

My Thoughts: Top Five Players On Ohio State's Defense



Over the past few weeks on Buckeye Sports Bulletin's Fan Forum, subscribers and staff writers have engaged in debates over who the five best defensive players are on Ohio State's roster this season. With the Jim Knowles-led Buckeyes' defense loaded with NFL-ready talent, many of whom decided to return for their senior seasons, at nearly every position, there were many different answers throughout the thread, as some subscribers valued the stars in Ohio State's secondary, while others highlighted the returning talent in the trenches.

With fall camp still about three months away, I decided to share my own top five list:

5) Tyleik Williams

It's crazy to think that a player of this caliber, one which may find himself drafted in the first round of next year's NFL Draft, can barely crack the top five of this list, but that is merely a product of how deep this Buckeye defense is this season. Standing at 6-3 and 327 pounds, Williams is an imposing figure on Larry Johnson's defensive line, one who can once again serve as a dominant presence on the inside this season, both in the run and pass game.

Last season, Williams was one of the more productive defensive linemen on the team, racking up 54 tackles, a tied-for-team-leading 10.0 tackles for loss, three sacks and — perhaps most impressively — five pass breakups. It was a unique display of versatility and athleticism that caught the eye of many and earned him a third-team All-Big Ten honor.

With another offseason under his belt, Williams is once again primed for a dominant season in the trenches, one which can be made even more dominant if the Buckeye edge rushers can generate pressure from the outside.

4) Jack Sawyer

Speaking of edge rushers, senior defensive end Jack Sawyer comes in at No. 4 on my list following a

breakout junior year for the Buckeyes. Sawyer, who could also hear his name called in the first round next year, was one of the leading catalysts behind the myriad of returning defensive starters on Ohio State this offseason, and he can make that decision worthwhile with a full dominant season, something he has not had since he arrived in Columbus as a highly touted five-star freshman in 2021.

After struggling in 2022 at the Jack, Sawyer finally showed what he was capable of in his natural position last season, recording 48 tackles (10 for loss), a team-high 6.5 sacks, three quarterback hurries and two pass breakups. Most of that production came towards the end of the season, too, a time where he later explained he grew more comfortable and confident coming off the edge.

I believe Sawyer will continue that positive momentum and put forth a monster senior season in 2024, one which could propel him into the national conversation among one of the top edge rushers in the country. Sawyer also seems as motivated as any other Buckeye to perform both as a team and individually, which can only add to his chances of putting together a great senior campaign.

3) JT Tuimoloau

Sawyer's counterpart and fellow former five-star Tuimoloau has established himself as one of the Big Ten's more disruptive edge rushers throughout his Buckeye career, and I'm expecting more of the same for the senior in 2024.

Tuimoloau was a consistent force off the edge for the Buckeyes last season, often generating just enough pressure on opposing quarterbacks to disrupt the throw, but not enough to put a significant dent on the stat sheets. Still, he finished tied for 10th on the team in tackles with 38 while racking up an impressive 5.0 sacks and six quarterback hurries, the latter being the most on the team.

Tuimoloau, like Sawyer, is one of the unquestioned leaders of this defense as well as one of more experienced players, a combination that will have him in line to once again make a considerable impact on the defensive line this season.

2) Caleb Downs

Downs is the outlier on this list, as he is the only Buckeye within my top five who has yet to play a snap for the Scarlet and Gray. While the only action we got to see of Downs was in scarce practices and limited spring game action, his production from last season alone instantly makes him one of the more talented players on the entire roster.

Downs, who was pitted as the team's starting safety from the moment he arrived on campus in January, had one of the more impressive seasons by a true freshman in recent college football memory last year, racking up 107 tackles for the Tide last season — the most by a freshman in program history since at least 1970 — along with two interceptions, three pass breakups and a forced fumble. It earned him the SEC's Freshman of the Year award and a few All-American accolades as well, a feat that has many Buckeye fans excited for what the now-second-year safety can accomplish in Columbus.

Downs was lauded by his coaches and teammates for the maturity and sheer skill he showed in spring ball, so it seems he is fitting in well to this Knowles-led secondary. With Downs also figuring to be an impact player in the punt-or-kick return game and potentially even on offense in special packages, the sophomore has a chance to be one of the more valuable players the Buckeyes have had in the Ryan Day era.

1. Denzel Burke

My top Buckeye defender for the 2024 season is senior cornerback Denzel Burke, who is once again slated to be one of the better shutdown corners in the Big Ten and maybe even the nation. After a sluggish sophomore season, Burke had a career year in 2023, blanketing opposing teams' top receivers on a weekly basis with a team-high eight pass deflections along with an interception.

But while he is a lockdown corner on the outside, what makes Burke even more special is his physicality in the run and pass game, which was shown last year when he had multiple bruising hits near the line of scrimmage, including one against Maryland that brought back memories of Denzel Ward's infamous "barbeque sauce" hit against the Terrapins in 2017.

But like many on this Buckeye defense, Burke is still not satisfied with his collegiate career, and is ultra-motivated by the fact that he has yet to defeat Michigan or win a Big Ten or national title. Burke's unwavering confidence coupled with his already pro-ready abilities should put him in line for another sensational season in 2024, one which can propel him into the early portion of the first round of next year's draft.