and if it comes down to it, they can tuck the ball and gain a few yards on their own.

Both Howard and Brown have been advertised as mobile quarterbacks, but Howard has been able to show that he can be effective in the ground game at Kansas State, rushing for 351 yards and nine touchdowns last season with the Wildcats.

The Buckeyes used Brown on the goal line multiple times last season for his running ability, but injuries have impacted him seemingly whenever he takes off with the ball. He was hurt in Ohio State’s win over Penn State on a goal-line run and missed multiple weeks, and when he got his chance to start in the Cotton Bowl, he only lasted four drives before he had to be removed from the game after his cleat was caught in the turf, twisting his ankle.

He said that is a new problem for him, and even though he’s had several injuries in the past year, he does not view it as a pattern.

“There’s been some work with that,” Brown said. “It was just two freak deals. It was just weird. My cleat got stuck in the ground both times. I was injury-free in high school. I never really had any ankle problems or anything like that. Then two times where my cleats got stuck and I got twisted around.”

But whoever wins the battle between Brown and Howard will be running an offense with some new looks under offensive coordinator Chip Kelly, who is set to take over play calling and coaching the quarterbacks, both of which Day is stepping back from – though his influence will certainly still be felt.

In his extended tenure as a head coach at both the college and professional ranks, Kelly has overseen several quarterback battles and believes he knows how to handle them at this point. He doesn’t want to get in the way too much so that chemistry between the players won’t be an issue when they get on the field.

“Every time I’ve been involved in these,

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SPRING PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

when they're organic is when it's the best," Kelly said. "I don't think you can anoint somebody or force the issue. There's the team chemistry part of this thing, too, so we're not going to force the issue. At some point in time at every school there's a quarterback battle. You have to let them play it out on the field, and that's where it has to be decided.

"We're really detailed on what practice looks like and how that's going to operate. But I also think you need to let the players go. I don't think you need to put shackles on them and keep them constrained. You've got to let them go and you've got to let them operate."

But even though both Howard and Kelly are new to the team and each other, Kelly has already been impressed with what he knows about Howard in terms of his knowledge of the game and how well he's fit in with his new team.

"You don't have to talk to Will for more than five minutes to know where he's coming from," Kelly said. "He's really focused. He knows he's got a short window left in his college career, and he really wants to capitalize on that.

"The other thing is in the short time that Will's been here, how quickly he's fit in with the entire team and how much the rest of the players respect him. He was one of the gold award winners for his work in the weight room this offseason."

Howard was excited about Bill O'Brien as Ohio State's offensive coordinator when he first came, but when he heard Kelly would be taking over when O'Brien

left for Boston College, he thought back to how he used to follow teams that Kelly coached.

"The first thing that came to mind was those Oregon offenses that he used to run and how prolific they were and how great their run and pass game was," Howard said. "Then, I grew up an Eagles fan and he coached the Eagles. That was really cool. There were a lot of different things that went into it, but as soon as we hired him, he gave me a call that day."

"He does a lot of good stuff in the RPO world," Howard added later. "A lot of the things he's trying to teach us is that we don't have to work harder, we need to work smarter – getting the ball out to these guys on the outside we have, letting them go make plays in space."

But whether Howard or Brown start against Akron on Aug. 31, both of them have the same goal in mind of winning a national championship, just like the rest of the team does, and both are trying as hard as they can to be the one to try to lead this talented team there.

"We know how much is on the line, we know how much we've already given to this season, and how much we've invested in this team," Howard said. "We had a really good winter – the way guys were brought in, the leadership we have on this team, the amount of guys that decided to come back, that decided to come to this program. At the end of the day, we know that our main goal is to win and to win all of them. That's the bottom line."



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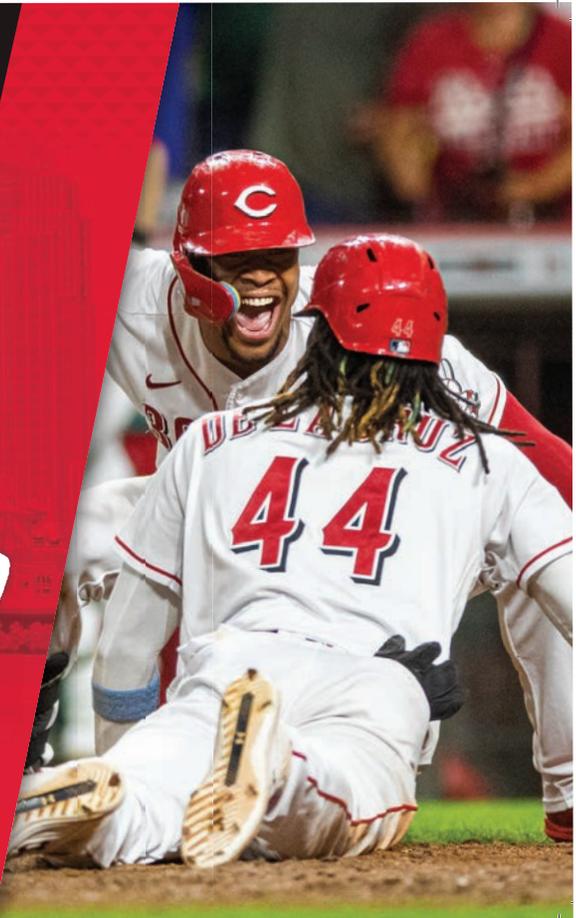
NOT DONE YET – Ohio State quarterback Devin Brown (pictured) is not backing down from his goal of being the starting signal caller for the Buckeyes and is set to battle with newcomer Will Howard this spring.

