

'Freak Athlete' Smith Emerging In First Spring

By GREG WILSON

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State freshman wide receiver Jeremiah Smith came out of high school as the top-ranked recruit in the country, a rare feat to accomplish as a pass catcher.

His recruitment came with some drama. Playing at Chaminade-Madonna Prep near Miami Gardens, Fla., in-state schools such as Miami and Florida State were two programs that went hard after him even after he committed to Ohio State, and it seemed like a flip was possible when the early signing period came around on Dec. 21.

When he went to sign during a ceremony at his high school, he had a bag with him that had an Ohio State hat and a Miami hat, but he ended up going with the Buckeyes. It was a decision he said was made at the last second, ultimately deciding to stick with Ohio State because it has a better track record of wide receivers being drafted to the NFL in the first round.

But Ohio State wide receivers coach Brian Hartline, who has quickly become one of the chief wide receiver recruiters in the country, didn't see it that way.

"He never wavered," Hartline said. "His family never wavered. He can say what he wants two minutes before the hat came out, but he always told me the same thing. His parents always told me the same thing. He's been loyal. His family is loyal. They always did what they said, and I can't thank them enough. I'm really excited for him."

Whether he was a real possibility to flip or not, it was known from the beginning of his recruitment that he would be a special talent wherever he landed. His scouting report on 247Sports compared him to NFL wide receiver Julio Jones, one of the best in the league for many years, and he backed that hype up throughout his high school career.

In his senior season at Chaminade-Madonna Prep, the team went 14-0 to win their third straight state championship which he had a big impact on, reeling in 88 catches for 1,376 yards and 19 touchdowns along the way. He also had a rushing touchdown and returned a punt for a score during the season. He had 58 catches for 1,073 yards and 20 touchdowns the year before, already showing he deserved to be the top wide receiver prospect in the country.

Before the Cotton Bowl, Ohio State cornerback Denzel Burke was asked about Smith after he had officially signed with Ohio State, and Burke was impressed. But he wanted to see him do it at the next level before he really gave him any credit for his impressive numbers.

"I have to see him in person," Burke said. "All of that high school stuff is cool, but when you've got an elite corner lining up across your face, let me see what you can do. I heard he's a five-star, he can move. Let's line up and we'll find out."

Now that Smith is actually in practice with the Buckeyes, Burke has turned into a believer and agrees that he is going to be great after he was finally able to see him in person and defend against him. And it took only two practices for him to see that.

"This might be a big statement, but the

way he handles himself and the way he moves and the potential he has, I feel like he might be the next best wide receiver to come through here," Burke said. "I'm really excited to see what he can do. The sky's the limit for him."

When teammates and coaches talk about Smith, the common word that seems to come to mind for almost all of them is "freak."

"Freak. Athlete," sophomore cornerback Jermaine Mathews Jr. said about the freshman. "He's big, strong, fast. A lot of the same things you see in Marvin (Harrison Jr.), but not the same – he's younger right now."

"He's a freak," sophomore quarterback Devin Brown said March 4. "He's going to be next level. That guy handles things the right way, does everything right in the weight room. I was throwing with him yesterday, and every time I throw with him it's like, 'Jeez, this guy's a stud.' He's going to be a freak. He's just so smooth. He's super smooth, super athletic. He's a big kid. He could snag it literally anywhere. He was making a couple of one-handers yesterday. This kid's just freaky."

Plenty of talented wide receivers have come through Ohio State in recent years, with the likes of Harrison, Chris Olave, Jaxon Smith-Njigba, Carnell Tate and Garrett Wilson all gracing the field for the Buckeyes. But none of them were able to significantly contribute as freshmen.

The closer it gets to the season, and the more teammates and coaches talk about Smith, the more it seems like a realistic expectation that he will see the field in his first year at Ohio State given his development since he arrived on campus as an early enrollee.

Senior wide receiver Emeka Egbuka has been through the system, so he knows what it takes to get on the field. He thinks it's possible Smith could do that as a true freshman.

"Logically speaking, you have to understand the offense," Egbuka said. "You have to know the ins and outs, not just your play, but your role in the play and the concept of it all, which takes a little bit to learn, but it's not impossible. You've got to be able to block, go out there and make big plays. But ultimately if you're talented enough, you're going to get on the field."

"I'm not going to say that he's starting as a freshman because that's not for the far future, but if he continues his hard work and his diligence in his craft and he's able to learn the offense, the sky's the limit for him."

Listening to his coaches and teammates, the talent aspect won't be an issue for him. Already as an 18-year-old receiver, he's able to do things that great veterans can do. Hartline said he doesn't need to teach Smith how to do those things, but he does need to explain why the things he does work since he still has so much to learn. Smith has been trying to take it all in.

"I love the way he lifts. I love the way he approaches things," Hartline said. "I love the questions he asks. I love the way he makes mistakes and corrects mistakes. It's very veteran-like. There's so much ball he has to learn. He does things that are good, and I'm like, 'Do you know why that

worked?' and he goes, 'I have no freaking idea.' So trying to teach him all of that, why it works, so then the consistency at which it works goes through the roof."

"I'm very excited and proud of the conversations we're currently having, and I'm excited for them to keep going."

The talent Smith has and the way people talk about him could be an excuse for him to coast and play through his career because people talk about him like he is a guaranteed starter for Ohio State. But that's not the attitude he's had since he joined the program. He is keeping the same mentality that got him to this point, impressing those such as Egbuka.

