

Ohio State Guard Wyatt Davis Pushes Through Loss During Offseason



In college football, losses happen.

Losses happen to some teams more than others and can happen from a dominant effort or by a game of inches. They can come to a team that was expected to lose, and they can come to a team that never saw it coming. But, no matter what, a college football game will always have a winner, and it will always have a loser.

Ohio State went 13 games into its 2019 season without experiencing a loss. But that 14th game, in which the Buckeyes fell to Clemson, was the one that mattered the most, with the loss taking Ohio State out of the national championship picture.

It was a loss filled with highs, lows, controversy and what-ifs, but, as with all football games at the collegiate level, one team had to lose by the time the final whistle blew.

Those college football losses, as dramatic as they can be at times, can always be counted on. Losses in life aren't quite the same. There is no clock that hits zero, there is no rule saying a game has to be finished at a certain time in a certain way, but just like in college football, there will always be a time when it comes to an end.

Ohio State guard Wyatt Davis, who finished his first full season as a starter at Ohio State as an All-American, experienced losses both on the football field and in his life, with the latter coming from the death of his grandfather, Willie Davis, on April 15 at the age of 85.

The loss was one that did not come out of nowhere, but one that hurt Davis all the same.

"It was honestly very tough when he passed, but unfortunately my grandad was kind of struggling with health for the past couple of years now, so we knew eventually it was coming," Davis said. "It was hard when he passed, but it was even harder seeing him in the state that he was in just because that's not the granddad that I remember in the hospital bed."

Willie Davis had been hospitalized for a month with kidney failure before passing away, but decades prior, he was known for dominating the same sport his grandson did this past season. After playing at both offensive tackle and defensive end during his time at Grambling State, Davis was selected in the

15th round, pick No. 181 by the Cleveland Browns in the 1956 NFL draft, and after two years of military service, he made his debut for Cleveland in 1958.

He continued to play on both sides of the ball for the Browns before finding his permanent place on defense once he was traded to the Green Bay Packers in 1960. There he thrived, making five Pro Bowls, garnering five first-team All-Pro selections and winning five NFL championships as well as a pair of Super Bowls in Super Bowl I and II.

Though sacks were not a stat during Davis' 12-year NFL career, John Turney of Pro Football Journal reported that he had more than 100 of them in his career, with the total possibly being as high as 120. According to Davis himself: "I would think I would have to be the team's all-time leader in sacks. I played 10 years and I averaged in the teens in sacks for those 10 years. I had 25 one season."

Fumble recoveries were a recorded stat, and Willie Davis had 21 of them while at Green Bay, which remains a team record. All of this led to his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1981.

That alone would have left an impact on Wyatt Davis, a former five-star prospect with large aspirations at the college level and beyond, but what Willie did after his impressive on-field career made the same sort of lasting impression.

Davis founded the alcohol distributor Willie Davis Distributing in 1970 and followed that up in 1976 with All-Pro Broadcasting, which currently owns a variety of radio stations. Quarterback Bart Starr, Davis' former teammate in Green Bay, said in the foreword of Davis' book, "Closing the Gap: Lombardi, the Packers Dynasty, and the Pursuit of Excellence": "Willie took his work seriously, both as a football player and later on in his many business ventures. That discipline has led him to unbelievable success."

This drive on and off the field motivated Wyatt, along with his brother, David, who played defensive tackle at Washington State and Cal, and showed them what they would be able to do, both as a football player and beyond.

"What a lot of people don't know is my granddad was more successful and made more earnings outside of football than he was when he was playing," Davis said. "That type of work ethic is inspiring. He didn't let people put him in a box of just being an athlete, and he broke outside of that box and was extremely successful."

Last season, Davis said he would often get videos from Willie congratulating his grandson for his play during some of Ohio State's wins on the way to a Big Ten title and College Football Playoff berth. Davis said those moments always meant the world to him, considering how much he looked up to his grandfather in a variety of ways.

"He's like a second father to me and my brother. You know obviously with football he held me and my brother to very high standards because he knew what we were capable of," Davis said. "I knew he could never actually physically go to one of my games, but I knew that he was always watching."

"Even at the end of the season, he was still saying how proud of me he was. It was awesome, and it almost made me tear up hearing that, because he's my idol. He's what I want to be as a football player and as a businessman."

At the end of the season came the other loss that has shaped Davis' offseason, the football loss to

Clemson that kept the Buckeyes from taking on their former quarterback, Heisman Trophy winner Joe Burrow and the rest of LSU in the national title game.

It was the first collegiate loss that Davis had faced as a starter, and it is the game from his dominant 2019 campaign that he won't soon forget. These feelings led to an empowering speech during mat drills from the junior guard, one that resonated with everyone who heard it.

"I think everyone will attest to the fact that the one guy that stood out to me was Wyatt Davis," said strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marotti. "He gave probably the most inspiring talk to a team in a winter program that I've ever heard in my life. I mean, I had tears. I know a lot of other guys were teared up, and it meant so much."

Davis said the speech came off the back of a drill that Marotti called the "parabellum," and it was inspired both by the recent loss to the Tigers and by finding his voice as a leader after often staying behind the scenes in his first three seasons with the program.