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Veteran Defensive Line Looking For More In 2024

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Following a dominant season when it ranked in the top five nationally in several categories, expectations are sky-high across the board for Ohio State's defense entering spring.

While defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' unit is loaded with veteran talent at each position, perhaps no position group has more talent and greater expectations than the defensive line.

The Buckeyes have a stable of experienced and motivated rushmen leading Larry Johnson's front, with all but one starter opting to return for their senior season rather than depart for the NFL. That group consists of defensive ends Jack Sawyer and JT Tuimolou as well as defensive tackle Tyleik Williams, with the three accounting for 51.8 percent of the team's sacks (14½ out of 28) last season and each earning All-Big Ten selections.

Ohio State has another senior returning in defensive tackle Ty Hamilton, who is expected to take NFL-bound Mike Hall Jr.'s spot on the starting front four this season.

But the group is also loaded with emerging young talent, many of whom are poised to make noise and earn added playing time this season. It is a potentially lethal combination of established veterans and upstart underclassmen that could allow the unit to wreak havoc on opposing offenses, a possibility those inside the group are processing as spring practice begins.

"It's definitely coming together," Hamilton said on March 7. "There's a lot of guys who are really growing up, really pushing up the ranks right now. Anybody (on our defensive line) can play. All the guys are jumping out. All the guys are really working. It's a unit where everybody is pushing hard."

For Johnson's unit, that dominance begins on the edges with Sawyer and Tuimolou, whose Buckeye careers have seemingly been woven together ever since they first arrived on campus in 2021 as highly coveted five-star freshmen.

The two seniors managed to achieve individual success in their first three seasons amid great pressure and expectations, with the peak coming last season when the pair combined for 86 combined tackles (17 for loss).

While these accolades put them in prime position to declare for the NFL draft this offseason, Sawyer and Tuimolou felt there was still more to add to their résumé in Co-

lumbus – mainly a win against Michigan and both a Big Ten and national championship – a feeling that ultimately prompted them to return to Ohio State in January for their fourth and final seasons. It was a decision that Tuimolou said was made in lock-step with his fellow defensive end.

"Jack and I talked a lot (about our decision) – a lot is probably an understatement," Tuimolou said. "We had so many goals coming in our freshman year. We understood that the goals we had and set for our defense – individual goals and on the defensive line – were just right there and all reachable. And once we thought about that, we became even more motivated to come back and get straight to work."

For the veterans Sawyer and Tuimolou, that daily chase for greatness began in spring camp, where they have already looked to make improvements to their respective games.

Starting with Sawyer, he is hoping to replicate the success he had toward the back end of last season, when he picked up five of his 6½ total sacks in the final three games.

Sawyer pointed to these successes, which were capped by a dominant three-sack performance in the Cotton Bowl, as an example of him playing looser and reacting to the play rather than thinking. It is a mentality he admittedly lacked while playing at the hybrid defensive end/linebacker "Jack" position in 2022, but one he is looking forward to doing more of this year.

"I felt like I was in a groove, probably the whole second half of the season," Sawyer said. "I felt like myself again. I was just out there playing, having fun with my teammates. When you come here and you expect to hit the field and be a certain way, it's hard to get over that."

"I've known all along what I was capable of. It was frustrating the first few years, not playing up to – for whatever reason – what I was capable of on the field. But once you put that stuff to the side, go out there and play ball like you know how, it's going to take care of itself."

In addition to playing more freely, Sawyer is looking to improve upon his overall technique and flexibility this offseason, something Tuimolou is also emphasizing at the start of spring practice. He said that despite his previous successes, he is still committed to perfecting his craft, which he thinks will come with working on the little things.

Tuimolou also mentioned that he wants to react more on the field this season rather

than think, one of many desired improvements he expressed to the media following the Buckeyes' second practice on March 7.