"There's nothing he really can't do," Egbuka said. "He runs fast, he jumps high. He's strong. He's a natural pass-catcher. He's very coachable. I do my best to uplift the young guys and give them pointers here and there, and he's always willing to listen. He always puts his best foot forward every single day."

Head coach Ryan Day is another person who has noticed not only the talent Smith possesses, but the hard work he puts in to try to continue getting better and how impressive it is for someone so young to have that approach.

"He's jumped right in," Day said. "The talent's there. The thing that's been most impressive to me so far is his discipline that he's already built in his life. Then the skill of playing the position at such a young age as well, and Hartline and everybody will continue to build on that and grow on that."

That work has already paid off, at least as much as it can at this early point in his college career. He became the first player to lose his black stripe in the spring, and in doing so in just four practices, he became the fastest player in program history to achieve that feat.

It's just the first step in what is looking to be a very impressive Buckeye career for Smith, and sophomore wide receiver Brandon Inniss is pushing for that to start sooner rather than later.



SONNY BROCKWAY

NOT NORMAL — Ohio State freshman wide receiver Jeremiah Smith has wowed coaches and teammates in his first spring with the Buckeyes, putting him in position to compete for a starting job in his first year.

"I feel like Jeremiah is a different caliber," Inniss said. "When you watch him, how smooth he is and the physical capabilities he brings to the game, he has to play. Some way, he has to play."

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Smith, Downs As Advertised During Spring Practice

By **PATRICK ENGELS**

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Since head coach Ryan Day assumed head coaching duties from Urban Meyer in 2019, perhaps no team has possessed as much talent and hype as this year's 2024 squad. The Buckeye roster is loaded with NFL-ready veterans and surging newcomers this spring, a unique collection of talent that those within the Woody Hayes Athletic Center are excited to see take shape as the offseason progresses.

"They're as close to NFL players and pro players as I've been around," Day said after Ohio State's first spring practice on March 5. "They're very, very competitive. They can't wait to get the pads on. It's fun to be around guys like that."

This elite talent was on full display this spring, when a number of Buckeyes turned heads throughout the 15-practice schedule, all culminating in a 34-33 win for the Scarlet team in the spring game held at Ohio Stadium on April 13.

Ohio State's defense showed it was capable of matching – maybe even exceeding – the production it had last season, with the unit's collection of returning starters such as Denzel Burke, JT Tuimolou and Jack Sawyer, among others, along with newcomer Caleb Downs all coming together to flash during practices made available to the media this spring.

The offense was no slouch, either, with the Buckeyes' five-man quarterback room developing chemistry with returning wideouts Emeka Egbuka, Brandon Inniss, Carnell Tate and freshman sensation Jeremiah Smith, as well as the dynamic duo of TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins proving their worth as one of the premier rushing tandems in the nation.

In the end, while the scoreboard may not have indicated it, Jim Knowles' defense earned final bragging rights heading into summer camp with a strong performance in the spring game, as the unit accounted for six sacks and four interceptions on the day.

With 15 practices now in the rearview, Buckeye Sports Bulletin is taking a look back at the players who stood out the most this spring while also keeping an eye on some of the top position battles to look out for as the Buckeyes continue into the offseason.

Top Spring Offensive Player: Jeremiah Smith

It's never easy for a freshman with a boatload of hype surrounding him entering his college career to match those lofty expectations, especially in the early going. But Smith may have exceeded them this spring.

Smith, who entered the program as the top-ranked player in the entire 2024 recruiting class, instantly garnered the attention of on-looking media during the first spring practice on March 5 due to his imposing physique and raw athleticism. His intangibles not only caught the eye of local media early on this spring, but also his teammates and coaches, who gushed over the 6-3, 215-pound freshman's already polished skill set.

"He's a freak," quarterback Devin Brown said March 4. "He's going to be next level. That guy handles things the right way, does everything right in the weight room. I was throwing with him yesterday, and every time I throw with him it's like, 'Jeez, this guy's a stud.' He's going to be a freak. He's just so smooth. He's a big kid. He could snag it literally anywhere. He was making a couple of one-handers yesterday. This kid's just freaky."

Smith's abilities were on full display throughout the spring, but he most notably dazzled during Ohio State's Student Appreciation Day held on March 30. In the 90-minute open practice that included several 11-on-11 drills held in front of fans, Smith was the unquestioned top performer of the day with a number of impressive catches. His most notable snag occurred when Brown found Smith on a deep ball and made the play despite coverage from Burke and Downs.

Day said after Student Appreciation Day that Smith possesses a unique work ethic and maturity at wide receiver – traits that many others in the program have also used to describe Smith this spring – putting him in prime position to crack the starting lineup this season.

"Jeremiah has really stepped in," Day said. "He got his black stripe off real quick. He has a great approach. I'm going to be careful what I say, but he's certainly been a pleasure to watch, and we're all very excited for his future. If he continues on the path he's on, he's going to play a lot of football and will certainly have a chance to start as well."

Smith – who was also seen making an acrobatic one-handed catch in the end zone over cornerback Davison Igbinosun in a video posted on Twitter on April 6 – had a quiet outing in the spring game, hauling in just two catches for 12 yards. But his overall performance this spring still gives him momentum heading into the summer as he attempts to break into the starting lineup.

Regardless of where he ends up on the depth chart, those who witnessed Smith operate in practice know he will find his way onto the field in some capacity this season.

"I feel like Jeremiah is a different caliber," Inniss said. "When you watch him, how smooth

he is and the physical capabilities he brings to the game, he has to play. Some way, he has to play."

