

Emeka Egbuka To Return Punts, Xavier Johnson On Kickoff Return Duties To Begin Season



Ohio State head coach Ryan Day confirmed on Thursday who will be returning punts and kickoffs when the season begins on Saturday at Indiana.

“Yeah, it looks like (Emeka Egbuka will) do the punt returning and Xavier (Johnson) will start off doing the kickoff returning,” Day said.

Egbuka handled 11 of Ohio State’s 15 punt returns last season, averaging 6.8 yards per return with a long of 18 yards. Nationally, the Buckeyes ranked just 79th in the nation in punt returns and seventh in the Big Ten, averaging 6.7 yards per attempt.

Johnson, meanwhile, handled most the kickoff returns, taking 12 kickoffs and averaging 22.4 yards per attempt with a long of 46 yards. The Buckeyes struggled nationally in this category as well, ranking just 88th in the country and 10th in the Big Ten with 19.0 yards per attempt.

Ohio State has not returned a punt for a touchdown since Jalin Marshall in 2014 against Indiana, while it’s been even longer without a kickoff return touchdown, with Jordan Hall the last to do so in 2010 against Michigan. With some of Ohio State’s struggles in recent years to get consistent production out of the return game, Day said the team did consider making some changes, but that Egbuka and Johnson give the Buckeyes their best chance for success right now.

“We looked at a lot of different options to see who could do that and we’ll possibly give some of those guys opportunities, but when you talk about returning both punt and kickoff, they require a certain skill set,” Day said. “The first thing is they have to be able to field the ball. We put some guys back there and it felt like once the ball was in their hand, they gave us a real good chance but didn’t quite handle the ball very well. And then other guys, you know, just have to take care of the football. You have to be strong enough to take a shot because those are kind of high speed hits, so there’s a lot that comes with it.

“But this year you’ll see different guys have opportunities as time goes on,” he continued. “But Emeka

and Xavier certainly are the guys that give us the best chance right now.”

Others involved in the return game last season included Chip Trayanum, Jayden Ballard and Egbuka each returning at least one kickoff, while Ballard, Denzel Burke, Johnson, JK Johnson and Reis Stocksdale each returned at least one punt. Dating back to 2021, Ohio State also saw Julian Fleming, Steele Chambers and TreVeyon Henderson return kickoffs.