"Where that fire came from is I just feel like a buildup of emotions based off how we finished this last season," Davis said. "I kind of just got tired of sitting in the back of things. I mean last year for me, in my head I felt like I really wasn't in a place where I could be as vocal as I should have been based off my time being a starter and really what I had done for the program at that point. So kind of after this season and playing the way I did and ending on a high note, I felt like I had that respect from my fellow teammates to be able to step in front of them and kind of just open my heart out."

The speech was about the importance of the winter workouts that were taking place and how talent alone will not be enough to bring Ohio State a national championship. Davis also talked about the Clemson loss, and how he wants to be a leader and someone who can be counted on to help when called upon, both on the field and off.

"Essentially what I was saying during that speech was just, there's a lot of guys in the world that say they want things and they want all this stuff for them to happen. There's not many of them that are willing to put in the work for it," Davis said. "Coming off of that loss this past season, I don't ever want to experience that again. I was saying that the look in the seniors' eyes and they were crying - it's something I will never forget for the rest of my life. And for some of those guys, it was their last time ever even playing a football game, and that's how we went out."

"I was just telling them, right now, where we're at, this is the critical part of our season. And depending on how we do in these mat drills will truly let us know where we're at. And I was saying that I'm willing to open my heart out for you guys, I'll do anything for you guys because I'm bought in. I'm bought in to Coach Mick, to all other strength coaches and my coach and everyone in the facility and with the program."

The overall message that Davis was trying to get across to his team, even with months and months to go before the next season was set to begin: Be accountable.

"Like a lot of people say they want to be the best wide receiver for instance," Davis said on May 14 when players were working out from home. "Well are you taking the extra steps or taking the extra reps to put yourself in that position? Right now, we're in a place where you're on your own. You have no one holding your hand. I mean the coaches are still texting you, but at the end of the day, no one's really going to know what you're doing besides you. So I feel like hopefully, that what I had said hopefully it

still resonates and people are just using this as a reason to be accountable.”

This accountability could be seen throughout Davis’ game in his sophomore season. According to Pro Football Focus, Davis had 459 pass-blocking snaps in 2019 and did not allow a single sack in any of those snaps. The same website named Davis the best returning guard in college football, while Walter Camp and Sporting News named him a preseason first-team All-American.

Offensive line coach Greg Studrawa certainly noticed the talent that Davis possesses, but he was also impressed with the intensity and tenacity that the Ohio State guard seems to play with in every one of his snaps.

“The best thing about Wyatt, the thing that he did the best and why everybody’s talking about him is because he’s physical,” Studrawa said. “He tries to destroy people. He doesn’t try to just position block or just get the job done. He wants to try to destroy you physically, every single play that he’s in there.”

That desire to destroy his opponent comes from a source: Willie Davis. Wyatt Davis said his grandfather put that sort of energy into both his game and into his overall persona in whatever he was striving to accomplish.

“I feel like the reason why I have that fire is because what he instilled between both me and my brother is don’t be complacent with where you’re at, don’t be OK with just getting the job done,” Davis said. “It relates to the real world. You’re just barely doing what you need to do to get by, then that’s how you’re going to be, that’s how successful you’re going to be. You’re just going to be barely doing enough to get by.

“My grandad has always told me to go 100 percent, go above and beyond and do what you need to do to be noticed. And that competitive nature is what drives me to be so competitive, and as far as the physical nastiness, that’s the game of football.

“Playing football, you’ve got to be tough, you’ve got to be physical and you’ve got to be nasty. And that’s what my grandad has told me about playing the game, and that’s what I just tried to do.”

The Ohio State football team, as a whole, was coming off a massive loss in a game that felt like it was very much for the taking. The Buckeyes held a 16-0 lead thanks to some lackluster red-zone trips, then lost a major defensive presence in Shaun Wade to a controversial targeting call, then had a fumble return touchdown reversed into an incomplection, and then lost on an interception that was simply due to a miscommunication.

There were plenty of moments that will be thought about by that 2019 team for a while to come, and it is a loss that will lead to motivation in 2020 for the returning members. That loss led to Davis’ speech during winter workouts, but it is not the loss that hit home the hardest for the star member on Ohio State’s offensive line this offseason.

Wyatt Davis lost his grandfather, the man who, according to Davis’ Instagram, was the reason he wanted to play football in the first place.

“My grandad was essentially my hero growing up,” Davis said. “I mean his story of basically how he came from nothing, and it just seemed like he was like the underdog his whole entire life, especially getting drafted that late.

“Growing up, he was always around, especially with me and my brother, he treated us so good and that’s why it was just so hard when he passed.”

In an Instagram post about his late grandfather, Davis wrote: “I hope that I am making you proud. You are a true inspiration and I am fortunate to have had you in my life.”

From Wyatt playing with the fire put there by his grandfather, to stepping up as a leader for Ohio State this offseason in workouts, to becoming one of the best offensive linemen in college football, there’s plenty of reason for Willie Davis to be proud of his grandson.

*This is an edited version of a story that comes from the June print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin. For four free issues of the print edition, no card required, sign up at the link here:
<http://www.buckeyesports.com/subscribe-4issue-trial/>*