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Details Inside



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

NO EYES ON BUCKS – Though Ohio State will open the season at home against Nebraska on Oct. 24, the Buckeyes and quarterback Justin Fields won't have the crowd behind them after the Big Ten announced it will allow only family members of players and coaches to attend.

Ohio State Set To Begin Unique And Unprecedented 2020 Season

By **ANDREW LIND**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Under normal circumstances, more than 100,000 people would make their way into Ohio Stadium for Ohio State's season opener. But this year is far from typical, and the only people set to attend the Buckeyes' Oct. 24 matchup with Nebraska are the family members of players and coaches – as well as a few thousand cardboard cutouts in the lower deck.

Head coach Ryan Day has done his best to prepare his team for the unique and unprecedented season, holding Saturday practices inside the historic venue in an effort to make the abnormal feel ordinary.

"You have to bring your own energy," Day said during a teleconference on Oct. 2. "Being in an empty stadium is unique. I know the Big

Ten is still trying to get the guidelines around what game day is going to be like in terms of piping in music and noise and what that means when the ball is being snapped.

"We're going to try to replicate that the best we can, but we know it's not like playing in front of a full stadium every week. We're going to have to bring our own energy when we run out of that tunnel."

It will no doubt be visually jarring, both to the players and those watching on television, but the decision to play without fans in attendance is one of the many steps the Big Ten is taking to ensure player safety amid the coronavirus pandemic. And with games across the country being canceled or postponed due to positive tests or team-wide outbreaks, the Buckeyes aren't taking any chances when it comes to contracting the virus.

"This has been a difficult time," Day said. "We understand the ramifications and the consequences for our health – but also in terms of playing a season – of testing positive. And that's for our players because they've made great sacrifices, but also for the coaches.

"It's very difficult for those of us who have school-aged children at home. It's very, very difficult to make sacrifices. Some of us are not sleeping in our homes. It's not easy. We're trying to figure that part of it out."

Anyone who does test positive for the virus will be unable to participate in practice or games for at least 21 days, meaning they would miss a minimum of three games. Thus, Day is telling his players to be ready to contribute on the field this season, no matter if they're a

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From The Message Board

Ohio State returns several key starters in 2020, including Heisman Trophy-contending quarterback Justin Fields and projected first-round picks Shaun Wade and Wyatt Davis. However, the Buckeyes are still looking to fill several major roles on the depth chart before taking on Nebraska on Oct. 24. With that, we asked readers on the Buckeye Sports Bulletin Fan Forum, as well as staff writers, which position battles they have their eyes on in fall camp. Here are some of the responses:

"I'm interested to see how the CBs shape up besides Wade. You've got a few names like Cam Brown, Marcus Williamson and Sevyn Banks, but there are other guys who could be in the mix like Tyreke Johnson, Ryan Watts or Lejond Cavazos."

– Tiffin Buckeye

"Having watched the highlights of Trey Sermon which were posted on the BSB message board, I'm curious to see how the competition for RB pans out with Master Teague in the mix."

– PeyoteBuck

"I'll be interested to see how often Teradja Mitchell, Dallas Gant, and K'Vaughan Pope get on the field at the LB position. Many people thought one or more of these three would play from day one, and I think their futures are very bright. It seems strange that they have played so little thus far."

– Terrier Buck

"Has to be running backs or receivers. Running backs because the battle is so close and receivers because there is so much talent in the room and only one football to go around."

– Poster That Harley Built

"Not a battle for starting position but I am interested in seeing who emerges as the No. 2 QB. Will experience (Hoak) win out or will one of the young QBs (Stroud or Miller) have the talent to win the job. The answer may be as important as any starting role given the crazy circumstances surrounding this season."

– bstu9

"Running back is the position that will probably have me the most interested as well, but I think that figuring out defensive tackle might be the most important. Ohio State loses so much there with Jashon Cornell, DaVon Hamilton and Robert Landers gone, and who knows when Haskell Garrett will be able to return. There are a lot of question marks inside on the line, and a lot of players who were merely a part of the rotation in 2019 will have to step up big there this season."

– Wyatt Crosher, BSB

"I'm going to go off the board a little bit and pick defensive tackle as my top group to watch. With Haskell Garrett still seemingly in recovery and Taron Vincent dealing with nagging injuries throughout fall camp (and since arriving at OSU), I really don't know what to expect alongside Tommy Togiai, who I am ready to consider a probable starter given everything we've heard about him. Tackles don't get a ton of attention, but DaVon Hamilton, Jashon Cornell and "Big Bob" Landers were huge pieces of the defense last season and replacing them is going to be crucial for Ohio State, specifically if it wants to stop the run this season. Antwuan Jackson looks to be the favorite with Vincent and Garrett still up in the air, but I'm very curious to see if anyone else like Jerron Cage or Jaden McKenzie is able to earn some playing time."

– Patrick Mayhorn, BSB

"There's no doubt it's the battle between Sermon and Teague. I know they're talking about splitting the carries, but Ohio State's offense needs one of them to step up and be the feature back. While I do place a lot of blame on the offensive line for their struggles, we saw in 2018 how much J.K. Dobbins and Mike Weber struggled to get into a groove when they were rotating in and out."

– Andrew Lind, BSB

"The battle between Master Teague and Trey Sermon is the most interesting to me. Through most of last season, it seemed like Teague would step into J.K. Dobbins' role as the primary back in Ohio State's high-powered offense. Teague struggled down the stretch, however, and an Achilles injury in the spring led to an offseason full of rehab and the transfer of Sermon from Oklahoma. Whoever ends up being the primary ball carrier is the most interesting position battle to me, but I think the defensive back battles will end up being the most important."

"One of the biggest reasons the Buckeyes were so dominant in 2019 was because of a defense that ranked No. 1 in the country against the pass, allowing only 156.0 yards per game, and ranked No. 4 in third-down defense, with opponents converting on only 29.1 percent of third downs. Damon Arnette, Jordan Fuller and Jeff Okudah are gone, so whoever replaces them (likely Sevyn Banks/Cameron Brown, Josh Proctor and Marcus Williamson) will have a massive impact on how Ohio State performs on defense."

– Joe Dempsey, BSB

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

President Failed Us, Football

I have to disagree with the man from Hilliard about President Trump (BSB Letters, Oct. 3). If he did his job and had Americans wearing masks and social distancing when Dr. Anthony Fauci recommended it in March/April, we would have been in better shape as cases dropped in June and would have continued to drop over the summer.

His lack of leadership caused us to have no football in September. The work of our great scientists and medical workers to find testing solutions (like the rapid test developed in Illinois) was the deciding

factor to bring back football.

Trump had his quick test at the White House in May, but you couldn't find them in Ohio. It took days to get a result if you could find a place to get a test. Hats and helmets off to our doctors and scientists for their great work in spite of Trump's complete failure to protect us, the American voters.

Raymond Reinhart
St. Paris, Ohio

Fields' Injury Played A Role

In the Oct. 3, 2020, edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, Frank Moskowitz com-

pared the three field goals in the first half of the Clemson game to the 1996 Michigan game (The View From 15th and High). The big, overlooked difference was that Justin Fields had an injured knee and was far from 100 percent (in the Clemson game). Having to wear a bulky knee brace restricted his mobility.

For the entire season, he was a dual-threat quarterback. He threw for 41 touchdowns and ran for 10, plus running for numerous first downs. Against Clemson – 14 rushes for 13 yards. Dabo Swinney bragged about holding Ohio State to three first-half field goals. The

publisher never mentioned the Fields injury, so I thought I would.

