

Inexperienced LBs have ‘matured,’ Mitchell stepping up as leader, per Washington



Ohio State head coach Ryan Day admitted at the start of fall camp that the linebacker position would require extra attention from his staff during the preseason.

With an entirely new slate of starters to be determined, potential schematic changes in the works and questions surrounding the eligibility of USC transfer Palaie Gaoteote, there is no shortage of moving parts for linebacker coach Al Washington to sort through.

However, Washington said Thursday after practice that his level of comfort with the group is continuing to grow, even if he doesn't have all the answers just yet.

"When great guys move on, the benefit is the guys that are next, they get a blueprint of how it's done right. How it's done properly," Washington said. "So much of what we do is obviously what you can see. My expectation is for those guys to learn from that, and they have. They've carried themselves appropriately. So I'm confident, and they're all talented, so we gotta just go play."

One player that Washington seems particularly pleased with to this point is senior linebacker Teradja Mitchell, a former five-star recruit out of Virginia that appears poised for a breakout role on the Buckeyes' defense.

"I think he's done a great job stepping into a leadership role off the field, taking it upon himself to organize things and just having more of a voice, which is great to see," Washington said.

Mitchell has just 18 career tackles to his credit despite being one of the crown jewels of Ohio State's lauded 2018 recruiting class, but in the absence of last year's top four linebackers -- including two captains -- Mitchell is eager to fill the void in more ways than one.

"He's matured. His preparation, his consistent effort, but obviously he's got to perform, and he's been doing that," Washington said. "He's been really working at it. I don't think there's one thing that a person can show. It's consistency, and his approach has been that. Obviously he's eager to go out and do what he loves to do, and it's play football. The best thing about football is, when you get on the field, your play speaks for itself, and he's done that."

The praise Washington heaped on Mitchell Thursday indicates that he will likely be a starter this

season, as expected, but a slew of Ohio State linebackers have been practicing at both the Mike and Will positions on the inside.

Senior Dallas Gant seemed penciled in to replace Tuf Borland as the Buckeyes' new starting middle linebacker at the start of the spring, but a foot injury cost him nearly the entire early offseason, and may still even be holding him out just a bit in fall camp.

Still, Washington doesn't think Gant's in a bad spot entering the new season.

"I have a high level of trust in Dallas as a person that can -- number's called, go out there and play," Washington said. "He's been engaged, he's been with us step by step, even throughout the spring. He's still a leader, front and center every meeting, still vocal. He's been here enough years psychically, so I don't think he's far behind. Obviously you love to see him practice and you love to see him have a spring, but I think for him, the mental part is more important at this stage in his career."

K'Vaughan Pope is another Buckeye competing for an inside linebacker spot, and Washington said he's not looking to play him on the outside despite Pope running some drills with other hybrid players and Bullet candidates in practice.

Washington isn't tipping his hand about exactly what the base look for his linebacker corps will be this season, but the lack of discussion about Sam LBs on Thursday certainly lends credence to the idea that the Bullet could see quite a bit more use in 2021.

Washington said he has a good idea about how things will play out in his position room, but that the Buckeyes are still in the "dog days" of camp at the moment.

The fact that Washington seems at ease with his room is undoubtedly a positive indicator for Ohio State fans at this juncture, though.

"I'm very comfortable with the group," Washington said. "Comfortable with their character, their talent. They put themselves in position to do everything up until this point. So I'm very confident in each of those guys."