

Experience, Dual-Threat Ability Among The Separators For Will Howard In Starting QB Competition



In a move that was not surprising to many, Ohio State head coach Ryan Day officially named Will Howard the Buckeyes' starting quarterback for the team's season opener against Akron at home on Aug. 31.

While many who follow the program viewed Howard as the favorite to win the starting job over sophomore Devin Brown and true freshman Julian Sayin throughout the offseason, Day said there were certain characteristics that separated the fifth-year Kansas State transfer from the pack, something that became increasingly evident as the summer went on.

"When you take the aggregate of all the numbers, Will graded out significantly ahead of the other guys in the team work," Day said Thursday at the Woody Hayes Athletic center after naming Howard the starter. "Coming off the spring, everything was very new. It was a significant change in terms of scheme and what we ask the quarterback to do. Once he kind of went through the offseason, he changed his body and then came in with a much better knowledge of what was going on, you could see him playing faster, his feet were moving, the ball was coming out with more pace. And then I think after the first week, you just start to see him take control, make good decisions."

Howard's improvements to both his arm and overall physical condition have been well documented this summer, but another factor in Day's decision that may have been overlooked during this competition was the quarterback's experience under center. Howard enters Ohio State with four years of collegiate experience at Kansas State, playing 34 games (27 starts) for the Wildcats and totaling 2,643 passing yards and 24 touchdowns along with another 921 rushing yards and 19 scores.

Howard's experience in the Big 12 — which also includes a start in the 2022 Big 12 Championship Game against eventual CFP runner-up TCU, where he completed 18 of his 32 passes for 199 yards, two touchdowns and in interception in a 31-28 win — is a valuable addition to a Buckeye offense and team that has yet to appear in a Big Ten Championship Game in three seasons.

Offensive coordinator Chip Kelly said his quarterback's experience became obvious as he began to command the huddle during fall camp.

“One thing that you know he has is he has experience,” Kelly said on Thursday. “He’s been in the huddle. He’s been in a huddle in a lot of games, he’s been in a huddle in big games. This isn’t new to him. Columbus is new to him, but playing college football isn’t new to him. So I think that experience really started to shine through here during camp.”

Beyond his experience and overall command of the room, another significant factor that led to Howard being named the starting quarterback is his ability to run. Both Day and Kelly have consistently discussed with the media how Howard’s dual-threat ability can make Ohio State’s offense far more multidimensional than it has been in years’ past by not only making defenses think about the threat of a quarterback run, but also creating more space for top Buckeye backs TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins.

Kelly touched on these benefits on Thursday, saying that opposing teams will now have to gameplan for and react to Howard taking off during games, which could ultimately confuse them and give the Buckeyes the upper hand.

“His ability to help us in the run game is going to be a really big plus for us this year,” Kelly said. “He’s not just a guy that’s going to hand it off. People are going to have to respect him for his ability to run. He ran 22 mph this summer at 236 pounds, so there is a threat of a run at the position.

“So you’re going to have to defend 11. Some teams, when you play against them, you have to defend 10 because the quarterback’s not going to hurt you in the run game. But Will can.”

Howard’s ability to run — along with his sound decision-making and experience — could ultimately have a positive effect on the direction Ohio State takes this season. But with Howard playing alongside a group of veteran and explosive playmakers along with one of the best defenses in all of college football, Day said his quarterback does not have to play “extraordinary” football, but rather play a smart, turnover-free game in order for the Buckeyes to finish on top in 2024.

“We need someone who’s going to take care of the football, make good decisions, make the routine plays routinely,” Day said. “He has to play well on third down. He has to play well in the red zone and win the game in a two-minute drill. I mean, that’s what we ask our quarterbacks to do.

“And we have a good surrounding cast around him. So taking care of the ball is very, very important — but then also scoring touchdowns. I think all of our quarterbacks this year bring a skill set that they can beat you with their feet. They can beat you with their arm, but they have to beat you with their brain, too.”