

Jack Sawyer Ready To Live Up To Lofty Expectations At Ohio State



This is a modified version of a story that appeared in the Dec. 19 print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

It didn't take long for defensive end Jack Sawyer to make an impact at Pickerington North, at least in the eyes of head coach Nathan Hillerich.

In fact, Hillerich told Buckeye Sports Bulletin that he was told about Sawyer, who was in middle school at the time, when he had first taken over as head coach for the Panthers in 2017.

"When I was hired here at Pickerington North, he was an eighth grader," Hillerich said. "The previous coach before me, Tom Phillips - who took the director of player personnel job at Cincinnati - when I replaced him, he said 'Hey we got a kid that he's in junior high and he's going to be the best player to ever come through Pickerington.'

"That's a pretty big word when you just had (Michigan tight end) Jake Butt and (Ohio State guard/center) Pat Elflein and Godwin (Igwebuike), who went to Northwestern and was a captain. So, there was a lot of hype."

Before Pickerington North even took the field for a true practice for the 2017 season, which would have been Sawyer's freshman year, he had already shown what the hype was all about simply by his performance in workouts.

"I still remember the first time I came to the weight room," Hillerich said. "He was an eighth grader, and we have morning workouts at Pickerington, and he came to every morning workout, and we do competitions. We were doing a tire competition, so one-on-one just to see where you're at and you set the tire down and you both put your hands on top of it and it's just who can pull the other person and pull the tire back about three yards.

"He's an eighth grader and I put him up against a kid (Ohio redshirt freshman Tyler Foster) who's a tight end at OU, he's a Division I tight end that's two years older than him. And (Sawyer) beat him the first day and, you know he didn't back down, he was pumped to get to go. Just his competitiveness and the thought that he has no fear of coming in and competing and has a confidence that is just different

then a lot of kids. A lot of kids I think have similar talent, but just his competitiveness and confidence in himself is special.”

That may have been Hillerich’s introduction to Sawyer’s competitiveness, but that was not a new trait to the current five-star defensive end and Ohio State commit.

Whether it be Sawyer’s first football memory – an 80-yard touchdown on what he believes was his first ever carry in his first ever football game on a halfback dive when he was in second grade – or playing games with his parents as a kid, that drive to win was always something that Sawyer had within him.

“It was kind of something I learned growing up, you know,” Sawyer told BSB. “My parents, we played knockout in the front yard and they were never letting me win. I’ve always just been naturally competitive since I was a little kid and I guess it’s kind of natural, but I’ve always had a huge drive to compete and want to win and succeed in everything I do.”

Sawyer said that football has always been a big part of his life, starting from his dad, Lyle, who played football and was a starter at Division II Findlay. That, along with constantly watching, being around, playing and throwing around a football throughout his childhood made the sport a huge part of Sawyer’s family growing up.

That all led to the buzz that Hillerich heard about, and eventually, to Sawyer playing at Pickerington North and making an impact as early as his freshman season for the Panthers, an impact that Sawyer said was garnering some attention from the collegiate level.

Then, Sawyer entered his sophomore season as the No. 3 overall prospect in the 247Sports composite rankings and proved worthy of that acclaim, finishing the 2018 season with 62 tackles, 15 tackles for loss and six sacks while also forcing and recovering a fumble.

His efforts moved him up to second on the composite rankings for the better part a year, including when Sawyer committed to the Buckeyes on Feb. 3, 2019, becoming Ohio State’s first commit of the 2021 class.

“It feels great, it definitely feels good just being a part since day one really just believing in the coaches that early and really helping build my class,” Sawyer said. “It definitely feels good you know being the first guy and I’m kind of like the founding father of the class, so it definitely that means a lot to me.”

Sawyer’s commitment came just over a month after Ryan Day officially became Ohio State’s head coach following the Buckeyes’ 28-23 win over Washington in the Rose Bowl. But Sawyer said he never really wavered on his decision after the coaching change a lot of which had to do with the lack of coaching change at the defensive line, where associate head coach Larry Johnson has remained through both Day and former head coach Urban Meyer.

