

Ryan Day, Jim Knowles Discuss C.J. Hicks' Role On Ohio State Defense



Ohio State junior linebacker C.J. Hicks was on the losing end of the offseason competition between him and Sonny Styles for the starting Will linebacker role, but that doesn't mean the Buckeyes have stopped trying to get him on the field.

Speaking with local media at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center during Ohio State's "developmental week" on Tuesday, head coach Ryan Day said that him and his staff have had conversations about potentially moving the former five-star Hicks closer to the line of scrimmage in more of a defensive end role, while also still believing in the former five-star to excel at his natural linebacker position.

"Yeah, we have (had conversations), but we need C.J., right now, to play linebacker," Day said. "There are certain things that right now he is doing better than others. We need to find the consistency there that we believe that he can do at linebacker. Although we have a few guys already (at linebacker), he needs to be a part of that group."

"Because if you're playing with three linebackers in a game, all it takes is one injury and you're right in the middle of it, this is a long season."

Hicks, who came into Ohio State as a highly touted five-star prospect in the 2021 class, has struggled to see the field so far for the Buckeyes. He appeared mostly on special teams in his first two seasons, totaling 14 tackles in 25 games, before making an unsuccessful run at Ohio State's starting Will linebacker job over the offseason, losing the battle to Styles towards the end of fall camp.

Hicks' role has slightly increased in 2024, recording eight tackles across his first two games as either a reserve or a third linebacker in special packages. But his still-limited role at linebacker seems to be even more solidified following the emergence of Arvell Reese, who has inserted himself into the starting lineup at times in the early portion of this season after having a strong camp.

Defensive coordinator Jim Knowles pushed back on Day's claim that conversations have been made about Hicks moving from linebacker to more of a defensive end, but he did suggest the potential switch could still be implemented this season, especially if the Buckeyes' front four is hit with the injury bug at

some point this season.

“We haven’t discussed that, because C.J. is still developing very well and he’s considered very much a mix with those guys at linebacker,” Knowles said. “But I’ve said it before, it’s always in the back of my mind, because I think he has those gifts and tools to be able to do something like that.

“It’s nothing we’ve really discussed, but it’s always there for me, because I know it may come to play at some point. You would have to experience maybe some depth issues in some other places. We’re so talented on the edge right now, our depth is so good, that it’s not something we need to do right now.”

Although Hicks could eventually see some time at a new position this season, Day said they still view him as a linebacker who could make a significant impact on this year’s defense if he puts it all together.

“He has to improve, he has to continue to grow,” Day said. “We’ve seen him do it. We know that he can do it. It’s just the consistency part of it. So believe in C.J. in a big way.

“I know James (Laurinaitis) and everybody in that room is trying to get him there because we want and need him to play linebacker.”