

Stroud Praises Receiver Depth For Stepping Up In Absence Of Smith-Njigba



Entering the 2022 season, the Ohio State passing attack was largely expected to pick off where it left off after leading the Big Ten in yards per game and quarterback C.J. Stroud riding that success to Heisman Trophy consideration in 2021.

But the Buckeyes' expected aerial superiority did not show during the early stages of Ohio State's season opener against Notre Dame. A large piece of Ohio State's early struggles was caused by the health of its receiver unit, which saw graduate pass-catcher Kamryn Babb and third-year Julian Fleming already held out of the game due to respective injuries. The depth at the position took another hit after star third-year wideout Jaxon Smith-Njigba took a hit to his lower body by Fighting Irish safety Brandon Joseph during the first quarter, which Smith-Njigba tried to work through but could not consistently stay on the field before missing the entire second half.

As Stroud was without his favorite target in Smith-Njigba for much of the evening, the quarterback turned to the youth at the position to keep the offense on track.

"Jaxon is the best receiver in the country and we've built a connection, not just on the field but off of it too and that just helps us on the field. When he was out of the game, of course, it affects our team and our offense but we got the job done," Stroud said after Ohio State's 21-10 win over Notre Dame. "Xavier (Johnson) stepped up huge, Jayden Ballard stepped up huge, Emeka (Egbuka) had a heck of a game, Marvin (Harrison Jr.) played well.

"At the end of the day, when you boil it down and look at the scoreboard, Coach Day always says that 'No matter what type of game it is, we always have to stick together,' he continued. "I feel like that's what we did and no matter how I played, whatever the case may be, we got the win. "

Without the sure-handed Smith-Njigba, Stroud largely utilized the sophomore Egbuka — who was previously known for his prowess in the kick return game. Egbuka snared in nine receptions for 90 yards, including a 31-yard catch-and-run which resulted in Ohio State's first touchdown of the season.

As Stroud continued to forge a connection with Egbuka, he lauded the work ethic of the Steilacoom, Wash., native along with fellow sophomore Harrison — who added 56 yards on five receptions.

“They’re both extremely hard workers. They both are always in the building, working on their games and doing something right. Even off the field, they’re always trying to make sure their bodies are right,” Stroud said. “Emeka got to show a little of what he can do, even though he can do more. I feel like even in our passing game, he fits it perfectly, him and Marvin.”

Hits to the wide receiver depth also allowed walk-on turned scholarship wideout Johnson to elevate into the rotation, where he made the most out of his opportunities. He hauled in back-to-back positions, including the go-ahead touchdown, late in the third quarter. As the Fighting Irish switched into Cover 0 for the first time all night, opting to bring a fierce blitz after Stroud, Johnson diagnosed the coverage and adjusted his route to a soft spot in the secondary where Stroud found him for a 24-yard touchdown.

“They didn’t bring zero yet, but I was ready for it because it was third-and-long and they like to bring it,” Stroud said. “We had called that play earlier in the week, and I was talking to Jaxon, Xavier and Emeka because they play the H. I told them, ‘If we get this play and its zero, do this and that,’ and that’s what he did. It was kind of cool to see it pay off.

“Xavier is a vet. He definitely knows the game, he sees it well. He never really has any missed assignments or doesn’t know where he’s going, he always knows what’s up,” Stroud continued.

Stroud also spread the wealth to his tight end, finding Cade Stover three times for 14 yards.

The Buckeyes’ signal-caller finished the evening completing 71.9 percent of passes for 223 yards and two touchdowns.

“Looking at the film, I definitely think we did some great things on offense. We moved the ball when we had to,” Stroud said. “We just have to clean up some things.”