

Scouting Report: Ohio State DB Damon Arnette



The differences in Damon Arnette as a redshirt senior in 2019 and Damon Arnette during his first four years in Columbus are almost night and day. After finding playing time as a redshirt sophomore in 2017, the Florida product struggled with growing pains. He was stepping into a room that had produced some of the best cornerbacks in school history over the previous five years, and early in his career, Arnette was not that.

He drew the ire of fans for his tendency to draw the eyes of officials every time he was tasked with covering just about anybody, and his penchant for pass interference played a significant role in what has now become an obsession with cornerbacks that “turn and look” at the ball while it’s in the air among Ohio State fans. He was, to put it frankly, not good in 2017. He was picked on by opposing quarterbacks, he struggled in man coverage and with penalties, and he just looked out of place.

In 2018, when he moved into an outside spot full-time, things really didn’t get better. His struggles remained despite four years in the program, and things just weren’t clicking in Ohio State’s man-coverage-only defense.

That’s what made his breakout 2019 campaign so stunning. This was a player who, like several other members of Ohio State’s starting lineup on defense, had become an albatross in 2018. The news that he would start again in 2019, even under new management in Jeff Hafley and Greg Mattison, was met with groans.

However, after years of Arnette seeming to be so close to *getting it*, he finally got it. Everything came together, he got out of his own way, he was put into a system that allowed him to play in the way that’s natural to him, and it all just worked. His stats dropped slightly because he was being asked to make fewer tackles, but his production in coverage skyrocketed, and he was named a Second-Team All-Big Ten player because of it.

So, how did that happen?

The obvious answer is to point out Ohio State’s shift in defensive philosophy, which has been a common theme in these film studies. Arnette, like just about everybody else on defense, benefited greatly from a defensive coordinator that knows what zone coverage is. He’s not a particularly great athlete (4.56 40-

time), and that made his margin for error essentially nothing in man coverage. He was never big enough to just body those receivers either, so in Arnette's first four years, he often looked like a slot corner being asked to play outside.

In 2019, two things happened. First, the switch the zone, which helped the game slow down for Arnette, as he was usually in a deep outside third in cover 3, and able to see the whole field for the first time in his career. Second, the addition of Jeff Okudah. Okudah is bigger and faster than Arnette, and more suited physically to deal with No. 1 receivers. Arnette was never going to be able to do that successfully, and in 2019, he no longer had to. He was free to play his game, which is that of a clever, feisty No. 2 cornerback in a zone system. That's his fit, and it's the only thing that will work for him long term.

The first part there, clever, is an important one to note when talking about Arnette's game. His football IQ is rarely talked about because he doesn't play a position that typically draws that moniker, but Arnette was without a doubt one of Ohio State's smartest and most instinctual defenders last season.

Take this play for example. Ohio State is in off man coverage, when Arnette's man goes in motion. Arnette makes the correct call, signaling to the high-safety, Jordan Fuller, that he needs to rotate down and take the motion man, while Arnette shifts into Fuller's role as the deep safety.

Once he's there, Arnette reads that Okudah is way too far outside of his man to make a play, so he picks up the receiver, attaches to his hip, and makes an extremely difficult play look very easy.

There are also plenty of plays like this, from zone coverage. Arnette is dropping into a deep third, but he reads the plays quickly, knows that there isn't going to be any threat downfield, and gets in to make the play as soon as the ball is thrown. Again, difficult play, made to look easy.

This isn't just a coverage thing for Arnette either. It translates to his run stopping where he made a massive step forward in 2019, perfecting his pursuit angles to pair with what was already a pretty solid ability to hit.

Here's he again dropping into a deep third, but he's watching the backfield as he does it. He figured out where Jonathan Taylor is headed, gets outside of the wideout trying to block him, and meets the halfback there, behind the line of scrimmage. This isn't speed, or great athletic ability making this plays. It's Arnette reading the play as it's happening, his best ability that he was never able to show off before 2019.

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Zone-heavy defense that already has a No. 1 cornerback. That's the fit. Arnette is only going to be able to keep up this momentum if he's allowed to play in the system that fits him, and there's only one system that fits him. He could be a serviceable backup on just about any team, but if he goes to the right place, he's going to be a mid-round steal as a long-time starter at No. 2 cornerback for a team that was smart enough to do its due-diligence.