

# Gaoteote Won't See First, Second-Team Practice Reps During Ongoing Eligibility Issue



Ohio State hoped Palaie Gaoteote would make an immediate impact on its retooled linebacker corps this season, but the USC transfer won't be rolling with the first or second-string defense during the first week of fall camp.

Despite practicing with the Buckeyes, an ongoing eligibility issue with the NCAA means the former five-star recruit is neither on scholarship nor getting the reps he probably would otherwise, head coach Ryan Day said at a press conference Wednesday.

"I think it's another week or so before we can really get an answer on it, so that puts us in a pinch," Day said after the Buckeyes' first fall practice. "We can't throw him in really with the ones or the twos. Doesn't make sense, because that's wasting reps if he's not available."

Day first made Gaoteote's eligibility issue public at Big Ten Media Days in Indianapolis on July 23, but further details on the matter are not yet known.

The No. 15 overall prospect in the class of 2018, Gaoteote is the cousin of Ohio State fifth-year senior defensive tackle Haskell Garrett. Both players attended Bishop Gorman in Las Vegas.

Gaoteote made an immediate impact in the Pac-12 as a true freshman, recording 38 total tackles, 4.5 tackles for loss and two sacks in seven games. In 2019, Gaoteote tallied 58 tackles, including three for loss, in eight games for the Trojans, as ankle injuries kept him out of several games.

Gaoteote played in just two games for the Trojans in 2020 as he dealt with multiple injury issues that kept him out of competition, and entered the transfer portal on Dec. 7.

Day said it's "too early to tell" exactly what impact Gaoteote will have on the Ohio State defense, which lost its top four linebackers from a season ago, and the program will continue to take things slow with him this preseason as it awaits an answer from the NCAA.

In fact, Day said the Buckeye coaching staff isn't sure how the new linebacker corps will shake out in general ahead of Sept. 2's season opener at Minnesota.

"Nothing's been decided yet. The way we look at it is it's practice No. 16 coming off of spring practice,"

Day said. "Cody (Simon) had a very good spring. Where it goes, we'll see. I think we're gonna need a bunch of those guys. Last year there was four of them. They're the ones who played. This year, my guess is it's gonna be a little bit by-committee, but we'll see. We'll see how the next few weeks go."

Simon, a sophomore linebacker and the No. 75 overall prospect in the class of 2020, saw first-team reps this spring as a couple Buckeyes dealt with injuries. He will contend for time as an inside linebacker this season, but Day said seniors Teradja Mitchell, Dallas Gant and K'Vaughan Pope are sure to see the field.

"There are some veteran guys in there that have to play for us. Teradja and Dallas and K'Vaughan, they're into year three, and it's time to go," Day said. "Some of those younger guys are doing a great job of pushing; Tommy (Eichenberg) and Cody and it's good to get Steele (Chambers) in there and seeing him running around a little bit as well."

Day said Gaoteote won't be sidelined completely in the midst of his eligibility situation, but that he may be relegated to third-team status during camp until a final decision is made.

The USC transfer's off-field matter is not the lone question surrounding the position group in the preseason though, and Day said straightening out the retooled linebacker unit will be a point of emphasis for the coaching staff as the season approaches.

"That's a position that's obviously gonna get a lot of attention here and get a lot of focus from the staff, certainly through August," Day said. "And hopefully in about two weeks we'll get a better idea of who's gonna be starting in that first game."