

Resetting The Summer: Questions Linger On Offensive Line



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 offensive line.

Entering spring, the position group with perhaps the most questions surrounding it in terms of personnel was Ohio State's offensive line.

Paris Johnson, Dawand Jones and Luke Wypler all departed from last year's starting unit to become first-, fourth- and sixth-round picks in the 2023 NFL Draft, respectively. The Buckeyes are replacing the three Big Ten performers at left tackle, right tackle and center with a cupboard that wasn't fully stocked from the recruiting trail, especially at the tackle spots.

Two veterans help stabilize things at both guard positions, but everywhere else will be a true test of offensive line coach Justin Frye's skills as a developer of talent. Here's the rundown of where things stand.

Projected starters: Josh Fryar (r-Jr.), Donovan Jackson (Jr.), Carson Hinzman (r-Fr.), Matthew Jones (Grad.), Josh Simmons (Jr.)

In competition for starting spot: Enokk Vimahi (r-Sr.), Jakob James (r-Jr.), Vic Cutler Jr. (r-Sr.), Zen Michalski (r-So.), Tegra Tshabola (r-Fr.)

Depth pieces: Trey Leroux (r-Jr.), Grant Toutant (r-Jr.), George Fitzpatrick (r-Fr.), Luke Montgomery (Fr.), Josh Padilla (Fr.), Austin Siereveld (Fr.), Miles Walker (Fr.)

Young player to watch: Tshabola

Breakdown: Jackson and Jones will serve as the anchors for an otherwise unproven group, and as such their health and success will be of paramount importance for Ohio State's team. In addition to proving their mettle as starters a year ago, both saw rotational time in 2021. Jackson, a former five-star prospect, could be one of the best guards in the country.

The battle at center between the two of them will be waged between Hinzman, Cutler and James, the latter of which missed spring practice with injury. Hinzman is a mauler who played his high school

football in Wisconsin and appeared to hold a slight lead exiting the spring game, but Cutler didn't transfer in from UL-Monroe not to play.

James is the wildcard of the bunch, given the time he's missed. He cracked Ohio State's two-deep as the backup center last year and is four years deep into his development as a Buckeye. Of the three, Hinzman is the only who had four stars on his recruiting profile out of high school.

Left tackle is Fryar's position to lose. He filled in admirably at right tackle when Dawand Jones went down with an injury last season, and has been someone coaches have raved about since 2021. Still, it's a new position — and the most important on the offensive line. He'll need to be a steadying force protecting a new quarterback's blindside.

Right tackle is the other competition that feels open, though a post-spring transfer addition in Simmons, formerly of San Diego State, might have closed it. His track record with the Aztecs wasn't a splendid one, but Frye made it clear in interviews that he doesn't buy into his poor Pro Football Focus grades and believes Simmons got better as the year went on. His first issue to fix is penalties — he was flagged 17 times in 2022.

During the spring it was Michalski and Tshabola competing for the spot. Both were four stars out of high school and powerful run blockers, but their pass sets still need maturation. Tshabola, a year younger than Michalski, boasts an interesting athletic profile at 6-6, 330 pounds. Neither should be counted out for the right tackle spot as fall camp nears.

The one player who could shake everything up is Vimahi. A guard through-and-through, there doesn't appear to be a spot for the fifth-year blocker that Frye is very high on. But that's also why he could create a shuffle up front.

"I told Enokk, as we're sitting here today, if we were going (to play a game right now), then Enokk's gotta get on the field somewhere, somehow because of what he did in the spring," Frye said.

Possibilities for getting Vimahi on the field could include sliding Jones to center, where he has experience, or Jackson to tackle, as he has the versatility to block on the edge. It's all a matter of putting the best unit on the field.

Montgomery and Padilla are both in the team's near-future plans after players on the current line depart, so if they manage to crack the two-deep or see playing time this year it will be great signs for their progress.