

Resetting The Summer: Linebacker Room Fully Stocked



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 linebacker.

Outside the wide receiver position, there's no place Ohio State returns more production in 2023 than at linebacker.

Both starters return from a year ago. The top man backing both of them up is also spending another year in Scarlet and Gray. Plus an intriguing former five-star prospect will enter his second season in Columbus pushing for playing time, perhaps primarily in what will be a retooled "Jack" position.

All the pieces are there and the "2" in the 4-2-5 are known. How defensive coordinator coach Jim Knowles deploys his calling card position — using two linebackers this time instead of a defensive end — and to what extent are where the interesting questions linger. Former Ohio State Butkus-Award-winning linebacker James Laurinaitas has been added to help develop the room as a graduate assistant, bringing with him eight years of NFL experience.

Here's where things stand entering fall camp.

Projected starters: Tommy Eichenberg (r-Sr.), Steele Chambers (r-Sr.)

In competition for a starting role: C.J. Hicks (So.), Mitchell Melton (r-Jr.)

Depth pieces: Cody Simon (Jr.), Gabe Powers (r-Fr.), Reid Carrico (r-So.), Arvelle Reese (Fr.)

Young player to watch: Hicks

Breakdown: Eichenberg should be a contender for the same award that Laurinaitas won, the Butkus, which goes to the best linebacker in college football every year.

He's back off one of the better seasons from an Ohio State linebacker in recent memory. Eichenberg collected 120 tackles — the most by a Buckeye since Joshua Perry's 124 in 2014 — with 12 tackles for loss, 2.5 sacks, three pass breakups and an interception that went for a touchdown.

Joining him as the position's other returning starter is Chambers, who posted a strong campaign in his own right. Chambers grabbed 77 takedowns, second-most on the squad, with 6.5 tackles for loss and two interceptions. His sideline-to-sideline containment was a nice complement to Eichenberg's toughness and nose for the ball up the middle.

Those two each played a hefty, hefty share of the snaps. Thus far Knowles hasn't been one to rotate his linebackers, though he said in the spring that that could change in 2023. Part of that push is Hicks.

Hicks is an Ohio prospect that ranked No. 7 overall in the 247Sports composite, considered the best linebacker recruit in the 2022 class. His athletic abilities have been lauded by Knowles and Laurinaitis both, with Knowles saying he believes Hicks will "unleash" at some point this season.

How does that look? Could he force Knowles' hand at a rotation at the position? It seems like something he'd be open to during the summer. The other and perhaps more viable option is that he takes over the Jack.

Knowles will consider both Hicks and Melton for the hybrid linebacker/defensive end role. The position wasn't in Ohio State's defense during the spring as the man who played it in 2022, defensive end Jack Sawyer, moves back to being a true defensive end after an underwhelming year.

Hicks seems to fit the profile. A quick player off the edge who can get after the quarterback and cover running backs or tight ends. Melton has also been raved about by coaches despite missing last season with injury, and the two were named by Knowles as the two players at the Jack.

Providing further depth at the main two linebacker spots is the team's third linebacker from last year, Simon. He quietly amassed 32 tackles spelling the starting pair in rare spots and playing in the team's 4-3 sub-package deployed against more run-heavy teams.

Another player not to be slept on is Hicks' classmate Powers. He holds recruiting pedigree in his own right, the No. 101 prospect in the composite and eighth-best linebacker. He's coming off a strong spring, polished off by collecting a team-high eight tackles in the spring game.

Carrico is another former four-star entering his third year looking to take another step. Reese, a freshman, brings plenty of athletic upside but is likely to bide his time learning on the bench in 2023.