Jim Chesney
Bluffton, Ohio

If you would like to express an opinion concerning Ohio State University sports, please send your letter to BSB Letters, P.O. Box 12453, Columbus, OH 43212, or email it to bsb@buckeyesports.com. Letters must be signed and include the writer's hometown and a daytime telephone number for verification. Publication priority will be given to those letters that are brief, and we reserve the right to edit letters for publication.

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No. 6	Nov. 14	No. 12	Dec. 26

The 2021 schedule will be determined based on the Big Ten's winter or spring schedule.

The next issue (Oct. 31 cover date) will be mailed on Oct. 27.

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Can Justin Fields really get better? Will Master Teague and/or Trey Sermon make anyone forget J.K. Dobbins? Who is the next great defensive end to follow in the footsteps of Joey Bosa, Nick Bosa and Chase Young? Can the Ohio State football team fix the mistakes it made in last season's Fiesta Bowl against Clemson and truly make a run at the national championship?

Be thankful we can even ponder those questions as this most unusual of football seasons gets under way with a look at what the Buckeyes will face during the upcoming eight weeks.

Oct. 24 vs. Nebraska – Former Nebraska national championship quarterback Scott Frost returns for his third season as head coach at his alma mater, and he has discovered that rebuilding the program in Lincoln has required more heavy lifting than he might have imagined.

The Cornhuskers finished 5-7 last season, posting a third consecutive losing record for the first time in nearly 60 years. Nebraska actually had six losing seasons in a row from 1956 through 1961. Then the school hired Bob Devaney, and the rest is college football history.

For Frost to return the program to the level of success it enjoyed under Devaney and his successor Tom Osborne, the Cornhuskers are going to have to get a lot more out of their defense than in recent years. It has ranked no better than 10th in the Big Ten in rushing, total and scoring defense during Frost's first two seasons.

Oct. 31 at Penn State – James Franklin has breathed new life into a program that just a few years ago was reeling from scandal. Penn State has posted 11-win seasons as well as top-10 finishes in three of the last four years, and that hadn't happened in Happy Valley since the mid-1990s.

But there is one hill that Franklin and his Nittany Lions cannot seem to climb. Penn State has lost three in a row and seven of its last eight meetings against Ohio State, and the Buckeyes have come home victorious on five of their last six trips to Beaver Stadium.

If the Lions are to reverse their fortunes against OSU, they will likely have to win a shootout. First-year offensive coordinator Kirk Ciarrocca comes over from Minnesota and inherits eight returning starters, including quarterback Sean Clifford (2,654 yards, 23 TDs).

But the defense, which ranked third in the Big Ten by allowing an average of only 16.0 points per game last year, is in rebuilding mode with only four starters back. The departures include all-everything linebacker Micah Parsons, who reaffirmed his decision to opt out of the 2020 season.

Nov. 7 vs. Rutgers – What a long, strange trip it's been for Greg Schiano since leaving Ohio State after the 2018 season. Out of coaching last year to spend more time on his "faith and family," Schiano resurfaced in December when he agreed to return to Rutgers as head coach of a program he piloted to 68 victories, including five bowl wins, from 2001 to 2011. Duplicating that kind of success in Piscataway, however, will be a constant uphill battle.

The Scarlet Knights have gone 3-33 in conference play over the past four seasons, and that includes 0-9 records in 2016, 2017 and 2019. No Big Ten team has experienced a longer streak of futility since Northwestern went 0-35-1 during a four-year period between 1978 and 1981.

Underscoring just how far Rutgers needs to go in order to become competitive are the final scores against division rivals Ohio State and Michigan. Since 2016, the Buckeyes have out-

scored the Scarlet Knights by a 222-24 margin while the Wolverines have a 207-21 cushion in their most recent four games against Rutgers.

Nov. 14 at Maryland – The Terrapins provide the second of a two-week breather for the Buckeyes. Maybe you think that's a bit harsh, but the fact remains that Maryland has had exactly one winning season since it joined the Big Ten, and that was a 7-6 finish in 2014.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

Since then, the Terps have a 21-40 overall record that includes a 10-34 conference mark. Things bottomed out last season with a 3-9 mark and 1-8 league slate, and there isn't a whole lot of optimism that 2020 will feature a turnaround. Maryland ranked dead last in the Big Ten last year in total defense, and it wasn't much better offensively, finishing seventh in rushing, 11th in scoring and 12th in passing.

Special teams weren't any better, especially the kicking game. The Terrapins attempted only five field goals all of last year and made only two, and they also missed three of 42 PAT tries.

If Maryland is to make any kind of improvement, second-year head coach Michael Locksley will have to begin with his offensive line. The OL surrendered 38 sacks a year ago (only Rutgers with 39 gave up more), and the Terps converted a Big Ten-worst 32.1 percent of their third downs.

Nov. 21 vs. Indiana – If there is a trap game on this year's schedule for Ohio State, maybe it's this one. Last year, the Hoosiers quietly put together their first winning season since 2007 and posted their first winning conference mark since 1993.

IU hasn't had back-to-back winning seasons since 1990 and 1991 and hasn't been above .500 in conference play two straight years since 1987 and '88. But optimism remains high in Bloomington because the Hoosiers welcome back 16 starters from last year's team.

That includes QB Michael Penix, who now has the position all to himself following the transfer of Payton Ramsey to Northwestern. Top receiver Nick Westbrook graduated, but Whop Philyor and Ty Fryfogle return for their senior seasons. That duo combined for 115 receptions, 1,606 yards and eight touchdowns in 2019.

IU also has a pretty good one-two punch at running back with Stevie Scott and Sampson James, who combined for 1,120 yards and 13 TDs last year.

Defense continues to be the problem at Indiana, though. The Hoosiers ranked ninth in the Big Ten last year in total, scoring and rush defense, and they have long struggled to mount much of a pass rush. The last time an Indiana defender broke double figures in sacks was DE Jammie Kirlew in 2008.

The schedule-makers didn't do the Hoosiers any favors, either. After kicking off the season with Penn State, IU plays Rutgers before embarking upon a three-week stretch that includes a home game against Michigan and road trips to Michigan State and Ohio State. Over the last 25 seasons, Indiana is a combined 3-58 against the Wolverines, Spartans and Buckeyes.

Nov. 28 at Illinois – Lovie Smith begins his fifth season with the Fighting Illini, and his program continues an upward trajectory.

Last year's six victories represented the most at Illinois since a six-win season in 2014, and the team went bowling for the first time since a 35-18 loss to Louisiana Tech in the 2014 Heart of Dallas Bowl.

If Smith and his team want to continue to improve, it will likely be on the strength of an offense that returns eight starters. Quarterback Brandon Peters threw for 1,884 yards and 18 TDs last season, the most scoring passes for an Illinois QB since Nathan Scheelhaase threw for 21 in 2013.

Defensively, some rebuilding is in order with only five starters back from a unit that ranked ninth in the league last year against the pass and only 13th against the run. That should be of particular concern to Smith, who lost his entire starting defensive line to graduation. Also exhausting his eligibility was middle linebacker Dele Harding, who was a first-team All-Big Ten selection by the media.

Illinois hasn't competed for a conference title since finishing in a three-way tie for second place in 2007, and the Illini haven't won a Big Ten championship since 2001. They will find out quickly if they entertain thoughts of breaking that drought when they open the season at Wisconsin, a team against which they have lost nine of 10 meetings and whom they haven't beaten in Madison since 2002.

Dec. 5 at Michigan State – One former Ohio State defensive coordinator takes over for another as Mel Tucker succeeds Mark Dantonio in East Lansing.

