

Slimmer, Faster Will Howard Gaining Comfort In Chip Kelly-Led System



Coming in as a fifth-year transfer out of Kansas State, Ohio State quarterback didn't have all the answers pertaining to what it takes to succeed as a Buckeye.

The former Wildcat admitted Tuesday morning at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center that he went through a series of struggles in his first few months in Columbus, with the veteran signal caller often having a tough time acclimating to the more nuanced and detailed offense run by new offensive coordinator Chip Kelly. But those difficulties were well worth it in the end, according to Howard, as it helped him work harder to find success on the other side, a process that he is starting to reap the rewards from during the beginning of summer camp.

"In the spring, I was — at the beginning, at least — drinking from a fire hose a little bit, especially just with the way that the offense was installed," Howard said. "But I think that was good for me, learning how to go through a spring or through a couple of practices without really having any prior experience with an offense, and going through the struggles that I had and the things that I learned from.

"I feel like I really started to settle in during practice seven, practice eight of the spring, I was like, 'Okay, this is really making sense. I'm starting to kind of get my stride. And now coming into fall camp, it's been completely different...Having these reps from the spring banked, and all these things that I've learned, it's helped me a lot this fall camp to just go out there and play more rather than think about things."

Howard, who transferred to Ohio State in January after two successful seasons at Kansas State, said his long acclimation process with Kelly's new offense was a challenge that he is thankful he took on, as it could help prepare him for life in the NFL, a place where his offensive coordinator spent four years as a head coach for the Philadelphia Eagles (2013-15) and San Francisco 49ers (2016).

"Obviously you're coming into a new system, you're having to learn things. But it's a lot faster," Howard

said. "The way I looked at it was — if my goal is to ultimately make it to the NFL, this is what I'm going to have to do at the next level. So I think it was a really good opportunity for me to learn how to learn fast, pick things up. And Coach (Chip) Kelly and Coach (Ryan) Day have done a really good job of making things easy to understand and to pick up."

While this acclimation process could help Howard have a potential future in the NFL, it could also help him in the present at Ohio State, a program in search of its first national championship in 10 seasons and is set to start a first-year quarterback for the second consecutive season.

Howard, who is the odds-on favorite to start for the Buckeyes this season and has assumed all-but one first-team rep through five fall practices, said that one thing that has helped him gain more comfort at Ohio State is his improved physique, a positive change that has been well documented by those within the program, including Day and Kelly.

Howard said that he has cut down his weight from 249 to around 233-235 pounds since he arrived at Ohio State, a months-long plan orchestrated by strength coach Mick Marotti and performance dietitian Kaila Olson that he said included everything from running more to maintaining a healthier diet.

"I knew I had to (lose weight)," Howard said. "And (strength coach Mick Marotti) came up with a plan and wanted to get my weight down to where it is now, at 230, 235. And I feel really good now. The plan worked, I just have to keep maintaining it."

"Whether it was in the winter, coming in on Saturdays, doing a little extra cardio, maybe cooking for myself a little more, which made me feel a little more grown up. It's kind of cool, adulting a little bit," Howard said. "It feels good to eat well and to treat your body right. And I really learned how to do that here, and it's been really, really good."

Howard's improved physique has seemed to reap its benefits early on in spring camp, where the veteran quarterback has shown a noticeably tighter zip on the ball as well as a greater pocket awareness that has seemed to improve with each practice. But the change may have had the greatest impact on his legs, where, according to Kelly, he was clocked at 22 miles per hour in a sprint this offseason.

Howard said his speed could serve to be a significant game-changer in a Kelly-led offense that embraces the run, and it is an element of his game that he has increasingly learned to embrace at his position.

"That's a big part of my game, and it's going to need to be a part of our game as an offense," Howard said. "Whether that's in the read game or the scramble game, whatever it may be. I just want these guys on my team to know that I'm willing to run the ball and go get that extra yard when I need to. Because at the end of the day, that's what it really comes down to."

"Are we going to run some quarterback run plays? Sure. But at the end of the game, when it's 3rd and 5 and everyone's covered down the field, am I going to be able to tuck the ball down and go get six yards and run someone over? I want those guys that are out there with me to know that I'm going to go get that extra yard."

Regardless of the improvements he has made to his body and overall play, the first-year Buckeye still has to show some more on the field and in the film room this fall camp if he wants to further separate himself from fellow quarterbacks Devin Brown and Julian Sayin and ultimately win the starting job.

Winning a starting quarterback job at Ohio State is a task that comes with a lot of pressure, something that the veteran is well aware of. But despite the extra set of eyes, Howard has chosen to simply focus on his job and rely on the support of his talented teammates to succeed in any role he is asked of.

Everything is heightened here, you feel the eyes a little bit," Howard said. "I don't feel like I have to be a hero here. I feel like I have the guys around me to where I just need to facilitate and get them the ball and make good decisions. At the end of the day, I don't have to go out there and do anything superhuman. I just have to be myself and trust the guys around me.

"I'm just trying to be the best version of myself every single day. That's all I'm trying to do. Whenever I get thrown in there, I'm going to go in there and make the best out of my reps. Show this team that I'm going to fight for them and do everything that we need to do to win. That's all that matters to me, just getting better and being the best teammate I can be."