

Fall Camp Observations: Styles Starts Again On Day Two, Young DBs Shine



Ohio State held its second of 25 fall camp practices Friday morning at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, and although there weren't as many obvious observations to point out today as for the offense, there are still some important things to note regarding how the defense shaped out during what was a soggy morning in Columbus.

Arguably the most pressing news from Friday's practice came from the linebacker position, which had Sonny Styles taking the majority of the first-team reps over fellow junior C.J. Hicks for the second practice in a row. Styles, who converted to linebacker from safety this offseason and has been lauded by many for his ability to quickly transition, was seen working alongside Cody Simon as the starting Mike linebacker for the majority of practice, while Hicks, who largely split with Styles in the spring, was garnering backup reps on a different field.

Styles earning starting reps at the Will over Hicks during the first two fall practices seems like an important development, especially considering Styles is significantly more inexperienced at the position. But within the program it appears more trivial, as defensive coordinator Jim Knowles told the media after practice that the two linebackers are "neck and neck" in the competition with little separation between them.

Aside from linebacker, there were no other major surprises as far as positioning, with each of the returning starters occupying their top role over their younger backups throughout the entire practice.

As for overall performance, the defense was not as dominant as they were on Day One, with receivers often creating more separation with members of Ohio State's secondary than a day prior. That trend was most evident on the final play of practice, when quarterback Devin Brown found sophomore Bryson Rodgers down the seam for a long touchdown, igniting a fiery celebration from the offense to end the session.

But there were still plenty of plays made on the defensive front, especially with some of the younger defensive backs.

Ohio State received its usual production from some of its top defenders, with cornerbacks Jordan Hancock and Denzel Burke both getting crisp pass deflections during 7-on-7 drills — Burke's play

coming on freshman sensation Jeremiah Smith in the end zone. But a few of the upperclassmen also shone, including redshirt freshman cornerback Calvin Simspon-Hunt, who had practice-high three pass deflections on the day, all coming during 7-on-7s.

Simpson-Hunt was not the only young defender that performed, though, as true freshman safety Jaylen McClain nearly came away with an interception of Will Howard during the middle of practice after jumping wide receiver Reis Stocksdale's route.

While there is not much to report on the defensive line, which mostly ran individual drills during 7-on-7 play, BSB would be remiss not to mention special teams. On that front, sophomore safety Caleb Downs continued to take reps as a punt returner, while Australian true freshman punter Nick McLarty booted two booming kicks that impressed those in attendance and had Ohio State's returners often backpedaling

Despite the two impressive boots, McLarty still appeared to receive backup reps at punter behind fellow Aussie Joe McGuire, who is in his second season with the program as opposed to the few days McLarty has practiced with the team.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin will continue its coverage of Ohio State's 2024 spring camp, providing daily online stories and reports as well as commentary and analysis on BuckeyeSports.com's Fan Forum.