Top Spring Defensive Player: Caleb Downs

Like Smith, Downs rose to the occasion amid great expectations this spring, emerging as a consistent and imposing force in the secondary.

Downs, who entered Ohio State in January following a record-breaking freshman season at Alabama, showed his worth as an aggressive and physical safety throughout spring practice. These traits were most evident during Student Appreciation Day, when he made several plays near the line of scrimmage and generated pressure on Ohio State's quarterbacks.

But while his physical tools may have shone throughout the 15 practices, it was his high football IQ and maturity that had coaches and teammates raving about the sophomore the most.

"Caleb has got great football intelligence," defensive coordinator Jim Knowles said March 7. "He picks things up quickly, plays like a veteran. The thing you notice about Caleb is, yeah, he still makes mistakes, but he corrects them immediately. That's what you're always looking for out of players. You're going to make mistakes, but can you correct them by the next play? That's what I've seen so far."

"He fit in the first day he entered the building," Burke added that same day. "His film speaks for itself. He already knows the whole defense. He's already out there with the ones with us. He's that guy, and he's going to do a lot of big things for us."

Ohio State safeties coach Matt Guerrieri said Downs' commitment to watching film has helped elevate the unit, motivating some of his teammates to follow suit and perfect their craft in the film room.

"He's really special," Guerrieri said. "First off, he puts the work in. Talent is a God-given thing. But the discipline and skill that you develop over time in your life, he's been able to do that. He's a really disciplined guy. He's the same every day from a mentality standpoint. He's the same every day from a work ethic standpoint. You see that translate to the field."

"He's probably in the film room more than anybody on the entire defense. He puts that type of effort in, and he's done a great job of pushing the envelope with other guys to make sure the standard is that way."

While Downs has received praise since he arrived on campus, he said he has yet to reach his full potential. He listed pass coverage and communication as two areas of his game that he still thinks he needs to improve upon to make him a more well-rounded safety.

"I think I can improve upon what I did well last year and increase on the qualities that I wasn't as elite at last season," Downs said. "Just being better in coverage, being better in the post, being better in my tackling, being a better communicator with my teammates. All that I think I can offer to the team. But at the end of the day, it has to be a team collective to go do what we want to do."

Spring Most Improved Player: Josh Fryar

Senior offensive lineman Josh Fryar, like many other Ohio State linemen last year, expe-

Top Performers At The Spring Game

Sophomore wide receiver David Adolph - While all eyes were on freshman sensation Jeremiah Smith heading into the spring game, it was the walk-on Adolph who instead stole the show. He was targeted early and often by the Buckeye gun-slingers, leading all pass-catchers with four receptions for 50 yards. Adolph's stat line was highlighted by his contested 25-yard catch over two defenders near the end of the second quarter, which set Scarlet up for their first touchdown score of the game.

Senior wide receiver Emeka Egbuka - After being overshadowed for much of the spring by other receivers on the roster, Egbuka made sure to remind Ohio State fans of his talents as a pass catcher during the spring game. Despite not playing a snap in the second half, Egbuka was still among the top performers on offense, ranking second on the team with four catches for 47 yards. He wowed fans with perhaps the flashiest play of the day when he hauled in an impressive one-handed catch near the sideline in the second quarter.

Junior cornerback Davison Igbinosun - Igbinosun is known for his physicality and pass-breakup ability, and those traits were on full display early on in the spring game. He put close coverage on sophomore wide receiver Carnell Tate on two separate pass attempts and then deflected a pass away from Smith in the end zone, all coming in the first half alone. He finished with three tackles along with the pass breakup.

Freshman safety Jaylen McClain - McClain may not make much of an impact at safety this season as he sits behind several veterans, but his presence was felt during the scrimmage. In his first appearance in front of fans at Ohio Stadium, he picked

off fellow early enrollee Julian Sayin and tacked on an additional three tackles. It was an impressive performance for the freshman that should give him momentum heading into the summer.

