

Unfinished Business Led Buckeyes To Return For An Additional Year



Ohio State seniors, Denzel Burke, Emeka Egbuka and Jack Sawyer each had their own variables to consider when making decisions on potential senior seasons. However, each player came back to a similar uniting theme fueling their decisions to stay one more year in Columbus — unfinished business.

The decision wasn't easy for several Buckeyes. Egbuka, Burke and Sawyer specifically all could've been selected in the first three rounds of the NFL draft. According to Sawyer, the selection in the NFL draft, which was likely, had he declared for it, would've fulfilled a personal dream.

"It was tough for a lot of us to decide to come back. It's a dream of all of ours here playing at this level to play at the next level," Sawyer said at Big Ten Media Days last week. "We came back for one purpose and one goal and that was to beat **The Team Up North** and win the national championship."

While some teams get a player or two to bypass the NFL draft for another year of college, the Buckeyes' five or more seniors who decided to return for a final season and forgo the NFL draft is a rarity, and it even came as a surprise to Egbuka.

"It was kind of shocking because all of the guys did their own process, they did their own evaluation and found out what was best for them," Egbuka said at Big Ten Media Days. "It just so happened that we all came together, and we were all thinking the same thing... I just think that testifies to how strong our bond is."

According to Sawyer, he was the first of the Buckeyes to make his decision to come back to Ohio State. After careful consideration, Sawyer pivoted to his new role as a pseudo-recruiter, forming a group chat texting with other teammates about the importance of returning for a senior season.

While Egbuka insisted he wasn't focused on what Michigan was doing, the elephant in the room for Ohio State's senior class is the lack of gold pants in their three-year careers.

"That's always a game that you want to win when it comes to Ohio State, and that's something that we seniors know all too well because we haven't done it once," Egbuka said. "So you can't really leave without the gold pants."

Sawyer didn't shy away from his hatred of Michigan or angst in allowing them to win three consecutive Big Ten Championships.

"I'd be lying if I told you that it (Michigan winning three straight Big Ten Championships) didn't burn a fire inside of us," Sawyer said. "It's definitely something that we think about...they hate us, we hate them. That's the way it's got to be."

Burke didn't just make his intentions clear to the media, he also let his newer teammates, whether it be younger players or transfers, know his expectations for 2024.

"I just put it out there just to kind of get the younger guys, the transfers, to understand that I didn't come back for any BS," Burke said in Indianapolis last week. "We're here to win it all and we're going to need everybody. We've got to hold each other accountable."

For Burke, Sawyer and Egbuka, their decision to stay for another year could reap benefits outlasting their own careers.

"I want to be recognized as the best corner to ever come through here and put my name on the wall and get a tree," Burke said.

Even with impressive personal achievements that Sawyer has had, his aspirations for what he wanted to accomplish as a team at Ohio State were still unsettled.

"Don't get me wrong, I want to go to the NFL and chase my dream of that more than the next guy, but before we can chase that, we have something bigger at stake, something bigger than ourselves," Sawyer said. "Coach Day always talks about leaving your legacy at the Ohio State, becoming one of the best teams to ever come through here, and my conversations with them were if we all decided to come back for our senior year, imagine the things we could achieve."

The senior Buckeyes will have quite the legacies if they become the first players to win a national championship under head coach Ryan Day, but as Burke, Egbuka and Sawyer have painfully found out over the course of three years, the legacy of being winless against Michigan is perhaps the most consequential one can have.

"That (beating Michigan) is the main reason why we came back," Sawyer said. "When we sign our name on the letter of intent, that's what we're coming here to do. Especially me being from Columbus, it would mean the world to me, and that's what I plan on doing this fall."