

Fall Camp Observations: Defense Stifles Offense, Styles Starts Over Hicks At Linebacker



Less than a month away from playing its season-opening regular season game, the Buckeye defense looked like the unit billed as one of the best in the country on day one of practice.

While the Buckeyes spent most of the day mixing different players along the unit rather than having a set-in-stone first-team, the defensive line showed signs of what it could look like come late August. Defensive tackles Tyleik Williams and Ty Hamilton and defensive ends JT Tuimoloau and Jack Sawyer received many of the first-team reps during the practice.

In the secondary, Jermaine Mathews spent more time at the nickel position rather than being on the outside as he had been in previous years.

During his press conference after the practice, head coach Ryan Day mentioned Mathews' importance to the team in the 2024 season. Day also added that Mathews is a player with a lot of quickness, twitch and talent in general.

"He (Mathews) is going to have a good preseason for us," Day said. "The talent is definitely there."

Former Alabama transfer and Sophomore Ohio State safety Caleb Downs was in at safety next to graduate senior Lathan Ransom, but also in with the special teams as a punt returner and kick returner.

Unsurprisingly, junior cornerback Davison Igbinosun and senior cornerback Denzel Burke were the first-team guys on the outside at the cornerback position.

In the middle of the defense, at a position of uncertainty for the Buckeyes, Will linebacker Sonny Styles received first-team reps. Styles' place in the first team came as a bit of a surprise as it was C.J. Hicks, who seemed to take more of the first team reps during the spring game. Hicks garnered most of the backup reps on a separate field at Will linebacker.

Alongside Styles was Mike linebacker and graduate senior Cody Simon.

The highlight of the day for the defense or highlights occurred against young quarterbacks, Lincoln

Kienholz and Air Noland, with the Buckeyes defense forcing back-to-back interceptions on the two underclassmen. Safety Ryan Rudzinski came up with the first interception of Kienholz, while grandson of Buckeye great Archie Griffin, Diante Griffin, got in on the fun with an interception of his own just one play later. Not long thereafter former Michigan transfer and senior linebacker Joey Velazquez forced a fumble that he subsequently returned for a touchdown.

The secondary excelled in coverage during the 7-on-7 drill when it forced several consecutive incompletions. Even when the offense found more of a groove, strong coverage overtop forced Buckeye quarterbacks to settle for contested checkdowns.

The defensive line found its stride with a two-play stretch later in the practice. Will Howard was sacked, or was as close as a quarterback can get to being sacked in the preseason, by senior defensive end Jack Sawyer. The Buckeyes' defensive line then stuffed running back Quinshon Judkins behind the line of scrimmage for another tackle for loss.

As the special teams go, Joe McGuire seemed to get the majority of the first-team reps at the punter position at the beginning of practice with a more even mix with Nick McLarty later on in practice.