

Resetting The Summer: DBs Trying To Take Next Step



Every Saturday leading into the start of Ohio State's fall camp, Buckeye Sports Bulletin will be giving an outlook on each of the team's position groups. This week's position is defensive back.

It's the last edition of resetting the summer, with Ohio State's fall camp starting Thursday, Aug. 3. Defensive backs are a fitting group to end on, as they have the potential to be the team's most improved position group from last year to this one.

The Buckeyes' cornerbacks struggled for much of last season before it was their safeties who prolapsed and allowed big plays in the final two games of the year against Michigan and Georgia. Three starters are gone from last year's group, with Ronnie Hickman clearing space at "adjuster," Tanner McCalister leaving his nickelback spot open and Cam Brown leaving room for a cornerback to step in.

With the depth of talent Ohio State has at every spot in the secondary, the potential is there for the back five to be a strength of the team and among the nation's elite. It will take a lot of proving on the field, though. Here's where things stand.

Cornerback

Projected starters: Denzel Burke (Jr.), Davison Igbinosun (So.)

In competition for a starting spot: Jordan Hancock (Jr.)

Depth pieces: Lorenzo Styles Jr. (Jr.), Jyaire Brown (So.), Ryan Turner (r-So.), Jermaine Mathews (Fr.), Calvin Simpson-Hunt (Fr.)

Young player to watch: Mathews

Breakdown: It seems best to break this position group into two sections, cornerback and safety, as there's plenty to discuss at each spot.

Coming off a strong spring, it seems that Ohio State's cornerback room is anchored by Burke. The Arizona native enjoyed a breakout freshman campaign in 2021, going for 12 pass breakups and an

interception, but suffered injury setbacks in 2022 and it was reflected in his on-field performance at many junctures. Back fully healthy, he looked like a potential lockdown presence for Ohio State in the spring.

Igbinosun and Hancock will contend to start opposite Burke, though the team could rotate all three into games with some regularity. Igbinosun is easily the longest player in the room, standing 6-2 with arms dangling close to his knees. His quick-footed athleticism allows him to leverage that length to contest catches.

After drawing rave reviews last fall camp, Hancock suffered a hamstring injury and never seemed to get off the ground in 2022. He's a player that seems to have a lot of promise, one of the top corners from his recruiting class, and he'll be looking to showcase his abilities in 2023.

Styles was brought in after the spring through the transfer portal via Notre Dame, a player converting from wide receiver. If he makes a fast enough transition, he's got the athletic tools to find a role in the back half of this season. Otherwise he'll play special teams and wait to be a factor next year.

Brown played admirably in spots after injuries took their toll on the Buckeyes' corners a year ago, and youngsters often make their biggest developmental leap from year one to year two. He's not a name to count out.

Turner enters his third year looking for a breakthrough, and is repping at nickel to provide the team with extra depth there. Mathews and Simpson-Hunt make for an intriguing freshman duo, with the former surging up the ranking late to finish as the No. 51 player nationally. Simpson-Hunt presents legitimate track speed and fantastic length that give him a lot of upside at the position.

Safety

Projected starters: Ja'Had Carter (Sr.), Lathan Ransom (Sr.), Josh Proctor (Grad.)

In competition for a starting spot: Sonny Styles (So.), Cam Martinez (r-Jr.)

Depth pieces: Kourt Williams (r-Jr.), Kye Stokes (So.), Malik Hartford (Fr.), Jayden Bonsu (Fr.), Cedrick Hawkins (Fr.)

Young player to watch: Styles

Breakdown: There's tons of potential lineups for defensive coordinator Jim Knowles to deploy at safety, and the projected starters for this position are as up in the air as any.

Proctor enters a sixth and final season at Ohio State back at the team's "adjuster," or free safety, role. A broken leg took away what was looking like a breakout season for the hard-hitter in 2021, and he was usurped in short order by Ransom at "bandit," or boundary safety, a year ago. He was the team's starter in the spring and has a leg up entering fall.

Speaking of Ransom, he finished third on the team with 74 tackles last campaign, tops among non-linebackers. He had a rough go of it in the above-mentioned games versus the Wolverines and Bulldogs, however, and as such is back with something to prove in 2023.

If Ransom and Proctor lock up their starting spots, it will be because they've earned it. Styles has a jaw-

dropping athletic skill set and can make impacts all over the field, commanding playing time entering his second year in Columbus. It wouldn't be a surprise to see him overtake one of his more senior teammates, he'll rotate in at the very least.

Nickelback is a competition between Carter and Martinez, with Carter entering the program as a transfer from Syracuse. He had 136 tackles and five interceptions in his three-year career with the Orange and nickel seems his best position naturally, though he's also shown an ability to play deep. Martinez has drawn a lot of praise from Knowles about his athletic traits and did get some experience in key moments last season, though he still showed room to grow.

Stokes looked like the best defender on the field at Ohio State's 2021 spring game, but seems to be on the outside looking in for a starting spot this year. Still, he's great depth to have. Same goes to Williams, who was a captain despite his very limited playing time in 2022.

Hartford stood out as a freshman during the spring and shed his black stripe, while Bonsu and Hawkins arrive as fellow four-star prospects in the fall.