"(I want to get) leaner and more twitchy, just continuing to react quicker and not feel like I'm thinking out there," Tuimolou said. "I want to be able to run around every Saturday, every time we play, just having that motor under me. For me, that starts in the weight room. Now we're on phase two, where it starts on the field, and then after spring ball, it goes back to square one, back to that weight room and cleaning up areas, critiquing all the small things."

The defensive line will be led in the trenches by another pair of veterans, those being the seniors Williams and Hamilton. Williams, like Sawyer, experienced a breakout season in 2023, earning third-team All-Big Ten honors after recording 53 tackles (10 for loss), three sacks and an impressive five pass breakups, the latter mark tied for third most on the team.

His athleticism and activity were pleasant surprises for Ohio State. Williams had been dealing with weight issues earlier in his career. He started his Buckeye career at 360 pounds and has since dropped to 327, though he still indicated that he needs to get in better shape.

This transformation has not only boosted his performance on the field – putting him in line to start again this season – but it also gave him a new perspective on his impact on the team. Williams said on March 7 that he has embraced his increased leadership role this season and is inspiring his younger teammates to improve every day, a concerted effort that he thinks will benefit the unit in the long run.

"I think you have to set a great example for the young guys," he said. "Just showing them how to practice, how to watch film, how to take care of their body. Because those are the things you're going to need to go on a deep run."

Hamilton – who has two years of eligibility remaining because of a redshirt year in 2020, and the extra year due to COVID-19 – experienced a bit of a letdown season after a strong end to the 2022 campaign. He started each of the last five games in 2022 – including the College Football Playoff loss to Georgia – but was used mainly as a rotational piece on the defensive line last year, recording 38 tackles (4½ for loss) and two sacks.

Despite this relative lack of usage, Hamilton did finish this past year strong in the Cotton Bowl with a career-high six tackles (two for loss) and a sack, giving him optimism heading into this season as he looks to improve upon his game.

"One of the main points of the offseason was to elevate my pass-rush game," Hamilton said. "I think elevating that allows me to fine-tune myself into being unstoppable."

Hamilton added that this improvement can help balance out the production in the trenches, creating a formidable one-two punch between him and Williams on the interior that he thinks could rival any defensive tackle duo in the nation.

"I think us together could be the best in the country," Hamilton said. "I stand by that. Us together, we just (complement) each other.

We have that chemistry and know that we're going to go out and play for each other."

In addition to those four returning seniors, the Buckeyes are also well-stocked with young and emerging talent, many of whom are on the verge of receiving more playing time. One of those younger players who may be ready for an increased role this season is junior defensive tackle Hero Kanu.

He was used sparingly on the interior but flashed at times last season, appearing in 11 games and recording 10 tackles and one sack. This offseason, however, the junior has turned heads due to his work ethic and overall improved skill set.

"He's just a worker," Hamilton said. "He's been working as long as he's been here. He's going to keep trying to find ways to get better every single day. That's what I applaud him for."

Knowles also listed Kanu as a prime candidate to emerge as a fifth defensive lineman in a special "Double Eagle" package, a potentially formidable five-man front that would have Sawyer and Tuimolou shift to outside linebacker, leaving Kanu, Hamilton and Williams on the interior.

"Hero really flashed last year at times when you go back and watch the film," Knowles said. "So the fact that we play a lot of rushmen, I mean, he's a guy who needs to have a good spring for us because he's going to be the next man."

Kanu is one of several younger defensive linemen who can earn more playing time this season with a strong showing this spring. Among those who can potentially flash are fellow juniors Caden Curry and Kenyatta Jackson Jr. on the edge and redshirt freshmen Kayden McDonald and Will Smith Jr. on the inside – all of whom earned second-team reps this spring – along with true freshman defensive end Eddrick Houston, who has earned significant praise from his coaches in his first few months as a Buckeye.

"He's always working, always wanting to know more," Tuimolou said of Houston. "I was just in the back (of the Woody Hayes Athletic Center) teaching him certain little keys and assignments, techniques on how to get better. So he's a student of the game as well."

With a unique combination of young talent and motivated veterans, Knowles and Ohio State's front four – maybe even front five, in some situations – has all the tools and intangibles needed to emerge as one of the nation's best. But regardless of this unique depth and talent, those within the room know that it will ultimately come down to turning high expectations into results come fall Saturdays.

"All of us on the defensive line, as a front, we all kind of had our own journey to how we are playing right now," Sawyer said. "And now, it's all about building and not looking back and playing how we know how to play, being confident out there and using our abilities that God gave us. I think that this whole year, you're going to see a whole different level of play from all of us."

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