

Previewing The Spring: Depth Fills Out Behind Incumbent Starters in Linebackers Room



Buckeye Sports Bulletin is previewing every position on Ohio State's roster leading into the beginning of spring practice, which is set to begin on March 7. Check back every week day for a new breakdown on how the spring might play out for the Buckeyes.

Ohio State received huge news on Jan. 12, when linebacker Tommy Eichenberg announced that he would return to Columbus for an additional season with the Buckeyes.

Eichenberg's decision to return to Ohio State followed fellow starting linebacker Steele Chambers' assertion that he would also come back to Columbus on Dec.14, 2022, keeping the Buckeyes' vaunted linebacking corps together for another season. Factor in talented depth-pieces Cody Simon and C.J. Hicks, among others, and Ohio State defensive coordinator and linebackers coach Jim Knowles has one of the most feared units in the nation.

"That's huge, getting Tommy and Steele back," Knowles said. "Those guys know the system, they know me and we work so well together. I feel like they made massive improvements throughout the season. I've broken them down individually so now I can kind of give them a plan on what we want to do. It is not a position of stress."

Starting with Eichenberg, who led the Buckeyes with a team-high 120 total tackles, including 12 tackles for loss, 2 ½ sacks and a pick-six, his return gives Ohio State a valuable on-the-field presence but also an important voice for the unit as a whole. Eichenberg was fashioned as the "leader of the defense" by his teammates, serving as a connector for the improved defense last season as a team captain.

While Eichenberg enjoyed a breakout season last year, even jumping into NFL Draft consideration as the campaign wore on before ultimately returning to Ohio State, Knowles pointed to several areas in which he can improve further during what will likely be his final season in the program.

"There's a lot of things we can do with Tommy in terms of pass coverage and getting him involved and getting his hands on the ball more," Knowles said. "Just working with him more on route progression and those kinds of things."

As Eichenberg serves as the man in the middle for the Ohio State defense, Chambers has been lauded for his ability to play sideline-to-sideline, utilizing his speed and acceleration to chase down ball-carriers while also being a solid presence in pass coverage. Chambers finished second on the team with 77 tackles, in addition to 6 ½ tackles for loss, two sacks and two interceptions.

Knowles said Chambers can improve in his ability to play in the middle of the field, including key mechanics such as block-shedding and hand fighting.

“Steele is a guy who is very coachable and has athletic skills,” Knowles said. “We want to really work with Steele on his hands and the inside fight, inside the box. He operates well on the perimeter, and he did fine inside, but I think as he grows in his career and the next level stuff, he’s going to have to face those physical challenges inside by really using his hands more.”

While Eichenberg and Chambers took the lion’s share of the snaps in Ohio State’s 4-2-5 formation — which typically just utilizes two linebackers at a time — Simon served as the third-man off of the bench for the Buckeyes. Primarily used in three-linebacker sets or in rotation, Simon carved out a solid season for himself by amassing 32 tackles (5 ½ for loss) and two sacks on the season.

As Simon provides the Buckeyes with some depth and experience, Hicks also boasts plenty of talent that Knowles can dip into if need be. Hicks, a former five-star recruit, ranked as the No. 1 linebacker and No. 7 overall recruit in the 2022 class while earning the nickname “Captain Buckeye” for his role in peer recruiting Ohio State’s class.

Hicks played sparingly as a freshman, however, collecting just six total tackles while largely operating in a special teams role. While Hicks saw a limited role in 2022, he expects big things heading into his sophomore season.

“Coming in, I kind of understood where we was going to be, especially since we’re running a 4-2-5 defense,” Hicks told Bucknuts. “I’m just blessed to be able to play in the game and just at least see the field a couple times.”

Outside of those core four linebackers, Ohio State boasts depth at the position with Mitchell Melton, Reid Carrico and Gabe Powers all waiting in the wings. With a wealth of talent at the position, Knowles also brought in some help in the form of graduate assistant James Laurinaitis — who was an All-American at Ohio State, where he played from 2005-08, and will focus primarily on coaching the linebackers.

As Laurinaitis left his mark on Ohio State as a player, he hopes he can help push this unit of linebackers to their full potential.

“For me, it all starts with can I be the best linebackers coach in the country? And can I aspire to do that at my alma mater?” Laurinaitis said. “I’ll attack this year with that vision.”