

Atlanta Falcons See More Than Speedy CB In Ohio State's Kendall Sheffield

Thomas Dimitroff rolled the dice last Saturday when Atlanta's general manager made the executive decision to trade up into the 2019 NFL draft's fourth round, swapping the 117th and 186th picks with the Detroit Lions before selecting Ohio State's Kendall Sheffield at No. 111 overall.

The 6-0, 193-pounder's road to the draft was bumpy between up-and-down performances over the past two years with the Buckeyes and a training process derailed by a partially torn left pectoral March 3 during the bench-press portion of the NFL scouting combine at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

But when Dan Quinn attended a Sheffield workout ahead of the draft, the head coach and about seven Falcons coaches and executives were sold on the speedster's upside — beyond just the potential at cornerback.

"When we went to Ohio State to work him out ... (his speed) is eye-catching, it's eye-catching," Dimitroff said. "He's just one of those guys that's going to add to this team in that way. And the great thing is, he is not just (fast). Sometimes guys like that get tabbed with the track-guy mentality. He's aggressive. He'll put his nose in there and really make some sweet tackles and aggressive tackles."

Sheffield spent two years in OSU's three-man rotation of cornerbacks before he quietly made his decision to declare for the draft by Jan. 14, leaving Columbus as a fourth-year junior.

But the Missouri, Texas, native's journey actually started in 2015 at Alabama before he redshirted and transferred to Brenham (Texas) Blinn College for the 2016 season.

As a four-star recruit — the 247Sports composite's No. 3 overall prospect, No. 1 cornerback and No. 2 player from Texas — out of junior college in the 2017 class, Sheffield signed with Ohio State and resumed his collegiate career, never quite taking off but doing enough to intrigue NFL scouts between straight-line speed and ball-hawking physicality.

"This guy can fly," Dimitroff said. "He is really fast. He's one of the faster guys in this year's draft. Obviously, wasn't able to run at the combine. Really fast, he's an aggressive guy as well. He's a guy that we look to continue to grow with and he has the ability to play on the outside, and we've also talked about him as a return specialist as well. That's not his background."

Sheffield split time with then-sophomore Damon Arnette and then-junior Denzel Ward among the Buckeyes' three-man rotation of cornerbacks in 2017, appearing across all 14 games while recording 40 tackles (two for losses), a forced fumble and a fumble recovery.

After the Cleveland Browns selected Ward (5-11, 190) with the fourth overall pick in the 2018 NFL draft, the junior duo of Arnette (6-0, 185) and Sheffield returned for the 2018 campaign, but had mixed results — Sheffield tallied 35 tackles (two for losses), eight pass breakups (two interceptions) and a forced fumble — as OSU's secondary struggled, surrendering big plays over the top and inconsistent against passes underneath.

Despite a small sample size from the fall through the spring — the injury at the combine cut his time in Indy short, so he was unable to ultimately compete — Atlanta saw Sheffield's multifaceted potential and jumped on him as a mid-round prospect.

"To have the ball skills outside, how important that is — we talk about it every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday," Quinn said. "So for a guy to have the chance to turn the ball over, he's got plenty of experience outside (and) inside. So we couldn't be more pumped to add both the corners to the group."

The Falcons prioritized the secondary, selecting Sheffield and before drafting former Washington cornerback Jordan Miller (6-1, 186) with the 172th overall pick in the fifth round.

The draftees inject youth into Atlanta's cornerbacks, complementing veterans such as Desmond Trufant (6-0, 190).

Taveze Calhoun (6-1, 188), Ryan Neal (6-3, 200), Isaiah Oliver (6-0, 210) and Blidi Wreh-Wilson (6-1, 190) round out the cornerbacks currently on the roster, but Dimitroff and Quinn took Sheffield with an immediate-impact expectation.

"I'm a hard-working player," Sheffield said. "I'll do anything for the team and I'm ready to get up there and work, and I'm excited."

Quinn described an opening for either Miller or Sheffield to step in immediately as the nickel cornerback for Atlanta's 4-2-5 or 3-3-5 looks.

"I think Sheff could, for sure, (be the nickel)," Quinn said.

The Falcons get Sheffield and others in Flowery Branch, Ga., for rookie minicamp next Friday through Sunday (May 10-12) for a first impression.

"When I camp up there, I just want to get up there and work and contribute as much as I can to the team," said Sheffield, who is expected by Dimitroff and Quinn to practice without limitations after he recovered from his left pectoral injury.

Sheffield is by no means a finished product, but the defensive-minded Quinn and staffers such as defensive passing game coordinator/secondary coach Jerome Henderson see his ability and look to get him there sooner than later.

"We really expect these guys to have an impact, right away," Quinn said. "The game readiness of those two players — they've been in it, they can stay right at the line of scrimmage and battle for it. The speed that we've added in Sheff' and the ball skills that we've added in Jordan, you're always trying to feature all the good things that a player has and have him planned. So it'll take a while to figure it out — who's going to go inside to play nickel, who's going to stay outside and those are the things that will take some time.

"And through the first part of OTAs and even minicamp to training camp, we've got the ability to move guys around. We've got some pretty strong receivers we'd like to match them up against. So sometimes you'll see me at practice, writing down over here in the morning before we get (going), 'Raheem (Morris), we need this play, this play, this play to match up the receivers,' or, 'OK, 'Rome, we need this one, this one, this one.' So that way, after that practice, 'OK, I like that matchup, get to see Sheff and

Julio (Jones),' and you get to see Miller against (Taveze) Calhoun.'

"There's no better (wide receivers) group to go against than the guys that we have. So we're very excited about that (cornerbacks) group."

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