

Previewing The Spring: Many Cards To Be Shuffled In Safeties Room



There's an argument to be made that seven players have a legitimate shot at landing one of Ohio State's three safety positions this fall.

Particularly after the somewhat unexpected return of graduate Josh Proctor and the addition of junior Ja'Had Carter through the transfer portal, there's a litany of questions as to who starts and where for the Buckeyes at the position that drives their defense in 2023.

"Everybody has their own little niche," Ohio State safeties coach Perry Eliano said Feb. 1. "But as a safety group, we have to be able to do more than one thing. Right now we're still in the evaluation process and it's a fluid situation."

Each of Ohio State's safeties are schooled in all three positions, but nickel safety seems the easiest to start with in terms of breaking things down because only two names seem to be in the running to replace Tanner McCalister, last year's starter.

Carter brings plenty of experience playing the nickel position, as well as deep safety, from Syracuse. He snagged a team-high three interceptions and added 36 tackles in 2022, his third year as a starter for the Orange.

"He's got his head down, and he's working," safeties coach Perry Eliano said. "He came here because he wanted to be developed to be the very best. He understands the task that's at hand. It's competition. And the old adage, iron sharpens iron. And so far, he's done a great job. He's just put his head down and worked."

Junior Cam Martinez will ensure that he doesn't win the job easily, however. Martinez backed up McCalister in 2022 and rotated in on occasion, including a start against Toledo while McCalister was injured. He made 15 tackles but didn't break up any passes.

Adjuster (Ohio State's field safety position) and bandit (boundary safety) are in competitions that involve three or more players, especially seeing as how some in the room factor in at both spots.

Junior Lathan Ransom started at bandit last season and piled up 74 tackles, third-most on the team and most among defensive backs. He added an interception and two blocked punts to those numbers, but some lapses in coverage against Michigan and Georgia will need to be learned from.

Thing is, Ransom might be a better fit at adjuster with his range and ball-seeking abilities. Proctor has played a traditional free safety role similar to adjuster at Ohio State before, namely in 2021, but moved down to bandit in 2022 before being usurped by Ransom in the team's first game against No. 5 Notre Dame. There's also some injury history with Proctor, but he's shown flashes of what made him a top 100 national prospect out of high school.

"Young men have to understand where they're at, and they have to be comfortable with, 'Y'know what? There's still more growth for me,'" Eliano said. "'There's still more I need to do in order to finish what I started here before going to the next level.' And Josh, there's some things he wants to finish, there's some things he wants to accomplish as a team, as well as individually."

Also factoring in at adjuster is sophomore Kye Stokes, who balled out in last year's spring game with nine tackles and two pass breakups before seeing garbage-time duty during the regular season.

Then there's fellow sophomore Sonny Styles, a former five-star prospect who played meaningful snaps in the College Football Playoff semifinals against No. 1 Georgia as a freshman to close last season. With such recruiting pedigree and athleticism that coaches have raved about, it seems that defensive coordinator Jim Knowles and staff will be looking to find a way to get him on the field.

It seems his best spot might be bandit, taking advantage of both his physicality playing closer to the box and his range dropping deep. But he's got the versatility to factor in at any of the three safety spots or potentially even linebacker if needed, and certainly could play adjuster if best for the defense.

"You earn what you get in the secondary, you earn what you get in the safety room," Eliano said. "So there's no handouts. And the thing I appreciate most about Sonny is he came in and worked. There was no entitlement. He was the No. 1 player and all that, but you never would have thought that the minute he stepped in the door. He earned the right to be on that stage and play the role that he played."

The last name that could factor in is junior Kourt Williams II, one of Ohio State's captains last season who missed most of the season with injury. In his limited action he's shown some quick twitch but has needed to develop his coverage ability, making him a likely fit at bandit if he's to contend for playing time.

There's a lot of shuffling to go on at safety for Ohio State. But with the proper stack, the deck could be deadly.