“I think a lot of that had to do with Coach Johnson. I knew Coach Johnson was going to stay there and didn’t really have any doubt that he was going to leave,” Sawyer said. “So trusting that and then Coach (Mickey Marotti), the best strength coach in America, too, really kind of made the decision easy. And then you know, after I took a visit and talked to Coach Day, I knew that was the guy I wanted to play for right away.”

That confidence in Day and Ohio State from Sawyer came despite offers from Michigan, Notre Dame,

Oklahoma and Penn State, among others. He also was offered visits from other major programs like Alabama, Clemson and LSU, according to Hillerich.

But the Pickerington North head coach said that he was not surprised about how early Sawyer made the decision, and a moment very early on in Day's tenure was what helped solidify that thought.

"(Sawyer's commitment) was right when Day had just been hired for probably, I don't know, maybe a month and I think a big part of it was the day after I believe Day got hired or a couple days after, the first place he visited on a Monday, start of school, he was waiting on Jack to come to school in my room," Hillerich said. "I think that meant a lot to Jack to know that he was priority No. 1, because he had a visit scheduled to go to Clemson in the spring, go watch spring practice and stay, and he ended up going to an Ohio State basketball game, spent time there, and committed."

Sawyer improved on much of the success he had as a sophomore in 2019, lowering his tackles total with just 37, but making them count more with 19 TFL and 13 ½ sacks to go with one forced fumble and two fumble recoveries.

But a big change happened in Sawyer's junior season on the offensive side of the ball. With Pickerington North facing injury troubles at the quarterback position, the Panthers turned to their five-star defensive phenom to become the signal-caller on very short notice.

"I didn't really have that much to prepare for my first game, I kind was just thrown in on a walkthrough the day before a game," Sawyer said. "I was excited and it was definitely a good challenge. It was fun, you know, touching the ball every play and trying to make a play, and I think I did all right, we made it to the playoffs so that's what I wanted to do was just help the team win."

Sawyer completed 6 of 11 passes for 60 yards and a touchdown and added 134 yards and three scores on the ground in his debut, a 38-17 win over Olentangy Orange. But the real challenge came in a battle against Dublin Coffman.

The Shamrocks started out the game hot, jumping out to a 7-0 first quarter lead, an advantaged that jumped to 21-6 in the third quarter off a pair of touchdown connections between quarterback Connor Mathews and Jameel Williamson, a current wide receiver at Akron, that went for 60 and 67 yards.

Sawyer helped cut that deficit later in the quarter with a 78-yard touchdown connection to wide receiver Chris Scott, now at Cincinnati, and after a Pickerington North field goal, the Panthers trailed 21-16 heading into the fourth.

There, Sawyer found Scott again from 25 yards out on a fourth-down conversion off a tipped pass to take a one-point lead after a failed conversion, and then Sawyer took one in himself from 7 yards to make it 29-21, capping off a run of 23 unanswered points from Pickerington North.

Coffman would score with 32 seconds left with a chance to tie the game, but the Panthers stuffed the two-point rush attempt, sealing a huge win in the process.

Both Sawyer, who finished the game with 201 total yards and three touchdowns on offense alone, and Hillerich noted that game as the highlight of his tenure at Pickerington North. Sawyer called it "probably the best game I've been a part of," while his head coach said it symbolized even more than just the impressive result on the field.

"Dublin Coffman at the time was I think ranked third in the state, undefeated, and he kind of put the team on his back," Hillerich said. "He had multiple touchdowns in the game and also was playing on defense and had two sacks that were just huge sacks clinching the game, you know, playing both ways, which is something not many guys do at the Division I level that we play at. It was a huge win and I think it kind of solidified him as a junior, he was a captain and that it was his team, and he wasn't going to let us have a down year, no matter how many injuries or what happened."

After all the effort it took to get his team into the playoffs, Pickerington North faced off against Olentangy Orange. But during the game, a 36-17 Orange win, Sawyer suffered a torn MCL, the first major injury of his football career.

