

Scouting Report: Oklahoma RB Transfer Trey Sermon



It looks like Ohio State has its next starting running back. After an injury to presumed starter Master Teague sent Ohio State head coach Ryan Day and his staff to the transfer portal, they've emerged with Trey Sermon, a graduate transfer from Oklahoma with three years of experience under his belt, two of which he spent as the primary starter before losing his job as a junior.

Sermon, a 6-0, 216-pound bruiser from Georgia seems to be stepping into a friendly situation at Ohio State, and he likely wouldn't be headed to Columbus if he didn't think so too. The Buckeyes are without an obvious replacement for Teague on the roster, and while Steele Chambers, Marcus Crowley, Demario McCall and Miyan Williams all have pros and cons, Sermon is considered relatively balanced. He did already play running back for a major college football program against starting defenses for an extended period of time, which is far more than anyone else on the roster can say.

Still, the presumption that Sermon is immediately the starter once he arrives in Columbus is one worth looking deeper into. He has the numbers of a quality starter if not a star, but does the film support that? Additionally, exactly what kind of halfback is Ohio State getting in him? Does he fit into Kevin Wilson's zone run system, or will things need to be moved around?

To answer that, let's dive into Sermon's Oklahoma tape and get to know the newest Buckeye, and potentially, the next starting running back in Columbus.

STYLE

First things first, Sermon is much more Mike Weber than he is J.K. Dobbins. That isn't to say that he's a bowling ball like Weber was, but he's not going to do a ton of maneuvering in close spaces, nor is he going to frequently make defenders miss with shifty footwork. He isn't sloppy by any means, but he just isn't the kind of athlete or halfback that Dobbins was. This is much more of a downhill runner than Ohio State has had in a while, going back to Ezekiel Elliott, if not even further back.

Take this play for example. He has the vision and patience in open space needed to find some room, but the extra yards here come from motor and strength, not from elusiveness. Sermon always keeps his legs moving, and can make plays like this more often than most backs because of it. He's not a true power

back because he's not big enough to pull that off, but he does run powerfully and angrily. That's going to make him a fan favorite because of second-effort plays, but it's also going to keep him from making a ton of highlights in the open field.

Now, sometimes "downhill runner" or "power" inspires thoughts of a running back that can't wait, and just barrels into contact. In some cases, that's true. But Sermon shouldn't be painted with that brush. He doesn't have the patience, vision or lateral movement of Dobbins, but he's quite a bit better at waiting for the hole than the vast majority of backs, which usually comes with experience.

He shows that off here. He stays behind his blockers until he sees a lane, and never stops his feet. Once the space is there, he doesn't quite have the elite burst to really hit it, but he still gets there quickly and knows how to get downhill in a timely manner. Once downfield, he always finishes his runs strong, which is going to be a theme at Ohio State as well.

Now, obviously Sermon isn't perfect, or he would be starting at Oklahoma right now. To be blunt, he's not fast, and that's the one thing that really can't be improved by a coach. He's not slow or anything, but he isn't going to pull away from defensive backs. He knows that, and is able to work around it, but if Ohio State is looking for big gains, Sermon isn't the guy. This is the running back to get you six yards a carry, just about every single time. He isn't going to lose yards, he isn't going to make mistakes, but he's not going to split through a defense for 85 yards either.

FIT

That brings us to fit, which is a bit of a tricky question, because even with an understanding of what Sermon can do, it's also important to understand what Ohio State wants to do. The Buckeyes are a zone running team, working off of inside and outside zone to spread the defense out and pull it in for big shots down the field as the game rolls on. In that zone running scheme, the Buckeyes love to pull guards, and had a ton of success running outside zone in 2019, which was a new introduction into the playbook.

Inside zone is fairly one-size-fits-all. Most halfbacks are going to be able to wait long enough to hit the gap that they're supposed to, as long as they have at least average vision and patience. Sermon has that.

Much more difficult is that outside zone, for two reasons. Firstly, because those big men up front have to sweep to the side, it's going to take some time for the hole to open up.

It looks like this. The read for the halfback is on the tackle, and has to be made quickly. The gap is usually going to be on his inside shoulder, but if it isn't, there's usually space on the outside to make a play in open space. It takes very good vision and patience to see that though, and it can't be done with just every running back.

From the looks of it, Sermon has it. He, again, isn't perfect. He's going to miss the gap occasionally, and Ohio State may have to shift its outside zone to inside zone ratio a bit in favor of the latter, but the OU transfer has the makings of a perfectly capable zone scheme runner. He's coming from one of the best zone running teams in the country, and he knows the scheme. He isn't anything special moving laterally, but he's smart, knows how to use his eyes and body language to manipulate defenders, and doesn't jump at the first sign of trouble.

If he can make a full recovery from a knee injury sustained late in 2019, the tools are there for Sermon to fit at Ohio State, and make an impact as a consistent force in a room that is without proven consistency right now. Ohio State should still look to get some other backs on the field to create some of those bigger plays, just as Oklahoma did, but Sermon's move into the No. 1 role in Columbus makes sense for both sides, and seems overwhelmingly like the most likely outcome from what should be a fun position battle — that is if anybody is playing football again come fall.