

Resetting The Summer: Wide Receivers Room Among Best In America



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 wide receiver.

Even after first-round pick and school single-season receiving yard record holder Jaxon Smith-Njigba went down with an injury that cost him his season, Ohio State still had one of the best wide receiver groups in college football last year.

Marvin Harrison Jr. blossomed into one of the nation's best, former five-star Emeka Egbuka gave the team a second pass catcher that surpassed 1,000 receiving yards, Julian Fleming found some production and former walk-on Xavier Johnson filled in admirably when needed, making huge plays against Notre Dame and Georgia.

All of those players return in 2023. It's hard to ever definitively say before a season that any one position room on any one team is the nation's best, but the Buckeyes' wideouts fit that bill if any one group ever did.

Still, some unproven players young and old will try to leave their own impressions in support of that core group. Let's take a look at where things stand entering fall camp.

Projected starters: Marvin Harrison Jr. (Jr.), Emeka Egbuka (Jr.), Julian Fleming (Sr.)

Depth pieces: Jayden Ballard (r-So.), Xavier Johnson (Grad.), Carnell Tate (Fr.), Kyion Grayes (r-Fr.), Kojo Antwi (So.), Brandon Inniss (Fr.), Noah Rogers (Fr.), Bryson Rodgers (Fr.)

Young player to watch: Tate

Breakdown: Harrison is back after being a finalist for the Biletnikoff Award, catching 77 passes for

1,263 yards and 14 touchdowns. Whether it's junior Kyle McCord — his former high school teammate — or redshirt freshman Devin Brown tossing him the rock, he'll be one of, if not the best receivers in the country and could be a top 10 pick in next year's NFL Draft.

The spring saw the Buckeyes experiment with putting Harrison in the slot, finding new ways for him to find and exploit mismatches with defenses. Ohio State fans could be in for a receiving season unlike anything they've seen before.

Egbuka isn't much of a drop-off from there. The No. 1 wide receiver in the country from the recruiting class of 2021, he's an equal threat from the slot or outside, having played both with much frequency in 2022. He sat out the spring recovering from an injury, but is back at 100 percent for summer workouts.

Fleming caught 34 balls for 533 yards and six touchdowns, quality production alongside the two above-mentioned stars. He's searching for more in 2023, however. A former five-star prospect, injuries have limited Fleming's abilities throughout his career. After receiving shoulder surgery last offseason, Fleming again sat out this spring with injury.

Still, he's looking to take another step forward and boost his draft stock.

The only questions within the wide receiver room pertain as to how the team will deploy its depth. Junior Jayden Ballard is the first name on the depth chart currently after the starting three, a blue-chip recruit known for being a deep threat. Entering his third season, he'll need to find some spots to make plays and serve as a launch pad for a starting spot in 2024 — because there's always young players pushing for playing time in coach Brian Hartline's unit.

One such young player this season is freshman Carnell Tate. He enrolled early and catapulted up the depth chart during the spring, losing his black stripe and grabbing a starting spot with Egbuka and Fleming out. That put him ahead of all four (at the time) second-year receivers on the team's roster.

Speaking of those second-years, Tate and other freshmen on the rise, two of them transferred out following the spring in Kaleb Brown and Caleb Burton. Neither saw their careers in Columbus take off in any meaningful way. Kyion Grayes and Kojo Antwi remain from that class, the latter making an impression with some nice catches during the spring.

Xavier Johnson is a versatile veteran and one of the leaders in Ohio State's locker room. The extent to which he'll be deployed this season remains to be seen, but there's an argument that he's the team's second-best pure slot receiver after Egbuka. That is, if Harrison isn't sliding inside on a given play. He'll see the field, the question is how much.

As much momentum as Tate built this spring, the Ohio State receiver recruit with the most buzz on signing day was Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage five-star Brandon Inniss, who did not enroll early. Look for him to try and start climbing the depth chart as Tate did when he arrives in the fall.

Freshmen Noah Rogers and Bryson Rodgers will be looking to grow and develop this year, likely to only see time in occasional mop-up duty.

Ohio State's receivers room has what could easily be the best starting trio in America and quality depth options of both the veteran and young variety. It is the team's greatest strength as fall camp looms.