Dantonio, who retired in February with a program-best 114 wins as well as the best winning percentage of any MSU head coach since Clarence "Biggie" Munn retired in 1953, will be a tough act to follow.

Tucker has been around (and around) since leaving Ohio State following the 2004 season, serving 10 years in the NFL with three different franchises and spending the last five seasons in various capacities at Alabama, Georgia and Colorado. Last year with the Buffaloes, he posted a 5-7 record – something that apparently impressed Michigan State enough to give Tucker a six-year deal worth approximately \$1 million more annually than what the school was paying Dantonio.

Whether or not that was money well spent remains to be seen. Sparty was a nonfactor in last year's Big Ten race, finishing a distant fifth in the East standings, and the team lost 12 starters from 2019. Included in that number are QB Brian Lewerke and top receivers Cody White and Darrell Stewart Jr. as well as first-team All-Big Ten defensive end Kenny Willekes and third-team All-Big Ten linebacker Joe Bachie.

Dec. 12 vs. Michigan – This is getting to be like the proverbial broken record, but it bears repeating to everyone out there who swears this is the year Jim Harbaugh and his team finally break through.

Harbaugh hasn't won a conference championship on the college level since back-to-back Pioneer League titles at the University of San Diego in 2005 and 2006. He won no titles in four seasons at Stanford, the same number he has won in five seasons at Michigan.

The Wolverines continue to bask in a tradition that continues to fade further and further into history. They are 2-17 since 2001 against Ohio State, including eight straight defeats; they have never played in a Big Ten Championship Game; they have no outright conference title since 2003; they have lost six of their last seven bowl games; they have no Rose Bowl appearances since 2006; they have no Rose Bowl victories since 1997; they have no national championship of any kind since 1997; and they have not won an undisputed national title since 1948.



Nebraska, Michigan Set For Noon Kickoffs

Ohio State will open and close its eight-game regular-season Big Ten schedule on the Fox "Big Noon Saturday" broadcast, with a noon start time set for both the season-opening Oct. 24 matchup with Nebraska and the season-closing Dec. 12 battle with Michigan.

Fox officially confirmed what had been expected for several weeks with a release on Oct. 12 that noted the start times for the two Buckeyes games along with kickoff times for all week one games and five future games.

Notably among the week one group, Ohio State and Nebraska will share the noon time frame with Michigan State and Rutgers, as two former Buckeye assistants, MSU head coach Mel Tucker and Rutgers head coach Greg Schiano, open

their seasons on the Big Ten Network. Penn State will match up with Indiana at 3:30 p.m. as it looks ahead to its week two matchup with the Buckeyes, and Michigan will square off with Minnesota on ABC in prime time at 7:30. Wisconsin and Illinois are set to open conference play on Friday, Oct. 23, at 8 p.m. on the Big Ten Network.

Along with the full game broadcast experience featuring a Gus Johnson and Joel Klatt booth, Ohio State will get the pregame "Big Noon Kickoff" experience on Oct. 24 as well, with Urban Meyer, Rob Stone, Matt Leinart, Reggie Bush and Brady Quinn coming to Columbus for a pregame show starting at 10 a.m. on Fox, live from Ohio Stadium.

Ohio State was featured on the Fox noon broadcast six times in 2019, putting up a perfect 6-0 record in those games.

Though not yet officially confirmed by the network, Blue White Illustrated reported on Oct. 12 that Ohio State's Oct. 31 matchup with the Nittany Lions will garner a 7:30 p.m. kickoff on ABC, the fourth-straight prime-time matchup for Ohio State in Happy Valley.

Cooper Earns First "Block O" Jersey

Ohio State introduced the creation of a new program on Oct. 10, when it announced that fifth-year senior defensive end Jonathon Cooper would be the first Buckeye to don the No. 0 jersey, allowed in college football for the first time in the 2020 season. In a post shared by the official team account, Ohio State explained that it is defining the uniform not as the No. 0, but as the "Block O"

Popular Staff Predictions To Return Oct. 24

The next print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin will be mailed Oct. 27 and will mark the return to a weekly publishing schedule.

As we count down to the Oct. 24 opener with Nebraska, readers will want to follow BuckeyeSports.com, free to all BSB subscribers, for any injury reports or position changes. Football season will also bring the return of the popular staff predictions, which will be posted each gameday morning.

The BSB staff also provides electronic recruiting coverage, daily stories and updates, as well as presenting reprints from the Buckeye Sports Bulletin archives. We will be featuring reprints covering games from our 40th Anniversary Football Season as part of our popular Reprint Thursdays.

Additionally, staff members man the BuckeyeSports.com Forum, interacting with subscribers on the hot topics of the day.

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jersey and is using it in honor of the late Buckeye legend Bill Willis.

"Toughness. Accountability. Fight. These are all traits Bill Willis exemplified throughout his life," the post reads. "The number '0' is a badge of honor. It represents fight – the backbone of our culture.

"Jonathon Cooper shares these traits and has been presented the opportunity to wear the Block 0 jersey this season."

Cooper called it a unique honor.

"This honor stands out from the rest," Cooper said. "Being a captain, all the great things that have happened here at Ohio State, this one stands out a lot

more to me personally. It doesn't just represent me, it represents a great man, a great player who played here. I know when I put that jersey on, I'm representing him and I have to go out there and be my very best, and I have to do that every single day. This one really means a lot to me.

"I will wear No. 0 because it's not about me. No one understood why I wore No. 18; it's because my birthday is Jan. 8. That represents just me. When I wear that Block 0 it will be in honor of a great Ohio State Buckeye and it will represent Ohio State University and all my teammates and coaches. I know I have to play



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A DISTINCT HONOR – Fifth-year senior defensive end Jonathon Cooper will be the first player in Ohio State history to wear the No. 0.

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2020 Ohio State Football Schedule

Date	Opponent	Time (ET)	TV	2019 Record
Oct. 24	NEBRASKA	12 p.m.	FOX	5-7 (3-6 Big Ten)
Oct. 31	at Penn State*	TBA	TBA	11-2 (7-2 Big Ten)
Nov. 7	RUTGERS	TBA	TBA	2-10 (0-9 Big Ten)
Nov. 14	at Maryland	TBA	TBA	3-9 (1-8 Big Ten)
Nov. 21	INDIANA*	TBA	TBA	8-5 (5-4 Big Ten)
Nov. 28	at Illinois*	TBA	TBA	6-7 (4-5 Big Ten)
Dec. 5	at Michigan State*	TBA	TBA	7-6 (4-5 Big Ten)
Dec. 12	MICHIGAN*	12 p.m.	FOX	9-4 (6-3 Big Ten)
Dec. 19	Big Ten Championship**	8 p.m.	FOX	

* 2019 bowl team

** at Indianapolis (Lucas Oil Stadium)

at my very best, and I wouldn't want it any other way."

Head coach Ryan Day called Cooper the perfect person to don the number for the first time and a representation of everything that he wants an Ohio State football player to be.

"Jonathon Cooper represents everything that an Ohio State football player should be," Day said. "He's tough. He's accountable. He loves this university and this state. He's someone who continually embodies our culture of 'fight.' And that's in everything that he does, on and off the field. I'm proud of Coop."

Day went on to explain the thought process behind the creation of the new tradition on his radio show on Oct. 12.

"We thought long and hard about what that should mean for Ohio State ... We thought it should mean a little something more, thought long and hard about it, and thought someone should be given the award year in and year out," Day said. He went on to say that Cooper had earned the honor through hard work in the face of adversity.

"A Columbus native, been through a lot of adversity, it was a great fit," Day said of Cooper. "It was a really cool moment, and I know he was really excited about it."

