

Freshman Cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. “Built” For Big Performance Against Penn State



Any time a freshman comes into a game during his first season, it can be considered a big moment for a first-year player who is just beginning to get their feet wet in college football. But that moment was ratcheted up for Ohio State freshman cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr., who was called on for the Buckeyes against Penn State.

With junior cornerback Denzel Burke out with an injury, the Buckeyes looked to Mathews, who had only played his first significant snaps of the season against Purdue following Burke's injury. But in a big moment against the Nittany Lions, Mathews answered the challenge for Ohio State.

"I knew the moment was big," he said. "I just wanted to go in there and do my job and ensure that we win the game. That's really my whole mindset going into the game."

Mathews has exuded that confidence ever since he arrived on campus, and it's been noticed by his teammates, who were not surprised to see him stand out in the 20-12 win over Penn State.

"It felt like he was built for that moment, honestly," safety Josh Proctor said. "It wasn't too big for him. He went out there and he played like a vet that's been out there before."

Mathews finished with three tackles and a pass breakup, including a pair of second-half stops on third down that forced punts by the Nittany Lions. Despite only having played defensive snaps in three previous games this season, Mathews did not look at all out of place.

"These guys come in now as freshmen - I wish I had half the talent they come in with," wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. said. "He's a talented guy. You see that right away from the first play that he played."

With Burke expected to play against Wisconsin on Saturday - one of several Buckeyes expected to

return to the field against the Badgers - Mathews will resume his position on the sideline, with the possibility of rotating in to relive Burke or Davison Igbinosun, a distinct possibility now that he's shown what he can do on a big stage.

"He loves to compete, and the moment wasn't too big for him, and now he's got to be consistent," head coach Ryan Day said. "It's one thing to do it, now it's another thing to do it multiple weeks in a row. He did step up in a big way, and he has made a lot of progress from when he came in. That's part of being a freshman. Part of it is the football part of it, the other part is just the overall maturation of a young man."

And regardless of what the rest of this season holds, Mathews - who now seems primed for to compete for a starting job next season once Burke presumably departs for the NFL - is prepared to step up where he's needed for Ohio State.

"I feel like everything just happened for a reason, and I feel like I'm just blessed to just be in this position," Mathews said. "I just take everything in, don't take anything for granted."