

Ohio State Head Coach Ryan Day Says Linebacker Sonny Styles Is “Leader in the Clubhouse” To Start At Will Linebacker



One of Ohio State’s most pressing questions this fall camp has been centered around the status of the starting Will linebacker competition between juniors C.J. Hicks and Sonny Styles, but that question may be closer to being answered following head coach Ryan Day’s “lightning round” press conference at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center Thursday.

Speaking with a large group of local beat reporters on the practice field, Day said that both he and defensive coordinator Jim Knowles will meet over the weekend to make a final decision on their starting Will linebacker, but added that the converted safety Styles has caught their eye and emerged as the “leader in the clubhouse” with just over a week left until the Buckeyes’ season opener against Akron on Aug. 31.

“Sonny has really stepped up and played well,” Day said when asked how the Will linebacker competition is shaping out. “He’s made this transition from safety to linebacker very well. I think he did a nice job in the spring, but you can definitely see as he went into the summer, he’s just bigger, stronger, more comfortable closer to the line of scrimmage... I think he’s looking forward to playing in a game and getting an idea of what it all looks like.

“But I could tell you in practice, he’s playing fast. He’s playing violent. He does a nice job of taking the meeting to the field, being intentional with his work but playing really hard.”

While Day said any decision on that competition has yet to be finalized, those comments indicate that Styles is leading the way at Will linebacker and could find himself as the starter come next Saturday after a hectic offseason for the junior that included a full position switch from safety.

Styles appeared in 13 games at numerous safety positions last season, showing off his versatility with 53 tackles (4 ½ for loss), two sacks, a pass deflection and a forced fumble. The Pickerington, Ohio, native began making the transition to linebacker this offseason to make room for the transfer portal

addition of former first-team All-SEC Alabama safety Caleb Downs, adding what he said was 10 pounds of muscle to enter the year at 235 pounds.

If Styles does win the starting job, he will man the Buckeyes' defense alongside veteran Mike linebacker and team captain/Block "O" recipient Cody Simon, who Knowles tabbed as the unquestioned leader of the defense earlier this camp.

The former five-star Hicks, meanwhile, will likely fall into a reserve or rotational role on Knowles' 4-2-5 defense this season after failing to earn much playing time across his first two years in Columbus. Knowles has discussed using a hybrid three-linebacker system in some situations this season, however, which could put Hicks onto the field alongside the Mike Simon and Will Styles.

"Sonny and I both talk about it a lot," Hicks said earlier this summer. "We don't really care who starts as long as both of us are eating. He can start, I go in. I can start, he goes in. As long as we're both making plays, that's all that matters to us."