

Ohio State Freshman Wideout Jeremiah Smith Chasing Greatness As Rose Bowl Looms



Heading into Ohio State's first-round College Football Playoff matchup with Tennessee, Jeremiah Smith had already cemented himself as the most accomplished true freshman wide receiver in program history.

Smith, the consensus No. 1 overall prospect in the 2023 class who was pursued by other NIL-rich programs right up to his commitment to Ohio State on Early Signing Day last winter, somehow managed to live up to the almost inconceivable expectations put on him by smashing each of the program's freshman wide receiver records previously held by Pro Football Hall of Famer Chris Carter in 1983, recording 57 catches for 93 yards and 10 receiving touchdowns in his first 12 games of his Buckeye career.

Smith's historic regular season had many around the world of college football crowning him as the top freshman in the nation, with some even going as far as to say that he would be a sure-fire early-round draft pick — perhaps even the No. 1 overall pick — if he was eligible to go pro after this season.

But even with these impressive accomplishments and sky-high praise, Smith still entered the College Football Playoff wanting more.

It's what the great ones seek to do, according to the freshman, and "great" is what he is trying to become.

"I went up to (co-offensive coordinator/wide receivers coach Brian Hartline) before we had the Senior Tackle, I pulled him aside and (said), 'Coach, I want you to challenge me this week,' " Smith said Saturday afternoon at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center. "I told him I want to be challenged. That's what I want. He did that last week, that's why I had the game that I had.

"(He was) just pushing me in practice, pushing me to the limit that I want to be pushed. That's how you

become great. You see guys like Kobe Bryant and Michael Jordan, they want to be pushed. So I'm trying to be like them, but in football."

As he alluded to, Hartline's hard coaching paid dividends for the freshman sensation against the Volunteers. Playing in front of a nationally televised audience in primetime, Smith put together perhaps his most complete game of the season in the biggest game of the year.

He created separation on Tennessee's vaunted secondary early and often, first streaking past the Vols for a 37-yard opening drive touchdown, and then doing the same on a 22-yard pitch-and-catch from Will Howard in the third quarter. When it was all said and done, he finished with six catches for 103 yards and the two scores, a dominant performance that helped the Buckeyes blow past Tennessee and advance to the CFP quarterfinals against Oregon at the Rose Bowl.

Smith's successes on the sport's biggest stage, which come as no surprise to anyone who has watched him excel all season for the Buckeyes, occurred in large part because of his unbridled confidence. The teenager said numerous times on Friday that he is "always open" — the only time he felt he wasn't open was when the whole team is covering him — and that he has an obligation to make a play for his team whenever the ball is thrown to him, especially when he is put in one-on-one coverage.

"Win, that's all I can say," Smith said when asked what goes through his mind when he's one-on-one with a defensive back. "Coach Hartline, he asks me, 'You get one-on-one, what do you do?' I say, 'win,' and everyone just starts laughing out of nowhere. But it's true. You have to win your one-on-one battles."

"I feel like every ball that's thrown to me, I have to catch it no matter if the defender is on me or not," Smith added. "I just feel like I have to make a play no matter what."

Smith's high expectations may seem unreasonable for an outsider, but they are nothing new for him. Growing up in the football-rich town of Miami Gardens, Fla., Smith — the cousin of Seattle Seahawks quarterback Geno Smith — said those who surrounded him during his younger days had equally high expectations for him on the gridiron.

It is these types of expectations — along with his love for the game and support from his Buckeye teammates — that Smith thinks allowed him to embrace and exceed the hype in Columbus this season.

"A lot of people told me that I was going to be great at what I do since I was going into high school," Smith said. "Football is all I know, and that's all I really want to do. I just live, breathe, sleep football. That's all I really care about. I don't care about everything outside of football. Football is all I know, and I just want to play football for the rest of my life."

"I came to Ohio State for a reason, that's what I wanted," Smith said. "I wanted to be challenged. I wanted the expectation. Coach Hartline just helped me throughout the whole year preparing me for each game each week. Emeka Egbuka, Carnell Tate, Brandon Inniss, really the whole receiving room, just helping me with stuff I don't know about. I can't really say it's all on me because of my talents, but they've been a big part of the reason I'm having the season that I'm having, for sure."

Smith's successes this season have already allowed him to etch his name in the Ohio State history books, and those triumphs only grew after his two-score outing against Tennessee. But the freshman has yet another chance to further cement his legacy on Wednesday when he takes the field on the

sport's grandest stage at the Rose Bowl, where he will line up against the top-seeded Ducks with a trip to the College Football Playoff semifinals on the line.

Smith's last outing against Oregon did not go as planned for the freshman. He was flagged for offensive pass interference on Ohio State's last drive, a crucial mistake that knocked them out of field goal range, and a call that he certainly did not, and still doesn't, agree with. But regardless of the call, Ohio State's most decorated freshman wideout has a chance to right those wrongs and get revenge on the Ducks, something that he, like many other Buckeyes, have been waiting for ever since the clock struck zeros at Autzen Stadium on Oct. 12.

"I think about that call probably every day, it was a crazy call," Smith said. "The DB was holding me, I just cleared his hands. I guess receivers can't be physical anymore, but DBs can hold 10 yards, 15 yards down the field. It's behind me, I just know how to move now when a DB is grabbing me. I guess you can't be physical as a wide receiver in college football anymore, but we'll just see how things play out this game."