He also explained that the honor will not always go to a senior, but rather to the player who the staff and strength and conditioning team feel is the most deserving.

"Certainly, whoever that is, we really want to exemplify all the things that Bill Willis did and stood for and the people of Ohio stand for, in terms of fight," Day said.

Dennis Not Ready To Name Backup

Even if a pick has been made in the battle for Ohio State's No. 2 quarterback position behind Justin Fields, quarterbacks coach Corey Dennis wasn't tipping his hand in a media availability on Oct. 13.

The first-year Buckeye assistant stuck strictly to the company line, complimenting the play off all three contenders – freshmen Jack Miller and C.J. Stroud and senior Gunnar Hoak – but refusing to name an official backup with the start of the 2020 season just over a week away.

"I think that's something that we'd evaluate," Dennis said when asked about who the backup will be when Ohio State takes on Nebraska. "Coach Day, myself, Coach (Kevin) Wilson, we'd all go in and we'd talk about it, but let's just hope that we get to keep Justin Fields."

While Ohio State is not yet ready to name an official No. 2 quarterback to fill in behind Fields, Dennis did speak positively about all three quarterbacks, specifically the growth that the freshmen

have had in the understanding of the playbook since their arrival in January.

"Gunnar Hoak, first off, he's a guy who's been around," Dennis explained when asked for an evaluation of his backups room. "He's seen a different college offense before so he's seen a lot of football. He's extremely talented. He's kind of the older guy in the group, obviously."

"And then Jack and C.J., they're literally just pedal to the metal, trying to learn everything they can and just soak it in, and they're both doing an unbelievable job."

"They're both doing really well. They both have good days and they both have bad days, but those guys are grinders. They're both extremely talented. They're both really diving in, want to know the offense, and in our reality, they have a great guy to look up to in Justin Fields. So they know, (if they aren't preparing as hard as Fields), can they truly be where he is in the future? Justin is a great example, and those guys are trying to do everything he does."

"All three of those guys are doing a great job and they're really grinding, and like I said earlier, everyone has to prepare like they're the starter."

In 2019, without a scholarship freshman quarterback on the roster, Ohio State leaned heavily on graduate transfer Chris Chugunov, who took the vast majority of the quarterback reps after Fields, both in garbage time and when Fields struggled with injuries. Hoak threw just six passes in 2019 and still has yet to lose his black stripe.

Even without the steady experience of a player such as Chugunov, Dennis said that he's confident in Ohio State's quarterback stable, even in the case of an emergency that requires a non-Fields quarterback to take significant reps in a game.

"We'd be ready to go," Dennis said when asked if Ohio State is confident in playing one of those backups if needed. "There's no doubt. They'd be ready to go. They know the offense, but they're continuing to get better. They're continuing to grow. They know that they're not where they need to be, but they're definitely grinding every day and getting where they want to go."

In those mop-up reps, which Ohio State expects to see quite a few of this season, given the fact that Chugunov threw 43 passes in 2019, the Buckeye do not yet have a plan for splitting reps, nor do they have a defined player who will take the bulk of those opportunities.

"I don't know that we've really sat down and thought about it, but I think that long-term, we're going to do what's best for Ohio State for that year and just continue to grow guys and to get guys better," Dennis said. "But to say that we thought about it, no, we haven't."



Corey Dennis

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BSB Podcast Enhances Online Coverage

Buckeye Sports Bulletin has launched a podcast to work in tandem with BuckeyeSports.com to keep BSB subscribers informed on all of the latest around Ohio State football, basketball, recruiting and everything else.

The Buckeye Sports Bulletin Podcast covers Ohio State from all angles, with input from beat writers who cover everything from football and recruiting to men's volleyball and women's hockey, and everything in-between. With BSB's deep Rolodex of former Buckeye players, coaches and college sports analysts around the country, as well as in-house experts Joe Dempsey and Andrew Lind, the BSB podcast has you covered on all things Buckeye, all the time. Staffers Patrick Mayhorn and Wyatt Crosher host with a constantly rotating guest list to get insight and analysis on the latest in OSU news.

With Ohio State returning to play on Oct. 24, the Buckeye Sports Bulletin Podcast will be jumping to two shows a week: a preview show released at 10 a.m. on the Friday before each game and a recap show released on the following Monday, reacting to all of the action in the latest Buckeye game. Those preview shows feature an in-depth interview with a beat writer who covers Ohio State's upcoming opponent, to provide the best possible insight on the matchup for the Buckeyes. The first preview podcast is set to release on Oct. 23, featuring Erin Sorensen of Hail Varsity, an outlet covering Nebraska athletics.

The show is free for all listeners. To find the show, go to your favorite podcast app or website and type in "Buckeye Sports Bulletin Podcast," and click the subscribe button. You can listen on Amazon Music, Apple Podcasts, Audible, Google Podcasts, iHeartRadio, Podbean, Spotify, Stitcher, YouTube and anywhere else that podcasts are found.

For those of you who are new to the podcast world, the show is also posted at 10 a.m. every Friday on BuckeyeSports.com, as well as in the BSB Fan Forum. The Monday recap show schedule is more tentative because of time constraints, but the episode will be released on all platforms before the traditional 5 p.m. commute.

Five Buckeyes Lose Black Stripes

Five more members of Ohio State's 2020 recruiting class officially joined the team since BSB last went to print, as half-back Miyan Williams, offensive lineman Josh Fryar, safety Lathan Ransom, cornerback Cameron Martinez and offensive tackle Paris Johnson all joined the fold.

With those five in, Ohio State now sits

at 13 black stripes lost during the 2020 fall camp, 10 of which belonged to members of the 2020 class. (Senior transfer Trey Sermon was the first player to shed his stripe, on Sept. 16.)

Williams, Fryar and Ransom kicked off the wave on Oct. 3 shortly after a practice in Ohio Stadium.

Continued On Page 6



OHIO STATE INSIDER

Continued From Page 5

Williams, the first of the three to be officially announced by the Ohio State Twitter account, is a former three-star prospect from Cincinnati Winton Woods. Nicknamed "Meatball" by his Ohio State teammates for his 5-8, 227-pound frame, Williams rushed for 5,823 yards and 68 touchdowns in his high school career.

"First off I want to thank God for giving me the opportunity to play in this game of football," Williams said in a video shared to Twitter. "Thank all of y'all for welcoming me in, my unit, and everybody who's helped me here since I've been here. Go Bucks!"

Up next was Fryar, a three-star prospect from Beech Grove, Ind., who has taken reps all over the offensive line during his first offseason in Columbus. He was the first of a six-man offensive-line class to lose his stripe.

"I just want to thank everybody here, thank (offensive line coach Greg Studrawa) especially, thank my O-line unit, thank my strength coaches, and I want to especially thank the defense for going hard every day and giving me a look," Fryar said. "Go Bucks!"

Ransom, who recorded 82 tackles, eight pass breakups, six interceptions and two sacks to lead Tucson (Ariz.) Salpointe Catholic to the state championship game in 2019, was the last selection of the day. He was the third defender off the board and the second safety, joining defensive tackle Ty Hamilton and safety Kourt Williams in losing his stripe.

"I just want to thank the whole team, the whole defense. I want to thank (the defensive backs room)," Ransom said. "Go Bucks!"

Four days later, on Oct. 7, Martinez and Johnson followed suit.

Martinez, who came to Ohio State as the No. 323 player in the class of 2020, was praised by one of the top assistants on the player development side, Ryan Stamper, as a player who is improving early at the next level.

"This first guy could take a million reps in practice, played quarterback in high school, getting better and better at his new position, cornerback Cameron Martinez," Stamper said.

