

Stroud Defends Smith-Njigba Amidst Scrutiny Regarding CFP Decision



Ohio State star wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba announced on Dec. 5 that he will be unable to play in the Buckeyes' College Football Playoff run due to his lingering hamstring injury and that he will place his focus on rehabilitating prior to the 2023 NFL Draft.

Although Smith-Njigba's decision was rooted in a desire to get to 100 percent health, ESPN draft analyst Todd McShay said that NFL scouts have told him that Smith-Njigba was healthy enough to play and is protecting his health for the draft process. Several members of Smith-Njigba's family fired back at McShay, noting that if the receiver was healthy enough, we would play for the Buckeyes in the Chick-fil-a Peach Bowl on Dec. 31 against No. 1 Georgia.

"Being with my son yesterday for his first day of rehab and seeing his limitations for myself gave me peace w our family's choice to get my son healthy," Smith-Njigba's mother, Maada, tweeted in response to McShay's report. "Encouraging him to play would be selfish and abusive. I'm at peace because I know he's in the right hands for recovery."

Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud was also quick to defend his teammate — and someone he's called his brother since before either of them arrived on campus. Stroud echoed the sentiment shared by Smith-Njigba's mother while pointing to the physical nature of football and the microscope its players are put under.

"Honestly, it sucks. I feel so bad for him, he works so hard. The stuff that people are saying is crazy, man," Stroud said. "We really put our lives on the line, and our bodies on the line, our mentals. I'm not saying other people in other careers don't, but people judge us so much because we have a scoreboard and we have a result that people can go look up online. That makes it kind of tough."

Smith-Njigba rose to prominence with a dominant season in 2021, collecting program records in receiving yards with 1,606 and receptions (95) while operating out of the slot next to Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson. His record-breaking campaign culminated in a stellar Rose Bowl performance, in which he broke Rose Bowl records for receptions (15) and receiving yards (347) while adding a trio of touchdowns — including the go-ahead score with 4:22 remaining to play.

Smith-Njigba carried large expectations entering the 2022 season, as Olave and Wilson departed for the

NFL and he stepped into the feature role in Ohio State's passing game. However, he sustained a lower-body injury after a hit from Notre Dame safety Brandon Joseph during the first half of the Buckeyes' season-opening win over the Fighting Irish. Although Smith-Njigba tried to return to action against Notre Dame during the second quarter, he missed the rest of the second half and the following week's game against Arkansas State.

From there, Smith-Njigba tried to get back on the field against Toledo on Sept. 17 and Iowa on Oct. 22, but both attempts were futile. He did not appear to be anywhere close to 100 percent and could not remain on the field for the entirety of either game. He finished the season with five receptions for 43 yards.

"The last game he really played was the Rose Bowl, where he had 300-something yards, three touchdowns. People look at that as the standard and the expectation for every game, how do you live up to something like that?" Stroud said.

Stroud also defended Smith-Njigba's character, noting that he remained engaged with the team throughout the season while aiding the Buckeyes' young receiving corps despite not being able to play.

"I know that people were talking about how he should play. You have no idea the stuff he's been through this year, no clue," Stroud said. "Who are people to talk about my brother like that?"

"It kind of makes me a little angry. People try to make it seem like he's not a team player or that he doesn't care about his teammates, but that's the total opposite," he continued. "I'm on the phone with him every day. It's, 'How's practice, bro?' and 'I'm watching film, doing this. I'm helping out the young receivers.' He helped out (Marvin Harrison Jr.) so much this year, and he helped out (Emeka Egbuka), those dudes who had to step up.

"It's unfair for people to try to ridicule Jaxon."