

Depth At Safety Has Improved According To Jim Knowles



In a unit full of multiple talented contributors at every position, it's tough to find an area of concern even at the backup positions for defensive coordinator Jim Knowles. In the offseason, it was the safety position that kept Knowles slightly restless.

While almost every program in college football would trade their safety room for a lineup of former SEC freshman of the year Caleb Downs and four-year letterwinner Lathan Ransom, every other program is not Ohio State. At Ohio State, relying on a true sophomore in Malik Hartford and a true freshman in Jaylen McClain, as talented as they may be, at the backup spots isn't ideal.

"It goes back to safety depth," Knowles said on Aug. 15 when asked if there were any glaring issues with the defense going into the team's second scrimmage on Aug. 17. "We feel good about our starters, but the guys behind there - we have two guys who were unproven and still learning. Every day in practice is a learning experience for them and a challenge, particularly if they get to go against our best receivers. So our safety depth needs to come along."

Through the first two games, Knowles has to like what he has seen. For one, Ransom and Downs have been as good as advertised. In the team's opening game against Akron, Ransom led the team with nine total tackles and had a fumble recovery that he returned for a touchdown. In addition to being named the defensive player of the game against Akron, Ransom graded out as a champion in the game. Downs had a similarly productive outing against Western Michigan, where he tied the team lead with four total tackles. As Knowles said in the offseason, though, he wasn't worried about his starters but rather his fairly inexperienced backups. Through two games though, Knowles is more comfortable with the insurance policy that McClain and Hartford provide.

"(Hartford and McClain) are coming along," Knowles said in a press conference on Tuesday. "The more reps they get, they've been showing up, doing all the right things, playing hard, making the checks and making plays when their number is called. The more reps we can get them, the better. Football is a

tough game, it's a long season and we need them."

It's been a pretty small sample size in the first two games for Hartford and McClain, who have mainly received reps during the late stages of the first two games, but both players have looked the part. In the 56-0 win over Western Michigan, Hartford got on the stat sheet with an assisted tackle, but it was the true freshman McClain who made the highlight play. With five minutes to go in the fourth quarter, McClain got a perfect jump on the snap, taking off from the first down marker, untouched into the backfield to tackle the Broncos' running back for a loss.

The 373rd-ranked player in the 2024 class, McClain wasn't amongst the most talented freshmen in Ohio State's class according to recruiting experts, but since he has arrived in Columbus, McClain has flashed his skills as much as any true freshman on the defensive side of the ball. McClain became the first freshman to lose their black stripe in the fall and the third freshman to lose his black stripe on the year.

Learning from seasoned veterans like Downs and Ransom, Hartford and McClain will look to provide depth to a great defense, and eventually build a legacy of their own as potential future starters.