"First I want to thank God, I want to thank my strength coaches, I want to thank my unit, BIA, I appreciate being out here with y'all every day," Martinez said. "Go Bucks."

Johnson is a former five-star prospect who came to Ohio State with massive expectations and immense talent, which Stamper mentioned in his brief introduction.

"He's extremely talented, got to continue to get better, future's bright," Stamper said.

"Hey, I love being out here with y'all every day," Johnson said. "I love my unit and the



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

OFFICIALLY A BUCKEYE – Freshman offensive tackle Paris Johnson is one of 13 Ohio State players to lose their black stripes this fall.

defense that gets me right every day, and the coaching staff. Buckeyes!"

Finally, freshman linebacker Mitchell Melton, who hails from Olney (Md.) Good Counsel, and wide receiver Mookie Cooper, a St. Louis native, shed their black stripes following practice on Oct. 13.

Major Polls Split On Buckeyes

Ohio State still has to sit through one more Saturday without getting the chance to earn its own ranking on the field, but nonetheless the Buckeyes moved up in one of the major polls in the Oct. 11 rankings, from No. 6 to No. 5 in the coaches poll, while remaining at No. 6 with The Associated Press voters.

The move can be attributed to Florida's 41-38 loss to Texas A&M on a last-second field goal, which knocked the Gators from No. 4 to No. 9 in the coaches poll and from No. 4 to No. 10 in the AP selection.

At fifth, Ohio State trails Clemson, Alabama, Georgia and Notre Dame in the coaches poll, while checking in ahead of North Carolina, Oklahoma State, Penn State, Florida and Cincinnati.

That largest drop in the coaches poll is from LSU, which dropped from No. 16 all the way to the bottom of the "others receiving votes" section, accumulating just four total votes, higher than only Arkansas, with one vote. The Tigers fell 45-41 to Missouri to drop to 1-2 on the year.

The largest jump is Texas A&M's, a nine-spot leap into No. 11 after its win over Florida. No. 12 Miami, No. 17 Tennessee and No. 23 Virginia Tech all fell five spots after losing to higher-ranked opponents. The Big Ten has five representatives in the coaches' top 25, including the Buckeyes, Nittany Lions, No. 15 Wisconsin (down one spot), No. 19 Michigan and No. 25 Minnesota, the latter of which is new to the top 25. Iowa and Nebraska are among the others receiving votes.

In the AP poll, Ohio State sits behind Clemson, Alabama, Georgia, Notre Dame and North Carolina and in front of Oklahoma State, Cincinnati, Penn State and Florida.

Notably, with Luke Fickell leading the way, this is Cincinnati's first top-10 appearance in

the AP poll since the final week of the 2009 season.

Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota join Ohio State and Penn State in the ranking, with Wisconsin at No. 16, Michigan up one spot to No. 19 and Minnesota up one spot to No. 24. Iowa and Indiana also received votes.

Haskins Benched By Washington

Former Ohio State quarterback Dwayne Haskins was benched by the Washington Football Team on Oct. 7 after starting the first four games of the 2020 season. Washington head coach Ron Rivera announced that Haskins would be lining up behind new starter Kyle Allen and backup Alex Smith on the depth chart.

"We're 1-3. Watching the game and Dwayne's play, Dwayne needs more work," Rivera told reporters. "He just hasn't had enough work in, and that's the thing I think I hope that everyone understands. He's got a live NFL arm. But he only played one year in college, he played very limited last year – I liked the things that I saw from last year – and this year he played, we gave him every opportunity. We gave him all the reps with the ones, we gave him an opportunity to start four games and gave us a chance to truly evaluate him.

"But with the (NFC East) division where it is right now, I'd be stupid not to give it a shot and see what happens in the next four games. But I wanted to put it in the hands of somebody who knows the system a little bit better, backed up by a guy that's been there.

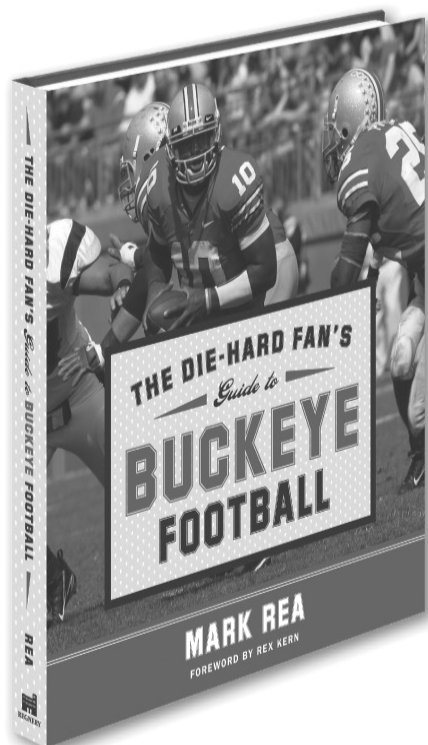
"He should be disappointed. If he wasn't disappointed, I'd be concerned. But right now, we're in a situation where, if we're still trying to teach one guy and the other 52 aren't given the opportunity to see if we can win these next four games, then that's not fair.

"We're trying to develop a young quarterback, but we've got one eye on what's happening in our division. If somebody was 4-0 and somebody else was 3-1, OK. But there's a chance to win here."

On the Washington Football Talk podcast on Oct. 12, Rivera expanded on the decision and doubled down, even with Allen suffering

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an injury in a week five loss to the Los Angeles Rams.

"I thought I saw enough," Rivera told NBC Sports Washington's JP Finlay. "For 11 weeks he was our starter and, again, just the indictment is on the situation, its circumstances, OK? No OTAs, no minicamp, all right? A different version of training camp without four preseason games. So, the evaluation was over 11 weeks, and during that process, we saw some positive things. And I know I was very positive because I'm trying to build confidence in the young man, not just for him but for his teammates.

"There's also a point where you sit there and say, 'OK, how many chances?' These

next 3-to-5 weeks are different. There's an opportunity and we've got to take advantage of it, and I wanted to put the ball in the hands of somebody I think that knows the system a little bit better. I think Dwayne has an NFL arm. But I also think, right now, he's still developing. He's a young football player. He didn't play a lot of football in college.



Dwyane Haskins

"He started the one year. He got an opportunity last year to play in four or five games that really showed his ability and talent, and that's what I was going off of – what I saw and what I liked. So now, for 11 weeks, we tried to see where he is. And really, I still think he is still developing."

While Haskins will likely need to be traded to a new team to find another opportunity to start, his former coach in Columbus still sees a bright future for him.

"Dwayne is a very talented young man, and I've got a special place in my heart for him," Day said. "It's not easy for him to go through, but he's going to come out of it. There's still a lot of football ahead of him."

Don't Forget First-Class Upgrade

This is the time of year when we suggest that readers consider upgrading their BSB delivery to first-class for football season. We traditionally recommend it for out-of-state readers in particular, and many of you upgrade annually.

In these unique times, we are recommend-

ing the upgrade even more vigorously. With the pandemic, the post office is more shorthanded than ever, and that is coupled with the expected crush of absentee and mail-in ballots in this election year. You can see how your BSB might get lost in the shuffle.

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From The Pages Of BSB

35 Years Ago – 1985

Point to be made; point proven.

Eric Kumerow, one of many anchors on the 1985 Ohio State defense, felt he and his mates had a point to make when they lined up behind the defensive front against Indiana. The 48-7 victory and the means by which it was achieved appeared to prove the point for the Buckeye linebacker and his fellow teammates on the defensive unit that had been recently maligned.

A 31-28 loss to Illinois the week prior stung. The Buckeye defense felt the sting well into the Indiana week.