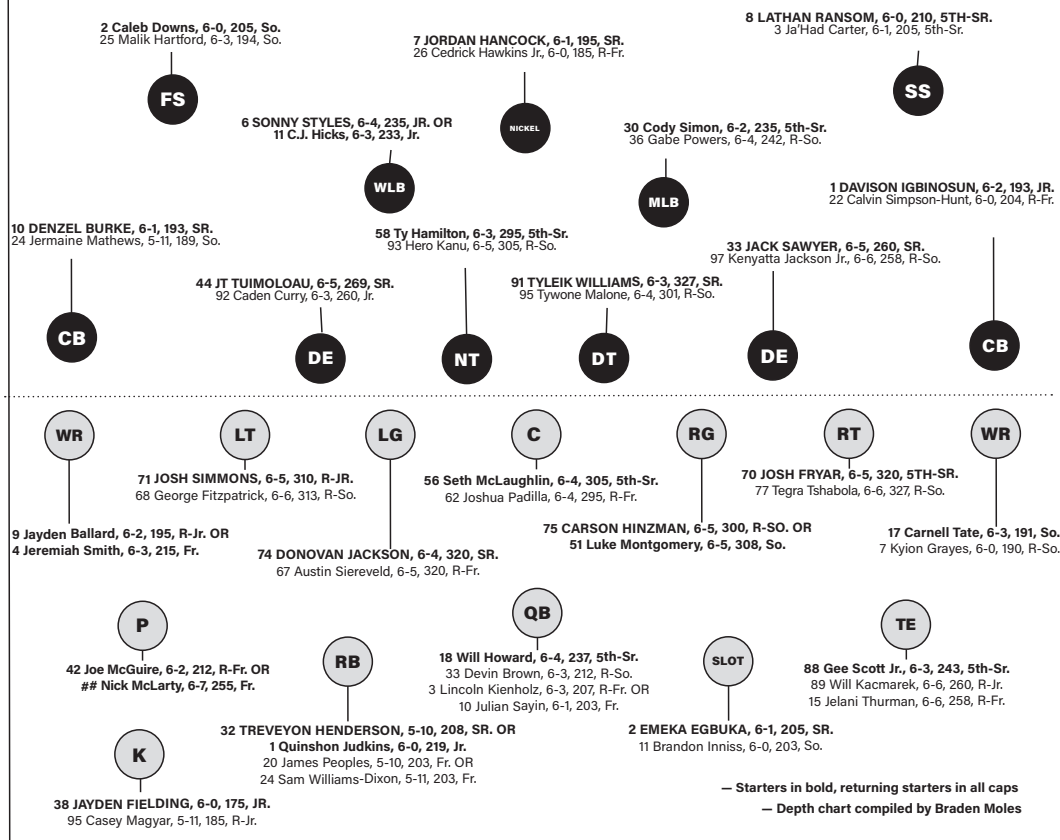
Sophomore wide receiver Brennen Schramm - Schramm, a preferred walk-on who shed his black stripe on March 21, played a large role in Scarlet's 34-33 win over Gray. He scored the lone touchdown of the first half off a slant pass from Devin Brown in the second quarter and finished with three catches for 31 yards, putting a cap on a strong spring for the Medina, Ohio, native.

Freshman cornerback Aaron Scott Jr. - Scott entered Columbus as the top-rated recruit in Ohio and fifth-best cornerback in the nation for the 2024 class, and those talents were on full display at Ohio Stadium. The Springfield, Ohio, native was all over the field for Jim Knowles' defense, racking up six tackles and adding two pass deflections. He also could have tacked on an interception to that already impressive stat line, with a pass attempt from Sayin nearly reaching the hands of Scott but instead ending up on the turf in the second half.

Freshman running back Sam Williams-Dixon - With Dalan Hayden entering the transfer portal, Williams-Dixon made his case to become Ohio State's third-string running back this season after putting together arguably the best offensive performance of the day. After receiving just three carries in the first half, the former three-star tailback exploded in the second half with several impressive runs, a stretch headlined by his 22-yard score in the third quarter where he found a seam through the middle of the defense and gave Scarlet a 27-20 lead. He finished with 75 yards and the score on 11 carries.

SPRING FOOTBALL ANALYSIS

OHIO STATE POST-SPRING DEPTH CHART



play fast. Sonny has shown a lot of that.”
With both Hicks and Styles showing promise at linebacker this spring and combining for 14 tackles in the spring game, Knowles and Laurinaitis seem to still have a competition on their hands at linebacker as they head into the summer.

Laurinaitis, however, sees this potentially ongoing battle as a positive thing for his linebacker room as it looks to build a competitive culture. The former three-time All-America linebacker said it is not only Hicks and Styles who are battling for extensive playing time, but also several reserves such as Arvell Reese and Gabe Powers, both of whom have been praised by Knowles and Laurinaitis for their respective strong springs.

Laurinaitis even said that he envisions a scenario where up to five of his linebackers can receive significant playing time at points this season, which he believes can prove beneficial as they gear up for a potentially extended post-season run.

“Coach Day’s talked about it a lot,” Laurinaitis said. “It’s going to be a long season. I’d say right now, we’re probably at five that I would feel confident rotating out there on the field. That’s going to be week to week. If you display during the week of practice that you’re locked in and somebody else has a bad mental week, well, I can’t reward you with starting if you have six mental errors during the week just because you started last week.”

Other Spots Up For Grabs

- Like last season, the quarterback battle is still an open competition heading into the summer, with Brown, fifth-year senior Will Howard and the surging true freshman Julian Sayin all battling it out for the role. It may have appeared that the starting job belonged to Howard when he first arrived from Kansas State this winter, but that no longer seems to be the case with both Brown and Sayin putting together strong springs. Brown was the first to flash with a few impressive practices in March, but the back end of the 15 sessions belonged to Sayin, who received glowing praise from Day and others for his consistent play and veteran-like qualities.

- Ohio State’s offensive line is still a work in progress, especially on the right side. Sophomore Luke Montgomery and Fryar appear to be the favorites to start at right guard and right tackle, respectively, heading into summer camp. But if Fryar makes the move to the inside, it will leave Montgomery and Tshabola battling on the outside. Tshabola also earned first-team reps at right guard during the spring game.

- Right tackle and right guard are not the only offensive line positions that still need sorting out post-spring. The starting center spot is also still up for grabs, with redshirt sophomore Carson Hinzman and fifth-year senior Seth McLaughlin duking it out for the position. Hinzman started each of Ohio State’s 12 regular-season games last season but was benched in the Cotton Bowl for undisclosed reasons. This prompted Day to seek an upgrade at the position and bring in McLaughlin from Alabama in January. He started every game for the Tide last season but dealt with snapping issues during the team’s Rose Bowl loss to Michigan. While McLaughlin is the presumed favorite to start at center this fall, he split first-team reps with Hinzman throughout the spring.

rienced some inconsistent play in his first full season as the team’s starting right tackle. The veteran Buckeye, who shared that he received a great deal of social media criticism throughout last season, was not afraid to admit that in his only media session this spring.

