

Stroud, Quarterbacks Leading Charge For Buckeyes In Spring Practices



When spring practices started last year, Ohio State didn't have a surefire replacement for Heisman Trophy candidate Justin Fields, whom the Chicago Bears selected with their first-round pick in the 2021 NFL Draft.

Three scholarship quarterbacks suited up for the first session, including redshirt freshmen C.J. Stroud and Jack Miller and freshman Kyle McCord. However, none of them had worthwhile collegiate experience from the previous year. Stroud and Miller scarcely played in Buckeyes' eight-game season, while McCord's last snaps were against high school athletes.

It appeared that Ryan Day had his hands full. Buckeye fans weren't expecting another Fields (or maybe they were), but he needed to make the right decision — one that would keep his program in national-title contention in the future. Southlake (Texas) five-star Quinn Ewers didn't help the head coach's cause when he chose to reclassify and attend Ohio State a year ahead of schedule.

Stroud separated himself from his teammates in the months before fall camp, earning Day's trust and working with the No. 1 offense throughout fall camp. Despite the smoke that Day might choose Miller, McCord or Ewers — a cloud the head coach created with comments, claiming the team would need all four quarterbacks to win — he stuck to his gut and chose Stroud as the starting quarterback.

The Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., native helped Ohio State lead the nation in total offense (561.2 ypg) and scoring offense (45.7 ppg). He also powered the Buckeyes' third-ranked passing offense with over 380 yards passing per contest. Stroud won the Big Ten's Offensive Player of the Year, Quarterback of the Year and Freshman of the Year awards and was a finalist for the Heisman Trophy.

On March 8, Day reflected on Stroud's progress in the last year, claiming that the rising redshirt sophomore took tremendous strides in his first season under center.

"At this time last year, he had not thrown a college pass," Day said. "Now, he's got a whole year under his belt. You're learning what to do. Now you're kind of learning why you do it. There is a deeper understanding of things."

Day said Stroud spent January and February learning new schemes and plays that Ohio State will look

to implement this fall, which can open up exciting new possibilities for an offense returning six starters from last season.

“There is a little bit of a ‘Rolodex’ of plays under his belt,” Day said. “We will look at some new concepts, too, and some things he can handle and maybe put a little more on his play with what he can do at the line of scrimmage.”

In 2017, Day arrived at Ohio State to coach the quarterbacks and run the offense with coordinator Kevin Wilson. Since then, the program has experienced high positional turnover with its signal-callers. J.T. Barrett (2017), Dwayne Haskins (2018), Fields (2019-20) and Stroud all started in Day’s five years in Columbus. Stroud will join Fields as the second quarterback in Day’s tenure to start more than one season.

“When you think about guys who have played in the NFL for 15 or 20 years at quarterback, this is just year two for him (as the starter), and it feels great,” Day said. “You feel like you’ve got a guy who has been around for a long time. We’ve only had that one other time with Justin. It is exciting going into the season with a guy who has played a whole season under his belt.”

McCord returns after becoming Stroud’s primary backup last year. Miller and Ewers transferred during bowl practices — the former to Florida and the latter to Texas. Day said he felt encouraged by McCord’s performance in the team’s first spring practice, claiming the rising sophomore didn’t skip a beat after two months off the field.

“I was impressed with how Kyle came in today,” Day said. “I thought he had a good seven-on-seven session. He had a good approach. He picked up from where he left off in the Rose Bowl practice, which was great.”

Corner Canyon (Utah) four-star Devin Brown will accompany Stroud and McCord in the Ohio State quarterback room this season. Brown lacks the collegiate experience of his counterparts, but Day said he has a competitive edge and a desire to improve.

In February, Brown said that the Buckeye coaching staff has encouraged him to embrace a “next-man-up” philosophy toward playing quarterback next season. He said quarterback coach Corey Dennis told him to embrace being a backup but to be ready whenever his name is called.

“Really, you’re only one snap away from getting in,” he said. “Kyle got into some games this past year. Depending on where I’m at in spring ball, I could be one play away from getting into the game. I have to attack it with that mentality that I have to be ready to play.”

Through the first practice, Day said Brown would need to learn the process of being a collegiate quarterback. It’s a simple formula for any freshman: the more reps one receives, the better they will become.

“Devin, it was his first day out here, and I thought he handled it pretty well,” Day said. “It was his first day and there was a lot going on his first day. You’re doing everything for the first time. The more reps we can get those guys, the better they’re going to be.”

If McCord and Brown can continue to progress behind Stroud, Ohio State can feel comfortable about its offense producing at a high level this season and beyond. Day said having a backup quarterback with

meaningful in-game experience — in this case, McCord — is something he's not yet experienced as head coach of the program.

"We have not had that (in the past)," Day said. "We haven't had a starter with experience going into last year. To actually have a backup who has been on the field and played in games and has a year under his belt, that's a big deal. You can't substitute experience.

"Just being through it and through a whole year should pay dividends. That should be something we can use to our advantage. I think Kyle had a good off-season. I think if he can continue to grow as the spring goes on, that would be huge for us."