"That (the Illinois loss) hurt our pride," said Kumerow, a 6-6, 240-pound sophomore. "Being up 14 points and then having them come back and score 17 points, that's not Ohio State defense.

"We talked about that this morning before the game, that we've got to work extra hard to show that tradition that Ohio State has, both offensively and defensively."

30 Years Ago – 1990

If anyone wanted to criticize Ohio State head coach John Cooper for being overly conservative near the end of Ohio State's 27-27 tie at Indiana, they would've had to go through Jim Colletto, Bill Young and Greg Frey first. All three agreed that Cooper's conservative running call on third down with 51 seconds remaining in the game was the correct one in that situation.

After trailing 27-17 in the fourth quarter, the Hoosiers came back to knot the score at 27 with 1:09 remaining in the game.

The Buckeyes got the ball at their own 20 with every intention of trying to move far enough to allow placekicker Tim Williams a chance to win the game.

But things got off to a bad start when junior flanker Bernard Edwards couldn't hold on to a short pass from Frey on first down. A 3-yard rush on a draw play on second down put Ohio State in a tricky third-and-7 situation, and rather than risk a turnover with a passing play, Cooper dialed up another handoff. Halfback Raymont Harris was stuffed at the line, Ohio State punted, and the Buckeyes' chances for winning the game were over.

"Everybody probably wonders why we didn't throw the ball," said Cooper. "Well, my thinking was that throwing the ball was the only way we could have lost the ballgame.

"If we throw the ball and it's incomplete, they were going to get the ball about midfield with one timeout left. So we took a chance with running the delayed draw play, trying to get a big play as we did early in the game."

25 Years Ago – 1995

Ohio State improved to 6-0 on the season and 2-0 in Big Ten play with a come-from-behind 27-16 win over Wisconsin at Camp Randall Stadium on Oct. 14. The win ended a brutal six-game stretch where the Buckeyes played five ranked opponents and took the field four times outside the friendly confines of Ohio Stadium.

Even more impressive was the fact that the Buckeyes won those games, including three straight against the likes of Notre Dame, Penn State and Wisconsin, by an average of just under 20 points per game.

"When I saw that schedule, my first reaction was whoever made it should have to play it," Cooper said. "But then I say that I can't worry about things I have no control

over. We knew we were going to be playing those teams."

20 Years Ago – 2000

Speaking a little less than an hour after Minnesota's 29-17 upset of Ohio State – a result that spoiled OSU's Oct. 14 Homecoming festivities and knocked the Buckeyes from the ranks of the unbeaten – tailback Jonathan Wells could only shake his head.

Wells, who started the game in place of the injured Derek Combs, told reporters he knew as early as Wednesday before the game that the Buckeyes' heads weren't in the right place. Although not a captain, the junior Wells called a team meeting after the Oct. 11 practice to get the Buckeyes, who were coming off an impressive 23-7 win at Wisconsin, focused on the task at hand.

"We sensed it Wednesday and called a team meeting after practice to talk to everyone," Wells said. "We still didn't come out and respond. That's top to bottom."

Where Wells had seen a team full of exuberance preparing for Wisconsin coming off an open weekend, he saw a team that was doing little more than going through the motions in preparation for the Gophers.

"I didn't see the intensity I saw last Wednesday from the whole team," he said. "Last week, we were having fun and looking forward to the Wisconsin game, but after this Wednesday's practice it wasn't there."

15 Years Ago – 2005

A No. 6 overall ranking in both major polls. Continuing aspirations for a second national championship in four seasons. An undefeated Big Ten season and the school's first outright conference championship since 1984.

It all melted into the early autumn mist of Beaver Stadium for the Ohio State football team Oct. 8 as it absorbed a 17-10 defeat at the hands of a resurgent Penn State, a loss that sent the Buckeyes reeling into the middle of the conference standings and left them searching for answers in a season that once held so much promise.

Ohio State not only tumbled out of the national top 10 for the first time in the 2005 season, it also descended into a tie for fifth place in the jumbled Big Ten standings. The Nittany Lions sat atop the conference with a perfect 3-0 mark as the lone unbeaten team in conference just three weeks into conference play.

"I really don't know what to say," OSU offensive lineman and senior captain Rob Sims said after the game. "Before this game, I still felt like we were the best team in the country. I know that Texas beat us, but we just as easily could have won that game. We wanted to keep going after that, win out and maybe play them again in the Rose Bowl. I guess that's pretty much out now.

"And it's tough to take, you know? We're better than this. I know we are. I really don't have any explanation for what happened in this game. We could have had this game just like we could have had the Texas game. We can still be Big Ten co-champs, and that's got to be our focus now. But we wanted more. We wanted this season to be magical."

10 Years Ago – 2010

Wisconsin landed an early haymaker to the chin of top-ranked Ohio State, and the reeling Buckeyes never fully recovered as they dropped a 31-18 decision to the

upstart Badgers on Oct. 16 in front of 81,194 frenzied fans at Camp Randall Stadium.

Senior return man David Gilreath took the game's opening kickoff 97 yards for a touchdown and Wisconsin tallied a pair of rushing touchdowns from junior tailback John Clay to take a 21-0 lead at the 13:15 mark of the second quarter.

It was a hole from which the Buckeyes could never escape.

"Wisconsin did the things they needed to do to win the game," OSU head coach Jim Tressel told reporters after the game. "It started with special teams and they ran the ball well. I'm proud of our kids who fought hard and fought back when maybe a lesser bunch would have folded their tent. We got it back to 21-18, but to Wisconsin's credit they ... came up with the win."

Five Years Ago – 2015

Ohio State surrendered the first points for the third straight game, but the top-ranked Buckeyes still left Ohio Stadium with their 20th win in a row.

Sporting all-black uniforms for the first time in program history, Ohio State (7-0, 3-0 Big Ten) ran for 315 yards on its way to a 38-10 shellacking of Penn State (5-2, 2-1 Big Ten) on Oct. 17. The Nittany Lions opened the scoring with a field goal, but the Buckeyes posted 21 points in the second quarter and added another 17 in the fourth to seal the win in front of 108,423 spectators.

After thanking the "incredible" fans, Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer praised the Buckeye offensive line for paving the way for his team's victory, calling them the collective player of the game.

"(Junior running back Ezekiel Elliott) and the offensive line took control of the game," Meyer said.

One Year Ago – 2019

Ohio State sailed through its nonconference slate and the first two games of its Big Ten schedule with such ease that head coach Ryan Day had been practically begging for his team to face some sort of adversity.

When the fourth-ranked Buckeyes were finally tested for the first time on Oct. 5 against No. 25 Michigan State, they rose to the occasion and proved once again they belonged in the conversation among the nation's elite with a 34-10 win over the Spartans.

During the opening quarter, though, Ohio State looked vulnerable. The Buckeyes were challenged – particularly on offense – in ways that they weren't in blowout wins over Florida Atlantic, Cincinnati, Indiana, Miami (Ohio) and Nebraska to open the season.

Ohio State failed to convert a first down on its first three possessions of the game and finished the first quarter with just 16 yards of total offense, all of which came through the air. The Buckeyes had just 10 rushing attempts for zero yards and held a slim 3-0 lead despite starting two drives inside the Michigan State 30-yard line thanks to a pair of fumbles.

"Early on, there were some mistakes made," Day said. "That was not a good quarter of football. But that was good. It was hard. You had guys kind of digging at each other, grinding and yelling at each other, so we've got to figure this thing out. And we did."

Day Wants Every Buckeye To Be Ready To Play

Continued From Page 1

starter or a walk-on.

