

J.T. Tuimoloau Carved Integral Role On Ohio State Defensive Line In First Year



Ohio State freshman defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau understood arriving months late to campus would come with significant challenges.

He didn't expect any preferential treatment. His national recruiting status wouldn't earn him any brownie points with the coaching staff and locker room.

Knowing this, Tuimoloau took a blue-collar approach to his first weeks in the program, using his opportunities to prepare physically and mentally. Ohio State stresses the importance of "mental reps" — watching other players perform and learn from their experience, which the 6-4, 277-pound edge rusher took to heart.

"It was just, keep your head down and stay in the books and stay back a little later to watch film or to meet with (defensive line coach Larry Johnson) one-on-one," Tuimoloau said. "That was my motto coming in is after every practice watch film with him and ask the older dudes just little tips and things I can get from them to apply to my game. That was it for me, keep your head down, watch film, do the extra work so it can get you more prepared.

Tuimoloau must have impressed the Ohio State coaching staff in that short time. He played double-digit snaps in the team's season-opening contest against Minnesota — a Big Ten opponent under the lights. Tuimoloau continued to flash to Johnson and company, as he didn't play fewer than 10 snaps in any game, according to Dan Hope of Eleven Warriors.

The Edgewood, Wash., native, recognized on Dec. 16 how far he'd come in his first year as a Buckeye.

"When I first got here, I didn't talk to anybody. I was quiet for at least two weeks," Tuimoloau said. "I think as we kept moving forward, me and (defensive end) Jack (Sawyer)'s bond grew. It's on the field and off the field. We always talk about what we could do better or what move he used, or how he used this move to get by a defender.

"Once I get to know my teammates, I'm very talkative, but I think when I first got here, I was like, 'I came in pretty late, I gotta get on my stuff.' I was very shy at a certain point, but it wasn't until the older dudes and Jack and the rest of the freshmen in my class just helped me open up."

Tuimoloau emerged as a front runner of the 2021 class and looks poised to continue his ascension in later years. Defensive end Tyreke Smith will play his final snaps for Ohio State in the Rose Bowl. Zach Harrison, who started opposite of Smith this season, could declare for the NFL Draft after the bowl season, while Javontae Jean-Baptiste could return for a fifth season in 2022. However, Tuimoloau only played 50 fewer snaps than Jean-Baptiste this year.

Both Tuimoloau and Sawyer figure to have expanded roles in 2022. Sawyer claims an off-season working with Johnson and player development coordinator Mickey Marotti will help them earn more involvement in the defense.

"I think more so it's kind of like our mindset's changed a little bit. As this season's kind of coming to a close and me and J.T. are developing and growing into men, I think we are starting to realize that we gotta take it to the next level with everyone we do," Sawyer said. "We're gonna have more of an important role next year and more of a leadership role next year that our defense needs. I think that's kind of more the way it's going for us right now."

Due to Tuimoloau's rushed build-up to the season, which featured no winter workouts or spring practices to help him adjust, he is eager to see how the training will help him make strides before his sophomore slate begins.

"I'm actually very excited just to get a full offseason, not only with Coach J but as well as with Coach Mick, everybody and the nutritionists," Tuimoloau said. "Get a full offseason before this season. I feel like I'm really excited to see my body and my technique level up."

Tuimoloau tallied 3 1/2 tackles for loss, 2 1/2 sacks, a quarterback hurry and a pass breakup this season. He felt surprised with his physicality against Big Ten offensive linemen. He thanked Ohio State's offensive line for its toughness and how it prepared him for future opponents.

"For the physical part, I feel like I did pretty well. I did a decent job going against the big O-linemen," Tuimoloau said. "I was very surprised, but just knowing what I did before getting here, putting in the training and the dedication, I feel like it all paid off. I feel like the only thing that needed to change was just your mindset. Transitioning from high school to college ball real quick, you just needed to change your mindset on it."

Tuimoloau also credited Sawyer, his family and frequent conversations with his father for helping him through the most challenging parts of that transition. He explained that his father would often remind him "there's a reason you're here" and that "sometimes you gotta sacrifice your extra time to get where you want to be."

Tuimoloau used his father's advice and put together a solid first season given his circumstances. He also acknowledges that his many opportunities took a great deal of trust from the coaching staff at Ohio State, which he is openly thankful for.

"I feel like I had a decent season. I got here three-and-a-half months ago and just taking everything in from the older guys. With the season I had, I give my props to Coach J and the whole defensive staff for trusting me because I know how late I got there," Tuimoloau said. "I had to take in the whole defensive schemes as well as my brothers on the D-line unit and also the offensive line. Just getting me prepared and helping me through practice and fall camp and everything like that."

But Tuimoloau believes the best is yet to come in his Buckeye career, and a significant step up could be right around the corner.

“I feel like the next step for me is just keep doing what I’m doing but take it up one more notch,” Tuimoloau said. “Still keep my head down, be humble, keep God close and continue to be the better version of myself.”