"It was definitely hard at first. Luckily for me I've been injury free my whole life up until that when I got hit," Sawyer said. "I just had to push through and really after the first month, I just got my mobility back on my knee and my leg. It was kind of a breeze honestly just doing all the stuff I love like squatting and getting strong and running again and stuff like that, so after the first month, I'd say it was pretty easy, but it was definitely a grind."

Despite that injury, the five-star defensive end said he feels better than he ever has after his recovery.

"I think I got better from that because it really pushed me that much harder and I worked out much harder and now I take everything less for granted," Sawyer said. "I appreciate it every time I get on the field, every time I get to work out. Yeah, I feel way better than I have ever in my life so I'm just super excited to finally get to put it to use in a spring game here soon."

Sawyer was healthy to play in his senior season for the Panthers, but ultimately elected to opt out and prepare to enroll early for Ohio State in January, choosing to do so during a time where it appeared the Big Ten was looking at playing a spring season.

Hillerich said that spring season idea definitely played a part in Sawyer's decision, but that, even with the conference ultimately playing in the fall, he thinks the star defensive end made the right decision in order to prepare for the collegiate level.

"Obviously a crazy, crazy year. We had talked this summer and we didn't know at the time if we'd even have football honestly. In July, we were thinking there's a decent chance we weren't going to play, especially when the Big Ten announced they were not playing football," Hillerich said. "When I think he really started thinking about it when Ohio State talked about moving the season to the spring and all of college football, and the possibility of him being able to play in the spring because he's already set to graduate early. And talking to Coach Johnson and Coach Day at Ohio State there was a legit chance I think that he'd be in the rotation as a defensive end."

"I think that's when maybe the wheels started spinning, the thoughts of you know, 'I have to make sure I'm ready to go January 6' or whenever he could enroll. And then with all the uncertainty and just making sure an injury or something wouldn't delay things for him, I just thought it was the best thing for him."

Now, Sawyer is set to make it official and sign with the Buckeyes during the Early Signing Period, but when he ultimately enrolls early, it will be far from the first time he has visited campus.

While some recruits in the 2021 class have never been to Columbus for an official Ohio State visit,

Sawyer was at multiple home games over the past few seasons, and while he said all of his visits stand out for different reasons, it was a game in 2018 against a certain major rival that comes to mind first.

“I think the one that stands out the most might be Urban Meyer’s last game against the team up north,” Sawyer said. “The college football playoff was loving them that year, and we just put it on them bad, smacked them around like we should and that was definitely probably one of the best games I’ve been a part of watching.”

Sawyer will have an opportunity to make his mark in that rivalry as soon as next season, though finding significant time as a freshman on Ohio State is never a given.

But if you ask Sawyer’s high school head coach, he is confident that the five-star talent is going to make his presence felt in the defensive line room early and often when he makes the move to Columbus.

“I think he’s one of them kids that’s going to go there and he’s going to make an impact right away,” Hillerich said. “I think he could be a guy like Andy Katzenmoyer or Maurice Clarett where coming in as a freshman, they’re going to compete and they’re going to be a guy that everybody talks about.

With that type of confidence from his head coach, a top five composite ranking in his recruiting class and being the “founding father” of one of the top classes in the country, it is safe to say there are a lot of outside expectations put on Sawyer’s shoulders as his time at Ohio State draws nearer.

Also adding to the pressure is Ohio State’s constant success at defensive end, with names like Joey Bosa, Nick Bosa and Chase Young all becoming top-four picks in the NFL draft, and each of which had massive success at the collegiate level.

But Sawyer looks forward to the pressure that comes with the expectations, and, as he did in second-grade football, games of knockout with his parents, in the Pickerington North weight room as an eighth grader or in a pivotal matchup against Dublin Coffman, he is using his natural competitiveness to try and come out the other side as one of the best defensive ends the program has ever seen.

“There’s a sense of pressure, but for a guy like me I always look at that as a positive because there are a lot of guys out there that would love to be in my position, and I thrive off that so-called pressure that people think I have on me,” Sawyer said. “I love that, I want those expectations. I want to be considered in the mentions of the Bosa brothers and the Chase Young’s of the world, so it just makes me want to work that much harder and try to achieve those, and if I do, then obviously I go down as one of the greats at Ohio State.”

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