“It’s just something that we make sure the guys understand is that they’re one, two plays away,” Day said. “At any point, they could be starting or even (be) backups. With our team of 120 guys, that’s everybody there, we’re going to need them all.”

“Typically, as you get to this time of year, you start to kind of just split up into scout team. That’s not the case (this year). Guys need to be engaged, and they need to be ready to go. People talk about the next-man-up mentality, but it’s going to take all of us to get this done.”

“We’re not really changing how we practice, but it’s just more of an awareness and more of an accountability across the board.”

Day knows Ohio State cannot eliminate the risks associated with playing college football during a pandemic, and while the Big Ten’s daily antigen testing should mitigate the potential spread of the virus, losing a player for one-third of the season could be devastating for a program with national title aspirations.

“Honestly, it’s scary, because it can ruin your whole season just like that,” Day said. “I think, sometimes, the coaches and the players look at me like, ‘Coach, I know. We have to be smart.’ But if you get tired of it and you take a deep breath, it’ll get you real fast.”

“So, I’m trying to be really good at



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STRANGE FEELING – To prepare for playing games in an empty stadium, Ohio State head coach Ryan Day has held several Saturday practices inside Ohio Stadium this fall.

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staying on top of it.”

While COVID-19 remains an ever-present threat, the Buckeyes don't have the luxury of tune-up games this season.

They'll hit the ground running with the opener against Nebraska before traveling to Penn State for a game that could potentially decide the winner of the Big Ten East Division.

Day will presumably rely upon the more experienced players on his roster in those matchups before diving deep into the depth chart for expected blowouts in the middle of the season.

“It's different,” Day said. “Before a conference schedule, if you have a few games ahead of time, you have a little bit better feel for what to expect. We don't have that luxury this year, so we'll just work through it and try to figure out best ways to create a game environment in practice and go from there.”

Day did not say who would serve as acting head coach if he were to contract the virus, only that he believes his staff is well-equipped to handle his absence – or that of any other coach, for that matter – if such a situation arises.

“We've had these conversations that if somebody were to go down, what would happen next? Between Kevin (Wilson) and I on offense, we call it together, and it's the same thing with Kerry (Coombs) and Greg (Mattison) on defense. So we feel pretty good there,” Day said. “If something ever happened to (safeties coach/special teams coordinator) Matt Barnes, I think (quality control coach) Parker Fleming could step into that role and we could put him there. We have really good contingency plans, and when they come up, we'll address them.”

Of course, Ohio State isn't alone in navigating the safety protocols and other guidelines put in place by the Big Ten. But in order to win another conference title and compete for the national championship, the Buckeyes will have to treat any potential complications like an unexpected injury or inclement weather and simply control what they can.

“It's a challenge, for sure, but it's the same challenge for everybody,” Day said. “We're all under the same rules and the same situations and scenarios, so we just have to handle it better than everybody else.”

“I'm not saying it's easy. It certainly isn't. But it's like playing a game in rainy weather. Both teams have to deal with it, and the team that deals with it the best is going to prevail. That's kind of the way we have to approach this. It's not perfect, but we just have to handle it better than our opponent.”

Big Ten Secures Daily Testing

At the forefront of the Big Ten's decision to resume the fall football season was the ability to administer daily rapid testing through partnerships with Biodesix Inc. and Quidel Corporation, which the conference officially announced on Sept. 30.

“The partnership with Biodesix and Quidel is an important step toward achieving our mission of keeping our student-athletes and the communities that support them healthy and safe,” Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren said in a statement. “The data we are scheduled to collect – and the research component of this partnership – will provide

major contributions to all 14 Big Ten institutions as they study COVID-19 and attempt to mitigate the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) among wider communities.”

Quidel, which also entered into a partnership in September with the Pac-12 Conference, manufactures the FDA-authorized SOFIA 2 SARS rapid antigen test, while Biodesix will oversee and manage on-site testing for athletes and staff members before every game and practice and validate the daily test with

polymerase chain reaction testing on a percentage of anonymous samples.

“Along with its medical and scientific capabilities as a certified laboratory, Biodesix is committed to helping the Big Ten meet the testing requirements and reporting protocols established by the medical subcommittee and adopted by the Big Ten council of presidents and chancellors,” said Dr. Jim Borchers, Ohio State team physician and co-chair of the Big Ten Conference return to competition task force's medical subcommittee. “Quidel's rapid antigen testing technology represents the ability to perform COVID-19 surveillance testing on a large

scale with prompt results.”

Additionally, each of the Big Ten's 14 athletic departments have appointed a chief infection officer to monitor the results and determine whether it's safe to continue practicing or playing games based on the average test rates.

If the team positivity rate (number of positive tests divided by the total number of tests administered) is greater than 5 percent or if the population positivity rate (number of positive individuals divided by the total population at risk) exceeds 7.5 percent, the program must stop practicing and playing games for a minimum of seven days.



Parker Fleming

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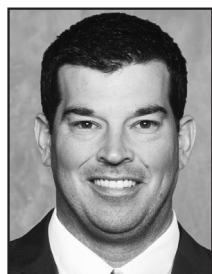
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2020 Ohio State Football Roster

