

Resetting The Summer: Defensive Line Attempting Dominance



Every Saturday leading into the start of Ohio State's fall camp, Buckeye Sports Bulletin will be giving an outlook on each of the team's position groups. This week's position is defensive line.

Since the recruiting class of 2021 put pen to paper, the potential of Ohio State's 2023 defensive line has been sky-high.

Five-star defensive ends J.T. Tuimoloau and Jack Sawyer enter their third years in the program alongside blue-chip defensive tackles Mike Hall and Tyleik Williams, and all have shown flashes of delivering on the promise of their respective recruiting rankings. Ty Hamilton also returns as a starter from last season and will command reps of his own.

A glut of second-year players and an addition from the transfer portal look to complement those core five, as depth is always an important part of the strategy of defensive line coach Larry Johnson.

If expectations for even a majority of those players are realized, Ohio State's defensive line will be one of the most dominant in college football. Reaching that point is a much tougher task than writing the words on this screen, however.

Here's where things stand entering fall camp.

Projected starters: J.T. Tuimoloau (Jr.), Mike Hall Jr. (r-So.), Ty Hamilton (r-Jr.), Jack Sawyer (Jr.)

In competition for a starting spot: Tyleik Williams (r-So.)

Depth pieces: Kenyatta Jackson Jr. (r-Fr.), Tywone Malone (r-So.), Caden Curry (r-Fr.), Hero Kanu (r-Fr.), Omari Abor (r-Fr.), Jaden McKenzie (r-Jr.), Jason Moore (Fr.), Kayden McDonald (Fr.), Joshua Mickens (Fr.), Will Smith Jr. (Fr.)

Young player to watch: Jackson

Breakdown: Consistency might be the most important thing to develop in fall camp for the five players

that will anchor the Buckeyes' defensive line rotation, and it looks different for each member.

Tuimoloau — one of the highest-rated defensive prospects ever to come to Ohio State — had one of the single greatest defensive performances in team history against Penn State last year. But his production outside that game left something to be desired, recording just 1.5 sacks if you exclude it. He's shown game-breaking capabilities, it's a matter of finding that level game-in and game-out.

Sawyer is switching back from a disappointing year, by his own volition, at the Jack position. Now back in a true defensive end role, he's feeling more comfortable than ever and has bulked up to be another threat off the edge.

Williams needs to develop more stamina to be on the field longer and could use some more production as well, while the question for Hall mainly centers around his health. He was dominant through seven games last year for Ohio State, but shoulder issues limited his play and numbers in the back half of the season.

Hamilton simply needs to take the next step. He was solid at the point of attack but if he can be a true space-eater on the interior, it will reap benefits down the line for the Buckeyes.

Jackson was an obvious pick as a young player to watch after showing off during spring practice, a menace during viewing sessions open to the media. Curry showed plenty of potential when he hit the field in 2022, both will roll in with Sawyer and Tuimoloau in all likelihood.

Malone rounds out the expected defensive tackle depth, a transfer from Ole Miss after Ohio State missed on him during his recruitment. Johnson expressed excitement to finally have him in the fold May 30.

"He played baseball, so he never had his foot fully in football," Johnson said. "I think this is the first time that he's just going to play football and concentrate on football. So, I think you're going to see a different athlete. I think he didn't do spring ball his first year there because he played baseball. That did a lot to his development to where he's at now. Certainly, he's got a great upside."

Coming off a strong spring, Kanu could make a case for reps on the interior as well. McKenzie brings a veteran presence and will work to be ready to go if his number is called. McDonald is an interesting prospect coming in, a 6-3, 310-pound behemoth with great athleticism.

Abor is coming off an injury but is rearing to build toward his potential as a high-end four-star prospect at defensive end. Jason Moore could be a force in the future and will soak up information behind the group ahead of him. Mickens and Smith were four-stars in their own right.

If the group up front can find its consistency and be a wrecking crew all year, it will set the foundation for a breakthrough year defensively for Ohio State. Fall camp should shed some light on their progress.