

Knowles: Hicks To Be “Unleashed” In 2023



There’s been hype surrounding Ohio State sophomore linebacker C.J. Hicks ever since he entered the program as a five-star recruit in the class of 2022.

His athleticism is rare to see according to both defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and graduate assistant James Laurinaitas, himself a former Butkus Award winner at the position. And now Knowles feels as though this could be the year fans get to see exactly what the Ohio native brings to the field.

“C.J. is a guy who, I’m predicting, sometime this season we’re going to see him unleash,” Knowles said.

Hicks has the benefit of learning from two Ohio State veterans, seniors Tommy Eichenberg and Steele Chambers. The duo were the Buckeyes’ two starting linebackers in 2022, recording 120 and 77 tackles, respectively.

“The good thing is that he’s not pressed into service because of the veterans in front of him,” Knowles said. “I think that’s helped him to be able to play more relaxed. But at some point this year we’ll be able to see C.J.’s athletic ability, I think he’s just on the cusp of breaking out.”

Where that creates issues in terms of his “unleashing” is in how he gets on the field with those two in tow. It’s doubtful he starts ahead of either, certainly early on in the season at least.

One potential solution is the hybrid defensive end/linebacker position that is a staple of Knowles’ scheme, the “Jack.” Hicks’ burst and speed make him an ideal candidate to both rush passers and cover tight ends or running backs out of the backfield. Knowles confirmed that Hicks and redshirt junior Mitchell Melton will be the team’s two jacks going forward.

Ohio State opted for a traditional front with four defensive linemen in the spring, however, with the jack shelved for those months. It will make its return in the fall, but its usage remains to be seen.

“It’s up to me to find some things (Hicks) can do in the jack type of game, and also in those situations where we have the opportunity for him to play,” Knowles said. “Whether that’s through a rotation (or) me just saying, ‘Hey, he’s got to get in every so often.’ To move along a guy’s progression he’s got to get

plays.”

Hicks is working to earn that role in the offseason, per the word of his coaches. Asked which player was standing out most to him during spring and summer workouts, strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marotti said it was Hicks.

“He’s stood out to me the last couple weeks,” Marotti said. “It’s just his attitude. You can see maturity. When (players) come in as 17-, 18-year-old four- and five-stars sometimes they get a dose of reality. And I see a different, more mature guy. That’s cool to see.

“When you’re more mature, then you learn to take care of your body better, and you do get your sleep and night, and you do all those things that we ask you to as a grown player, all of a sudden your body starts changing. All the things that all of us want, they happen faster because of that competitiveness.”

That increased level of maturity from his freshman to sophomore season has been noticed by Knowles as well.

“You see it in everything. You see it in how he learns, how he’s able to articulate the defense and his assignment, how he does across the board, in the classroom and everywhere. Just being on time, not just being present at the workouts but being a leader. He’s had a really good offseason.”

With such a mentality and the talent coaches continue to rave about, it could be a matter of not if Hicks becomes a difference-maker for the Buckeyes, but when.