

Jayden Ballard Looking For Playing Time In 2023



Each of Ohio State's three starting wide receivers — given that Jaxon Smith-Nijigba didn't play much of the year — are back in 2023. This much is known. There's little doubt they'll be starting again.

What isn't known entering spring is whether other receivers can find a role for themselves within the offense. There's a group of second-year wideouts looking for spots that BSB chronicled earlier in the spring, but a certain speedy rising junior is also on the hunt for playing time. That player is Jayden Ballard.

"His play speed has got to continue to grow. He's got some of the best hands on the team," Ohio State wide receivers coach Brian Hartline said. "His routes have got to continue to grow. His body language is continuing to grow. The game within the game's got to continue to grow. So there's still a lot of growth (to be had) there, but he has not taken steps backward.

"Some guys take a step forward, two steps back. He has not done that. He's continued to grow and get bigger, and now he's over 195 pounds, he's running fast, great ball skills. We've just got to make sure the whole totality of being a receiver continues to grow."

Ballard did manage to flex some of his deep-threat ability in garbage time last season, picking up 155 yards on just eight catches for an average of 19.4 yards per reception. He scored one touchdown, a 72-yard catch and dash up the left sideline against Toledo.

That came off the arm of Kyle McCord, one of two quarterbacks who will be fighting it out to become OSU's starting signal caller in 2023.

Spring should provide ample opportunities for Ballard to showcase what he can bring. Two of the above-mentioned three returning starters, junior Emeka Egbuka and senior Julian Fleming, are out until fall.

"I'm going to make my opportunities count, make a good impression for Coach (Ryan) Day and Coach

Hart," Ballard said.

Ballard's got a bit more experience now in his third year, but that doesn't mean he isn't still taking lessons from those ahead of him. Marvin Harrison Jr., a Biletnikoff Award Finalist last season and the last of the three returning starters, has been one of the main people helping Ballard with his route running.

"I'm an older guy, but I'm still going to try to chase Marvin and be what he is," Ballard said. "Chase Chris (Olave), Garrett (Wilson), those types of guys. Chase Emeka, Julian."

Ballard's main area of focus has been improving things outside his deep-ball ability. His speed could be an asset in other areas of the route tree if utilized properly. He's been drilling footwork a lot in the offseason, he said.

"I was coming back to the facility every day and working on my top-ends (of routes)," Ballard said. "I do that with Coach Hart too. We're just getting my feet right."

In the end, whether or not Ballard gets meaningful playing time in 2023 will come down to whether he can reach the level of Harrison, Egbuka and Fleming so there's no dropoff when he comes in.

"At the end of the day, I'm going to pull a guy off the field to put you on, you've got to do what he does," Hartline said. "I mean, I'm not going to pull the left tackle off and put the next (wide receiver) in so everybody can feel good. So you've got to be able to do that. And if he's deserving of that, he'll be out there."