

C.J. Hicks Enters 2024, As A Much More Confident Linebacker



Now over two years removed from being the highest rated recruit in Ohio State's top-five ranked recruiting class, Ohio State junior linebacker C.J. Hicks is maybe not where he thought he'd be to start his junior year. Hicks, as it stands before the season, is entrenched in a highly-contested position battle with none other than the second-ranked player in Ohio State's 2022 recruiting class, junior linebacker Sonny Styles.

Behind All-Big Ten honorees, Tommy Eichenberg and Steele Chambers, Hicks didn't have an easy pathway to playing time as a freshman and sophomore. This path didn't get any clearer when the Buckeyes went from a 4-3 defense to a 4-2-5 defense, putting one less linebacker on the field.

To complicate things further for a potential Will Linebacker like Hicks, Styles is making the transition from safety to linebacker this year, making an overcrowded room of talented linebackers even more compact.

Going for a combined 14 total tackles in his first two seasons in a backup role, Hicks came into 2024 with a different mentality. According to Hicks, the biggest source of improvement from his game from 2023 to 2024 was his confidence.

"It was me trying to be perfect every snap, so that I could get on the field. That was my thing my first two years," Hicks said. "Then this year, I don't care (if I mess up) just go. If I mess up, I mess up, talk to Coach Knowles, get back on it."

Despite the change in mentality, Hicks will still have to force himself on the field over one of his very talented teammates, presumably Styles. According to Hicks though, one player's prosperity doesn't mean the other's failure.

"Sonny and I both talk about (the position battle) a lot," Hicks said. "We don't really care who starts as long as both of us are eating. He can start, I go in. I start, he goes in. As long as we're both making plays that's all that matters to us."

Hicks finds value in the pairing between himself and Styles and feels as though the duo complements each other well.

"I feel like you're getting the same guy," Hicks said. "Both of us can get to the quarterback, both of us cover. Both of us are fast, you can't really beat us in a lot of things."

Hicks' strengths go beyond that of a good linebacker, though. In high school, Hicks played several positions, including linebacker, running back and punt returner and almost every position in the secondary.

This wealth of experience helps Hicks become comfortable in situations that others at his position may not be.

"Me playing those positions has helped me a lot (to be more versatile)," Hicks said. "Me and Sonny both being 6-3, 230 plus, just to go out there and cover receivers, that helps our secondary a lot."

Hicks' positional versatility and athleticism in general translates well to rushing the passer, which according to both Hicks and linebackers coach, James Laurinaitis, may be his greatest strength.

"I think he's (Hicks) probably the best blitzer in our room," Laurinaitis said. "Arvell (Reese) might have an argument with that, I'm sure Sonny (Styles) wants an argument with that, but C.J. just makes stuff happen when you send him."

Hicks himself didn't shy away from his pass rushing or blitzing abilities.

"You need a play, it's third and long you need somebody to get to the quarterback, I'm that guy," Hicks said. "No matter who the defensive ends are. I love our d-line but I feel like I'm the best when it comes to getting to the quarterback."

Part of Hicks' pass-rushing or blitzing abilities goes back to the care-free attitude that he tries to play with.

"When you're rushing the passer or when you are blitzing, there are certain passes you still have to take," Hicks said. "But regardless, it's not like you're not thinking as much as just going."

When asked about the advice he wishes he could give to his younger self, Hicks' answer was simple.

"Stop thinking so much and just go, like I said, you make mistakes. It's fine, just go, stop thinking so much," Hicks said.

No matter what path Hicks takes it will be difficult for him to become a full-time starter for one of the best defenses in college football. Regardless of his role, Hicks will go forward with his newfound mentality: keep things simple and not sweat over mistakes.