“I didn’t think it was up to my standard,” Fryar said. “I thought I was thinking too much and not playing.”

To fix those inconsistencies this season, Fryar has taken a different approach, most notably with his physique. While Fryar is listed as 320 pounds this season – seven pounds heavier than last year – he has made significant changes to his diet and cut down on some body fat this offseason, changes that Day thinks have helped his lineman move more freely this spring.

“I think Josh Fryar has really changed his body,” Day said April 10. “His body fat is down. That’s something – his diet and everything – we really hammered during this offseason. That was significant with how quickly his feet are moving, because he’s very sharp at what he does. He’s bending better.”

Day, who said that Fryar had one of the “best off seasons of anybody in the building” earlier this spring, added that his body transformation has helped him emerge as a more versatile piece on the offensive line. That was made evident throughout the spring, where Fryar was seen playing both on the outside at right tackle and inside at right guard, even if tackle seems to be the eventual destination.

“Josh has played some right guard for us this spring to see what that would look like as Tegra (Tshabola) moved out there,” Day said. “We’ve tried some different combinations. I

think Josh can play both positions, but we do feel confident with him right now playing tackle.”

Fryar worked only at right tackle during the spring game but previously said he is gaining more comfort on the offensive line no matter where he plays. He credited that development to his improved conditioning, along with his better understanding of his role on the line, both of which have allowed him to act rather than think on the field.

“Now, I have a better grasp at strength and conditioning, the football part of it, just everything,” Fryar said. “I’m well rounded in that to where I just don’t have to think about it. I just go.”

Fryar said he has grown to like playing at both right guard and right tackle this spring, as each of them requires different skill sets that both he and his coaches think he possesses. But no matter what position he ends up occupying this season, Fryar’s overall improvement is an encouraging sign for the offensive line that is searching for more consistent play in 2024.

Position Battle To Watch: Linebacker

The departures of two-year starters Steele Chambers and Tommy Eichenberg left a significant hole at linebacker for Ohio State this off-season, and as the calendar moves past spring camp and to summer practice, it is still largely unclear who will patch that hole this season.

What is clear is that senior Cody Simon – who experienced a usage increase last season and has assumed first-team reps all spring – will assume the starting role at Mike lineback-

er. But there are still looming question marks regarding who will end up alongside him at the Will, a position that will either be occupied by C.J. Hicks or the safety-turned-linebacker Sonny Styles.

Hicks took the majority of the starting reps in the first two spring practices made available to the media on March 5 and 7 and also earned praise for the significant improvements he has made to his game since last season, where he was primarily used on special teams.

“I think C.J. Hicks has done a phenomenal job,” linebackers coach James Laurinaitis said April 3. “I think C.J. sees the opportunity, and he’s certainly making the case to get on the field this fall. It’s been a really good spring for C.J. Where he is now, compared to where he was last fall, he’s a much better football player.”

But the competition seemed tighter as the spring rolled on when Hicks began to share first-team reps with Styles, who made the permanent position change from safety to linebacker following the arrival of Downs. Despite not garnering many first-team reps early on this spring, Styles has been lauded for his ability to quickly learn the intricacies and nuances of playing linebacker, something that could put him in position to crack the starting lineup this season.

“It’s a change for Sonny because he’s playing in the box from a low position instead of dropping in,” Knowles said. “Things happen a lot faster. But he’s reacted superbly. He’s a guy who has football intelligence. He understands the scheme. He has played a lot of positions. I think he’s going to be great because one of the biggest parts of being a linebacker is you have to know all the pieces around you so you can

Smith Among Early Enrollees Standing Out

By GREG WILSON

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Instead of going through what most high school seniors do in their final semester – worrying about graduating and finding a date to prom – 16 young freshmen decided to enroll at Ohio State early so that they could go through spring workouts with the football team.

Coming to Columbus early likely makes the transition into the season a little easier for the freshmen, getting started with their conditioning and weight lifting to try to get in shape as quickly as possible and being able to experience 15 practices in the spring so that they know some of what to expect for the upcoming season.

Many of the first-year players from the fifth-ranked recruiting class in the 2024 cycle who enrolled early could contribute in some way. They have more time to prove their ability to coaches, and for those who won't contribute, it's more time to develop under the coaches.

Offensive coordinator Chip Kelly has respect for the guys who decide to enroll early since they choose to get thrown into the fire of playing football at Ohio State instead of going through their final semester of high school.

"I am always so impressed with young guys that enroll early, watching how they get acclimated and what they do," Kelly said after the spring game on April 13. "When you look at Julian (Sayin), Air (Noland), and (Jeremiah Smith), they should be in the hot lunch line of their high school and they're out here playing in front of 80,000 people. The whole concept here is we throw them in the deep end and see if they can swim. We don't baby anything."

The biggest standout was none other than five-star wide receiver Smith (6-3, 215), who caught the attention of not only his coaches and teammates but all Ohio State fans who paid any attention to the Buckeyes' social media accounts since videos of him making eye-catching receptions were posted seemingly every practice they had.

Five-star quarterback Sayin (6-1, 203), who enrolled early at Alabama before transferring to Ohio State, was another player who performed well enough to make a name for himself in spring camp, and after 15 practices he has firmly put himself in the mix at quarterback alongside Will Howard and Devin Brown.

