

Ohio State Cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. Hopes To Take Next Step As He Adjusts To Nickel Position



A former four-star prospect coming out of Cincinnati's Winton Woods, cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. wasted no time making a name for himself with a 58-yard interception returned for a touchdown in Ohio State's Week 3 domination of Western Kentucky.

A little less than a year later in his sophomore year, Mathews hopes to go from a talented young contributor to a valuable piece of Ohio State's defense as he shifts his focus from outside cornerback to nickel.

"(Switching from an outside cornerback to a nickel) gives me the opportunity somewhere else to get on the field," Mathews said. "And it builds my versatility up for the next level as well."

Mathews' move to the inside of Ohio State's defense doesn't mean he's finished getting reps on the outside. As Mathews explained it, he's had a 50-50 mix between the two, but he's still committed to his versatility.

"I didn't play nickel last year, and I started just learning it in the spring and I'm just growing more with it now," Mathews said. "I think I'm just getting more valuable for the team and finding my way, and buying into my role."

Mathews appears to be solidly behind cornerbacks Denzel Burke, Jordan Hancock and Davison Igbinosun at the cornerback position, but a football team can never have enough cornerbacks, especially in a season that could stretch into late January.

Even as a freshman with a similar standing in the depth chart, Mathews managed to appear in 11 of 13 games for the Buckeye defense, recording six tackles along with the previously mentioned pick-six.

Regardless of Mathews' place in the depth chart, head coach Ryan Day knows his importance in the secondary.

"He has quickness, he has twitch and he's competitive," Day said earlier this fall camp. "That's a guy who has a lot of talent, he's got to continue to build discipline in his life, very important, And he can be a contributor."

While any positional change may not be ideal, Mathews was able to come in with a positive attitude, following teammate Jordan Hancock's switch to nickel from outside cornerback a year ago.

"Definitely (Hancock's move to nickel) was actually some extra motivation," Mathews said. "He switched and he played really well last year. So I think I could just find my way there as well."

As seamless as Hancock may have made the move seem, Mathews knows he has plenty to work both on and off the field to become the player he wants to be.

"Having more attention to detail off the field, that's probably the biggest thing (to improve upon) for me right now," Mathews said. "Focusing more, having a game plan for everything that I got to do."

"There are some technical things as well (that I need to improve upon)," Mathews said. "I'm the hardest person on me. So I critique every little thing that I do on the field, even if everybody else probably thinks I made a good play, I probably stepped wrong or did this wrong and it could have been even better. It could have been a pick instead of a (pass break up)."

For Mathews and the rest of the secondary, the greatest source of improvement can come from going up against the Buckeye receivers, many of whom are as skilled as any in the country.

"The (receivers) make me better every day," Mathews said. "I have no worries when we get to the games because of the people I see every day in practice. I personally don't think that some of the receivers we are going to play are better than who we have now. So it just gives me more confidence."