

Ohio State Defensive End Jack Sawyer, Buckeyes All In For Cotton Bowl



Ohio State's 2023 season will end without a College Football Playoff appearance for the second time in three seasons, a disappointing reality for head coach Ryan Day's program that has landed them a date with No. 9 Missouri in the Cotton Bowl on Dec. 29.

While the consolation of playing in such a game with diminished stakes could cause some teams to check out for the season — and even opt out of the contest altogether — the Buckeyes have instead decided to embrace the unique challenge that comes with preparing for the Tigers, with several key 2023 contributors such as cornerback Denzel Burke, wide receiver Emeka Egbuka, defensive end Jack Sawyer and defensive tackle Tyliek Williams all announcing on Tuesday that they will participate.

For Sawyer, the Cotton Bowl isn't just an opportunity for his younger teammates to get playing time or a last chance for he and his other starters to showcase their skills for the NFL. Instead, it is a chance for the team to come together one last time and finish the 2023 season on a winning note, something he thinks his team is excited to accomplish.

"Pardon my French, but I think that is kind of bulls—t," Sawyer said when asked what his response would be to people who say this year's Cotton Bowl is "meaningless." "This game means a lot to us and to the fans. It's an opportunity for us to go out there and play, and put our best foot forward and show the world who we really are after a tough loss to a good team.

"So all of us who are playing are super excited to be playing," he continued. "We have a great opportunity to play in the Cowboys stadium. It's going to be a fun trip. There's going to be a lot of excitement to get to play a good SEC team in Missouri, they're a great team. It's a big game, and it matters."

Sawyer, who was one of seven players who announced on Tuesday that they were intending to play in the Cotton Bowl, said he and his teammates made a group decision to continue their Buckeye careers

for at least one more game to show the college football universe exactly what this team is made on a national stage, especially after the group's season-defining defeat to Michigan on Nov. 25. The edge rusher added that they did not take long to make a decision on whether or not to play, agreeing to do so right after their ticket to the Cotton Bowl was punched.

"It happened immediately, once we knew where we were going," Sawyer said. "We just all talked about finishing the season and going out strong, because we don't know what a lot of guys are going to do this year. In case some guys leave — or whoever leaves — we want to send guys out the right way and play together one last time and give it all we got for Columbus and the state of Ohio. We want to give all the fans and people a reminder that we still had a good year and that this team's not done."

Egbuka, who was firm in his decision to play in the Cotton Bowl but undecided on his future with the program, said the opportunity for he and his teammates to participate in a historic game inside a well-known football venue is something they are grateful for. He added that he's unsure if this group of Buckeyes will ever get the chance to play as a group again after this game, which only gives him more motivation to participate.

"I feel like every chance you get to step on the field is something you shouldn't take for granted," Egbuka said. "Playing football, we're blessed to be able to do so. You never know when an injury might come or when your opportunities to play with some of your best friends might run out. So just getting the opportunity to just go down to a great venue in Dallas and play against an opponent that's really good is a blessing in itself."

While the future of this currently-constructed Ohio State team is murky at best, those who are still within the Woody Hayes Athletic Center feel as motivated as ever to don the Scarlet and Gray for at least one more game and come away with a season-ending Cotton Bowl victory on Dec. 29. This mentality, according to Sawyer, is a testament to the camaraderie and respect that each teammate has for each other, something that has also driven their collective decision to compete.

"We're such a close team," Sawyer said. "Everybody loves everybody on this team, not to quote something out of 'Jackie Moon.' We just have so much love for each other. When you go work with guys every day in the offseason for the last three years, you just build those friendships, that brotherhood that lasts a lifetime. And then you come to a stage in your career like this, it just makes sense to go out there one last time, no matter what anyone is going to decide to do."

"Honestly, it was a really easy decision for a lot of us," he continued. "But some guys are in different positions. If some guys decide not to play, I fully respect and understand that. And I get it, it makes complete sense. But a lot of us, definitely the underclassmen, decided, 'You know, we should play, and we need to play,'"