The Buckeyes will add more players to the locker room over the summer – including wide receiver Mylan Graham (6-1, 185), tight end Max LeBlanc (6-4, 227), defensive lineman Dominic Kirks (6-4, 225), safety Leroy Roker (6-1, 175), offensive lineman Gabe VanSickle (6-5, 315) and tight end Damarion Witten (6-4, 215) – but for now, the 16 early enrollees are getting a head start on their college careers.

Here is an update from Buckeye Sports Bulletin on how each of the early arrivals have fared in their first spring with the Buckeyes. Players are listed alphabetically.

OL Deontae Armstrong

The offensive line was one of the few

positions last season where Ohio State had issues. It culminated in a very poor Cotton Bowl performance in which a lack of depth shone through, and the Buckeyes are hoping that adding not just one but two in-state linemen – twins, no less – will help bolster the group.

The first year for Deontae Armstrong, who lined up at left tackle this spring, is going to be about getting to a good size, developing as a player and taking in as much as he can about Ohio State's offense and what Justin Frye wants to see from him. He has already bulked up to 6-6 and 298 pounds since arriving on campus, which is a great place to be as an early enrollee.

OL Devontae Armstrong

Like his brother, Devontae Armstrong (6-5, 303) is also unlikely to see any significant time on the field this season. This season is going to be all about learning everything he can so that he can be an effective player in the future for the Buckeyes.

He did not suit up for practice the day before the spring game, but he did line up at guard earlier this spring when he participated in drills. While coaches haven't said much about the Armstrong twins this spring, head coach Ryan Day did talk about them when they signed with the Buckeyes in December, and he believes they have a lot to offer the program.

"I feel strongly about the Armstrong twins and the year they had," Day said when they signed in December. "Coming from a great program at (Lakewood, Ohio) St. Edward, what they did as a team this year and they led the way. The guys have been tremendous in terms of their development throughout their high school careers. You're seeing them play their best football and we're very excited for them."

DL Eddrick Houston

The process of keeping Houston (6-3, 270) committed to the Buckeyes as signing day approached was a stressful one for both Day and defensive line coach Larry Johnson as they fended off schools looking to swoop in at the last minute for the five-star prospect.

When he did sign – after Day left a press conference to take his call – it saved what would have been a tough year on the recruiting trail for the defensive line. Now that he's on campus and has been practicing, Johnson said the freshman is very happy with his choice, but it could be tough for him to get on the field in his first year.

"It's a growth process," Johnson said. "He should be in a classroom and getting ready to go to the prom now. But he's here and he has to go through a growing stage, learn how to play hard. Playing hard in high school and playing hard in college are two different levels. It's full speed ahead. He's got to learn how to do that, and he's got the skill set. He's got the physical skill, so now it's time to learn the game to play at a high level as fast as you can."

He earned some points early on when he got into the spring game and got a sack in front of 80,012 fans, finishing the game with six tackles.

He's stuck behind an extremely deep de-

Ohio State's 2024 Early Enrollees

No.	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Previous School
72	Deontae Armstrong	OL	6-6	298	Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward
73	Devontae Armstrong	OL	6-5	303	Lakewood (Ohio) St. Edward
96	Eddrick Houston	DL	6-3	270	Buford, Ga.
13	Miles Lockhart	CB	5-9	193	Chandler (Ariz.) Basha
18	Jaylen McClain	SAF	6-0	192	Rahway (N.J.) Seton Hall Prep
90	Eric Mensah	DL	6-3	308	Stafford (Va.) Mountain View
69	Ian Moore	OL	6-6	309	New Palestine, Ind
12	Air Noland	QB	6-2	192	College Park (Ga.) Langston Hughes
20	James Peoples	RB	5-10	203	San Antonio Veterans Memorial
35	Payton Pierce	LB	6-2	223	Lucas (Texas) Lovejoy
10	Julian Sayin	QB	6-1	203	Carlsbad, Calif./Alabama
5	Aaron Scott Jr.	CB	6-0	185	Springfield, Ohio
4	Jeremiah Smith	WR	6-3	215	Miami Gardens (Fla.) Chaminade-Madonna Prep
23	Garrett Stover	LB	6-1	220	Sunbury (Ohio) Big Walnut
12	Bryce West	CB	5-11	196	Cleveland Glenville
24	Sam Williams-Dixon	RB	5-11	203	Pickerington (Ohio) North

fensive line with Jack Sawyer, JT Tuimolau, Kenyatta Jackson Jr. and Caden Curry all on the edge. But if any first-year defensive end could manage to work his way into the conversation with that type of talent blocking him, it could be Houston.

CB Miles Lockhart

It was a quiet spring for Lockhart (5-9, 193) as one of many cornerbacks in a loaded room, and the depth of that room showed when Lockhart struggled to get much playing time when it came to the spring game or drills in practices that were open to the media. He did finish the spring game with two tackles and a pass breakup, however, getting into the game late.

Lockhart came in as the No. 398 overall prospect and No. 33 cornerback in the class, and Day believes he can slot in at nickel in the future for the Buckeyes.

"Miles Lockhart is a corner that I actually saw play live," Day said in December. "He's going to be a nickel for us as well. Miles is extremely competitive, fits to what Jim (Knowles) wants right there in that nickel position. He can also move out to corner. He is a really nasty, tough player who has jumped in and been a great part of this class."

