

Knowles Working Jack Position Back Into Defense For Fall



In year one, the calling card position of Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles' scheme didn't pay the dividends the team was hoping for. Dividends he saw yielded in his previous stint with Oklahoma State.

"It just wasn't popping," Knowles said May 30. "It wasn't effective, but it wasn't popping."

Jack Sawyer took up the mantle of playing the hybrid defensive end/linebacker "Jack" role, but only produced 24 tackles and 4.5 sacks over the course of the season. He moved back to defensive end full time in the spring.

Additionally in the spring, the Jack was completely absent from Ohio State's defense. All linebackers worked exclusively with linebackers and the same with defensive ends as the Buckeyes opted for a traditional 4-2-5 look throughout practices and the spring game.

The position is making its return come fall, however. Knowles will be spending instruction time with those who might play it.

"Maybe not even with the whole defense, but I'll be spending a lot of time with those two guys in particular," Knowles said. "Just one-on-one time, talking about the things that I want to accomplish."

There's a lot that can be done to work the spot off the field.

"That's a position where — when fully developed — where that guy knows everything about the defense and everything about the calls," Knowles said. "So a lot of that is one-on-one time with me and those two players."

Two candidates have emerged to play the Jack, both linebackers on Ohio State's roster: Sophomore C.J. Hicks and redshirt junior Mitchell Melton.

Hicks has been raved about by Knowles and graduate assistant James Laurinaitas on several occasions,

being a former five-star prospect with fantastic athleticism. The staff wants a way to get him on the field, and with returning starters at the two main linebacker spots, the Jack could be a route.

“The more that C.J. can play, the more it helps us over the long haul of the season,” Knowles said.

While he did individual drill work in the spring, Melton was kept out of all team activities while still working his way back from an injury that cost him the 2022 season. Prior to that he was in competition with Sawyer for reps at the Jack position. Always viewed as a body type that could lean either defensive end or linebacker, his build makes a lot of sense for the spot.

“He might be a surprise,” defensive line coach Larry Johnson said May 30. “I’m really looking forward to him. He’s really hungry. He can’t wait. We held him out in the spring for a reason. He walked out there for spring ball and he said, ‘Thanks, Coach.’ I said, ‘We need you to be healthy in August. I don’t need to see what you can do in the (spring).’ And I think that really helped him mentally, because he knew he wasn’t quite ready.”

Exactly how much the position is deployed in 2023 remains to be seen. It was tapered off at points last season and the team has a bevy of defensive ends to run a traditional 4-2-5 with.

Knowles is still working to find the answers to those questions. In the end, it will be a matter of what best fits the needs of his players.

“It doesn’t matter what I know,” Knowles said. “It matters what works and what the players know.”