

Previewing The Spring: Wide Receivers Room Is Stacked With Talent



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 weekday for a new breakdown on how the spring might play out for the Buckeyes.

No less than 98 percent of Ohio State's receiving yardage production from 2022 returns in 2023, and that's from a squad that finished third in the nation with 9.5 yards per pass attempt.

There are perhaps less questions at wide receiver than any other position entering the spring, but what inquiries linger pertain to the development of younger players as the Buckeyes prepare for a potential exodus of talent after this season. They'll get their shot at first-team reps in the months of March and April, because two returning starters are out for the spring.

"Right now, you should be trying to impress your peers," wide receivers coach Brian Hartline said Feb. 1. "Your peers know. Players know. By trying to impress your peers, that means everything. Being on time if not early, how you work, how you communicate, if you're up front (in team meetings). All those things matter.

OSU's wideout room begins with junior Marvin Harrison Jr., a finalist for the Biletnikoff Award as the nation's best pass catcher in 2022. After hauling in 77 passes for 1,263 yards and 14 touchdowns a year ago, one wonders what his ceiling is for 2023.

The two projected starters alongside Harrison are the same as last year, junior Emeka Egbuka and senior Julian Fleming. Egbuka gave OSU a tandem of 1,100-yard receivers — the first time in school history that's happened — with 74 catches for 1,151 yards and 10 touchdowns, adding some versatility with 87 rushing yards and two scores on the ground. Fleming, for his part, brought in 34 balls for 533 yards and six touchdowns.

Both Egbuka and Fleming are out for spring practice, however, per head coach Ryan Day. In their stead, the main player looking to take a step forward will be junior Jayden Ballard.

Ballard picked up 155 yards off just eight catches — mostly in garbage time — a year ago, scoring his first career touchdown. A former top-100 recruit out of Massillon (Ohio) Washington, Ballard's blazing speed made him a clear deep threat entering college. What he's had to tone is the other areas of his game.

"I thought where (Ballard) was at right now he would be towards the end of this year," Hartline said before the 2022 season. "But he's already there. He's gotta continue that. It doesn't mean it's good enough, it just means that you're really doing a good job, and it has to be maintained."

Graduate Xavier Johnson is back for one final round at Ohio State as well. A former walk-on, he had huge touchdown catches against No. 5 Notre Dame and No. 1 Georgia and also lined up in the backfield for some snaps after the team's running back depth took some hits. He had 13 receptions for 151 yards to go with 12 carries for 146 yards and one touchdown.

Beyond that, a quartet of redshirt freshmen, all four-stars from the class of 2022, will be looking to earn a spot on the two-deep.

The group is composed of Kojo Antwi, Kaleb Brown, Caleb Burton and Kyion Grayes. Antwi brings the most size and high-pointing ability of the group, Burton and Grayes factor in as having better burst and route-running ability outside. Brown is seen as a pure slot receiving option.

"Every year you have a new identity," Hartline said Feb. 1. "These players look for new opportunities to re-establish themselves or to establish themselves, and giving them that opportunity, I think, is critical. Sometimes the by-product of past years gets stuck in your mind as a coach, when as a player you're saying, 'O.K., come on now, this is my next year, new opportunity. Maybe some older guys are gone, my voice can be louder.' You've got to make sure, as a coach, you provide that platform."

Three freshmen early enrollees are on campus and looking to push for reps as well. The highest ranked of the bunch is Rolesville, N.C. four-star Noah Rogers, the No. 53 prospect in the 247Sports composite. Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star Carnell Tate lands pretty close by at No. 59. The final early enrollee is Zephyrhills (Fla.) four-star Bryson Rodgers, ranked 355th.

Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) American Heritage five-star Brandon Inniss will look to make a splash come fall when he joins the room.