SAF Jaylen McClain

Safety is a position that isn't as deep as some of the others on the team, and the addition of McClain (6-0, 192) is already paying dividends. Safeties coach Matt Guerrieri talked about the freshman on April 3 after he had seen him for most of the spring, and one of the things that stood out to him is that along with the talent, McClain is always giving as much effort as possible.

"He's being great," Guerrieri said. "First off, we do a thing where we track how well you run to the ball every practice. It's one of those things we grade. You can talk about all the schematics that you want. Coach Knowles has all of that. But if you're not running to the ball, you're not playing good defense. We track that, and he's one of the guys that every single practice is one of our highest-graded guys running to the ball. He's been awesome from an effort standpoint. He's in early, he puts the work in and he's made a bunch of plays out here."

That hard work paid off early when he

got into the spring game and picked off Sayin, scoring three points for the defense.

"McClain, I think, is a great plus," Knowles said. "He is a guy that has football intelligence. He's picked it up. Of those incoming freshmen who still should be in high school, he's a guy you're going to point to and you can see right now he's going to be a player."

McClain benefited from some extra time at strong safety this spring while usual starter Lathan Ransom continued recovering from an injury and backup Ja'Had Carter was also out. He's unlikely to crack the lineup once Ransom and Carter are healthy, but he factors in as valuable depth for Ohio State based on his spring game performance.

DL Eric Mensah

Even as one of the only two recruits Ohio State signed on the defensive line, it's likely that Mensah's (6-3, 308) first year on campus will also be spent in a developmental capacity that will hopefully pay off in his later years in Columbus.

One thing that works to Mensah's advantage this year is the depth at the position right now, since Johnson said the veterans on the team are very willing to pull the younger players aside, take them in and try to teach them what they can.

"You don't have to shepherd them. They're already standing next to them talking," Johnson said. "That's the good thing about that group is they coach the young guys really well."

OL Ian Moore

Moore (6-6, 309) was the highest-rated offensive lineman Ohio State signed this past year as the No. 166 overall prospect and fifth-ranked interior lineman in the class. But after coming out of high school as an interior guy, Moore has lined up at right tackle in spring practice, working into drills third behind Tegra Tshabola and Josh Fryar.

While he isn't likely to see the field much this season, it can still put him in position to compete for a spot in the two deep down the line.

Frye said that for young offensive linemen like Moore, he wants their first year to be completely about getting used to being at the college level since being with the

OHIO STATE SPRING PRACTICE

Buckeyes is such a big jump from being at the high school level.

"That jump from 18-to-19 and 19-to-20-year-old kid, that plays a lot into it," Frye said. "If you're (Devontae and Deontae Armstrong) and Ian Moore right now, you're keeping your head above water. That's your whole first year. When you sit and talk about a jam combo or a lock or whatever the call may be to Luke (Montgomery), he registers that. It's not something new because there's paralysis by analysis. The mental part on top of another year of natural maturity and getting bigger and stronger, that's always going to help."

QB Air Noland

Noland (6-2, 192) was viewed as a strong signing by Ohio State, but he was very quickly overshadowed when Sayin transferred in from Alabama.

He got his share of reps to begin the spring but those gradually fell off as workouts progressed, with Howard, Brown and Lincoln Kienholz taking the majority of snaps. When Noland did get a chance to throw, it was obvious at points that he was going through some growing pains as a freshman, including the last practice before the spring game in which he threw an interception and missed multiple wide-open receivers.

That shouldn't cause much worry at this point, though, because he was never supposed to see the field this season, and he has plenty of time to develop under Day and Kelly.

He did make his way into the spring game in the third quarter, working against many of the other players down the depth chart, but he did look less overwhelmed. He was able to tuck the ball and run, was hitting open receivers, finishing with 47 passing yards and an interception along with 42 yards rushing. Kelly likes the way Noland can be a running threat.

"Sometimes in our running game, our quarterback really is a blocker," Kelly said. "He's responsible for the defender. If the defender's cheating and fitting in on the run, then his responsibility is to make the defense be honest. Air did that a couple of times today."

RB James Peoples

As the highest-rated running back Ohio State signed this cycle, Peoples (5-10, 203) has shown quickly in the spring how he could be useful to the team this upcoming season, especially with the news of Dallan Hayden entering the transfer portal.

He has been doing well at practice, showing his ability to see gaps and get to them, including a 4-yard score in the spring game among his 10 carries for 36 yards. Day thought on signing day that Peoples had a chance to make an early impact on the team with his talent.

"He can do multiple things," Day said. "He's strong. He's got great change of direction. He's going to be a dynamic player, and I think he's going to make an impact early on in his freshman year."

New running backs coach Carlos Locklyn said Peoples was a player he recruited when he was at Oregon, so the way he plays will be nothing new for him, and the relationship the two already have could be useful as well. Peoples will compete to be the team's third-string running back along with

fellow freshman Sam Williams-Dixon and walk-on TC Caffey.

LB Payton Pierce

Pierce (6-2, 223) was the No. 203 overall prospect and No. 15 linebacker in his class, and he was someone whom Day was excited about because of his athleticism and how that could translate into him playing the linebacker position at the college level.

But Pierce has yet to have a chance to show that off. He has spent his first spring with the Buckeyes recovering from an ankle injury sustained during his senior season.

However, enrolling early still gave him the ability to learn the defense and feel what it's like to be at Ohio State as a football player, which will be a big advantage when he is able to get on the field, presumably this fall.

QB Julian Sayin

One of the only two early enrollees to lose his black stripe during the spring was Sayin (6-1, 203), who seemed to prove that his future at the college level will be bright.

With the quarterback competition still ongoing, Day said Sayin remains in the mix, and while it's unlikely he will end up being the guy, the fact that he has earned that recognition so early on says something. Kelly has been impressed with him through 15 practices as well.

"Julian is a very fast processor," Kelly said. "He really thinks very, very quickly on his feet. He makes really quick decisions. He doesn't stick on reads. He can progress and he sees things really well for a young player. He has not been exposed to a lot of college defenses – and especially what Jim (Knowles) does. Jim can make a young freshman quarterback cry with some of the stuff he does, but I never saw that with Jules, and it's been impressive his ability to retain."

Throughout the spring, Sayin made some of the team's most impressive throws, getting balls into tight spaces, but he also wasn't immune to making some freshman mistakes, which is to be expected, leading to an overall up-and-down experience.

With a line of 10-of-17 passing for 85 yards and an interception in the spring game – the most passing yards of the quarterbacks who made it into the contest – he showed that the talent is there, and learning from Day and Kelly should refine him into a great player.

CB Aaron Scott Jr.

Another player who quickly proved he belongs is Scott (6-0, 185). He's blocked in a deep cornerback room currently, but he worked his way into second-team reps by the end of the spring, where he rotated in during the spring game as well.

He played well in the exhibition, finishing with six tackles and two pass breakups, one of which almost ended up as the second interception before it bounced off his hands. It wasn't a performance out of the blue, however, as cornerbacks coach Tim Walton said earlier this spring he was excited to see what Scott could do.

"He keeps competing," Walton said. "He's made the transition, like what happened with Jermaine (Mathews Jr.) last year. You throw him in the fire, you let them go. You compete, you go, and by the time we get to the end of training camp, you'll have

it figured out."

It could be tough for Scott to find a role in the deep secondary in his first season, but if he proves his worth, he could find his way into a rotational role similar to Mathews last season.

WR Jeremiah Smith

It was a tall task for Smith (6-3, 215) to try to live up to the hype as the No. 1 recruit in the country in just 15 practices, but he seemed to do that as the top offensive player in the spring.

It seemed that every single practice, another video would be posted of Smith making an eye-popping catch that most veterans would struggle to make. With his performance early on in the spring, he became the first player to lose his black stripe, doing so after just four practices, which was also the fastest ever for an Ohio State freshman. Senior wideout Emeka Egbuka has been impressed with his approach to the game as a young player.

"There's nothing he really can't do," Egbuka said. "He runs fast, he jumps high. He's strong. He's a natural pass-catcher. He's very coachable. I do my best to uplift the young guys and give them pointers here and there, and he's always willing to listen. He always puts his best foot forward every single day."

At the pace Smith is seemingly acclimating to college football, including two catches for 12 yards in the spring game, it would be a surprise if he does not push for a starting job in his first season in Columbus.

"He's jumped right in," Day said. "The talent's there. The thing that's been most impressive to me so far is his discipline that he's already built in his life. Then the skill of playing the position at such a young age as well, and (coach Brian) Hartline and everybody will continue to build on that and grow on that."

LB Garrett Stover

Stover (6-1, 220) was the higher-rated linebacker the Buckeyes signed in the 2024 class and is looked to bring the same hard-nosed mentality that his cousin, Cade Stover, brought to Ohio State over the past few seasons.

It's been a quiet spring for the younger Stover, who has been working out at middle linebacker behind Cody Simon and Gabe Powers. But he finished the spring off with some momentum, totaling four tackles in the spring game.

This figures to be a developmental year for Stover with Simon and Powers firmly ahead of him, but earning some playing time late in contests remains a

realistic goal.

CB Bryce West

West (5-11, 196) was another good addition at cornerback on the recruiting trail, but West was another player who didn't get onto the field much in the spring due to an injury.

He did suit up in practice and was seen going through noncontact drills toward the end of the spring, but he didn't get into any 11-on-11 or seven-on-seven scrimmaging either in practice or in the spring game.

Day said he believed West was one of the best cornerbacks in the country when he signed, and even though West didn't get to practice in the spring, he tried to learn from some of the best college cornerbacks at Ohio State when he got onto campus.

"Just regular technique. Just follow their movements, because they've played the game so they know how to move," West told Eleven Warriors on March 2. "Coach Walton and them, they can teach you the right things, because in the room is Denzel (Burke), (Davison) Igbinosun – they always quiz me, and it's paying off and I can translate this to the field."

RB Sam Williams-Dixon

One thing that has been a big topic of Ohio State's spring camp for the coaches has been the extended season with the College Football Playoff now moving to 12 teams.

With a running back room led by TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins, it would have been tough in past seasons for a freshman like Williams-Dixon (5-11, 203) to find his way onto the field. But with a possible 16- or 17-game season now, Day and Kelly both believe Williams-Dixon will be needed to keep everyone ahead of him fresh.

"We're very cognizant of the fact that the playoff situation has changed," Kelly said. "You have to develop that depth. It used to be maybe you have a pair and a spare, which is what everybody says, but I think you may have to have more than that. You're talking about 16-17 games. You're really going to be tested that way. I was really happy with how those young guys have come along here in the 15 training sessions that we've had."

Williams-Dixon has largely answered the call thus far, working behind Henderson and Judkins but alongside Peoples and Caffey. He has as good a shot as either to see the field. He impressed in spring practice, including his performance in the spring game in which he led the Buckeyes with 75 yards on the ground and scored on a 22-yard touchdown.

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