No.	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Year	Hometown/Previous School	No.	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Year	Hometown/Previous School
0	Jonathon Cooper	DE	6-4	257	5th	Gahanna, Ohio/Lincoln	41	Josh Proctor	SAF	6-2	202	Jr.	Owasso, Okla./Owasso
1	Justin Fields	QB	6-3	228	Jr.	Kennesaw, Ga./Georgia	42	Lloyd McFarquhar	CB	5-9	170	So.	Cleveland, Ohio/Brush
2	Chris Olave	WR	6-1	188	Jr.	San Marcos, Calif./Mission Hills	42	Bradley Robinson	LS	6-1	230	5th	Troy, Mich./Athens
3	Kourt Williams	SAF	6-1	221	Fr.	Bellflower, Calif./St. John Bosco	43	Ryan Batsch	SAF	6-2	220	So.	Loveland, Ohio/Loveland
3	Demario McCall	RB	5-9	195	5th	North Ridgeville, Ohio/North Ridgeville	43	Robert Cope	RB	5-9	198	So.	Dublin, Ohio/Jerome
3	Teradja Mitchell	LB	6-2	242	Jr.	Virginia Beach, Va./Bishop Sullivan	44	Ben Schmiesing	LB	6-1	225	So.	Piqua, Ohio/Piqua
4	Lejond Cavazos	CB	6-0	195	Fr.	San Antonio, Texas/IMG Academy	46	Cade Kacherski	LB	6-2	225	So.	Dublin, Ohio/Jerome
4	Julian Fleming	WR	6-2	200	Fr.	Catawissa, Pa./Southern Columbia	47	Justin Hilliard	LB	6-1	231	6th	Cincinnati, Ohio/St. Xavier
5	Baron Browning	LB	6-3	240	Sr.	Fort Worth, Texas/Kennedale	49	Patrick Gurd	TE	6-4	230	Fr.	New Albany, Ohio/New Albany
5	Garrett Wilson	WR	6-0	193	So.	Austin, Texas/Lake Travis	50	Nathan Brock	OL	6-4	290	5th	Powell, Ohio/Olentangy Liberty
6	Taron Vincent	DT	6-2	295	So.	Baltimore, Md./IMG Academy	51	Trayvon Wilburn	LB	5-11	222	So.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Mount Healthy
6	Jameson Williams	WR	6-2	188	So.	St. Louis, Mo./Cardinal Ritter College Prep	52	Wyatt Davis	OL	6-4	315	Jr.	Bellflower, Calif./St. John Bosco
7	Kamryn Babb	WR	6-0	197	So.	St. Louis, Mo./Christian Brothers College	52	Antwan Jackson	DT	6-2	295	5th	Ellenwood, Ga./Blinn Jr. College
7	Sevyn Banks	CB	6-1	200	Jr.	Orlando, Fla./Jones	53	Luke Wrypler	OL	6-3	295	Fr.	Montvale, N.J./St. Joseph Regional
7	C.J. Stroud	QB	6-3	205	Fr.	Rancho Cucamonga, Calif./Rancho Cucamonga	54	Tyler Friday	DE	6-3	265	Jr.	Ramsey, N.J./Don Bosco Prep
8	Javontae Jean-Baptiste	DE	6-5	250	So.	Spring Valley, N.J./Bergen Catholic	55	Jerron Cage	DT	6-2	299	Jr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Winton Woods
8	Trey Sermon	RB	6-1	215	Sr.	Marietta, Ga./Oklahoma	55	Matthew Jones	OL	6-4	310	So.	Brooklyn, N.Y./Erasmus Hall
9	Jack Miller III	QB	6-3	215	Fr.	Scottsdale, Ariz./Chaparral	56	Aaron Cox	DL	6-3	255	Jr.	Mantua, Ohio/Crestwood
9	Zach Harrison	DE	6-6	265	So.	Lewis Center, Ohio/Olentangy Orange	57	Zaid Hamdan	DT	5-11	265	So.	Mason, Ohio/Mason
10	Mookie Cooper	WR	5-10	190	Fr.	St. Louis, Mo./Trinity Catholic	58	Ty Hamilton	DL	6-3	278	Fr.	Pickerington, Ohio/Pickerington Central
10	Cameron Martinez	DB	5-10	188	Fr.	Muskegon, Mich./Muskegon	59	Darrion Henry-Young	DL	6-4	275	Fr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Princeton
11	Tyreke Smith	DE	6-4	267	Jr.	Cleveland, Ohio/Cleveland Heights	59	Zach Stevenson	OL	6-1	295	R-Fr.	Lewis Center, Ohio/Olentangy Orange
11	Jaxon Smith-Njigba	WR	6-0	196	Fr.	Rockwall, Texas/Rockwall	60	Ryan Smith	OL	6-1	285	R-Fr.	Medina, Ohio/Buckeye
12	Gunnar Hoak	QB	6-4	215	5th	Dublin, Ohio/Kentucky	61	Gavin Cupp	OL	6-4	308	5th	Leipsic, Ohio/Leipsic
12	Lathan Ransom	SAF	6-1	198	Fr.	Tucson, Ariz./Salpointe Catholic	62	Chris Kuhn	OL	6-5	305	So.	Sandusky, Ohio/St. Mary Central Catholic
13	Tyreke Johnson	CB	6-1	195	So.	Jacksonville, Fla./Trinity Christian Academy	64	Jack Jamieson	OL	6-1	285	So.	Lakewood, Ohio/St. Ignatius
13	Gee Scott	WR	6-3	210	Fr.	Seattle, Wash./Eastside Catholic	66	Enokk Vimahi	OL	6-4	305	R-Fr.	Kahuku, Hawaii/Kahuku
14	Ronnie Hickman	SAF	6-1	205	R-Fr.	Wayne, N.J./DePaul Catholic	67	Jakob James	OL	6-5	295	Fr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Elder
15	Jaylen Harris	WR	6-5	215	Sr.	Cleveland, Ohio/Cleveland Heights	68	Ryan Jacoby	OL	6-5	310	R-Fr.	Mentor, Ohio/Mentor
16	Cade Stover	TE	6-4	255	R-Fr.	Mansfield, Ohio/Lexington	69	Trey Leroux	OL	6-7	335	Fr.	Norwalk, Ohio/Norwalk
16	Ryan Watts	CB	6-3	195	Fr.	Little Elm, Texas/Little Elm	70	Josh Fryar	OL	6-6	308	Fr.	Beech Grove, Ind./Beech Grove
17	Bryson Shaw	SAF	6-1	195	R-Fr.	Eldersburg, Md./Bullis School	71	Josh Myers	OC	6-5	312	Jr.	Miamisburg, Ohio/Miamisburg
17	Danny Vanatsky	QB	6-1	210	So.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Hills Christian Academy	72	Tommy Togiai	DT	6-2	300	Jr.	Pocatello, Idaho/Highland
18	J.P. Andrade	QB	6-2	210	So.	La Verne, Calif./Bonita	73	Grant Toutant	OL	6-6	307	Fr.	Warren, Mich./De La Salle
19	Dallas Gant	LB	6-3	232	Jr.	Toledo, Ohio/St. John's Jesuit	74	Max Wray	OL	6-7	308	So.	Franklin, Tenn./Franklin
19	Jagger LaRoe	QB	6-3	220	So.	Colleyville, Texas/Texas A&M	75	Thayer Munford	OL	6-6	315	Sr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Massillon Washington
20	Pete Werner	LB	6-3	242	Sr.	Indianapolis, Ind./Cathedral	76	Harry Miller	OL	6-4	315	So.	Buford, Ga./Buford
21	Marcus Williamson	CB	5-10	186	Sr.	Westerville, Ohio/IMG Academy	77	Paris Johnson	OL	6-6	305	Fr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Princeton
22	Steele Chambers	RB	6-1	220	R-Fr.	Roswell, Ga./Blessed Trinity Catholic	78	Nicholas Petit-Frere	OT	6-5	305	So.	Tampa, Fla./Berkeley Prep
23	Marcus Hooker	SAF	5-11	200	So.	New Castle, Pa./New Castle	79	Dawand Jones	OL	6-8	360	So.	Indianapolis, Ind./Ben Davis
24	Marcus Crowley	RB	6-1	205	So.	Jacksonville, Fla./Trinity Christian Academy	80	Corey Rau	TE	6-4	260	5th	Katy, Texas/SMU
24	Shaun Wade	CB	6-1	195	Jr.	Jacksonville, Fla./Trinity Christian Academy	81	Jake Hausmann	TE	6-4	255	5th	Cincinnati, Ohio/Archbishop Moeller
25	Xavier Johnson	RB	6-2	215	So.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Summit Country Day	82	Sam Wiglusz	WR	5-11	185	So.	Brecksville, Ohio/Brecksville-Broadview Heights
25	Craig Young	LB	6-3	228	So.	Fort Wayne, Ind./Wayne	83	Cormontae Hamilton	DL	6-2	265	R-Fr.	Memphis, Tenn./Whitehaven
26	Cameron Brown	CB	6-0	192	Jr.	St. Louis, Mo./Christian Brothers College	84	Joe Royer	TE	6-5	240	Fr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Elder
28	Dominic DiMaccio	K	5-8	192	Jr.	Powell, Ohio/DeSales	85	Austin Kutscher	WR	6-0	195	So.	Massillon, Ohio/Washington
28	Miyan Williams	RB	5-8	227	Fr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Winton Woods	86	Chris Booker	WR	6-3	185	Jr.	St. Louis/Dayton
29	Zach Hoover	P	6-2	200	5th	Toledo, Ohio/Central Catholic	87	Elijah Gardiner	WR	6-3	200	Jr.	Kemp, Texas/Kemp
29	Darryl Sinclair	CB	5-9	180	Jr.	Solon, Ohio/Solon	88	Jeremy Ruckert	TE	6-5	253	Jr.	Lindenhurst, N.Y./Lindenhurst
30	Kevin Dever	SAF	6-0	195	Jr.	Cleveland, Ohio/St. Edward's	89	Luke Farrell	TE	6-6	258	5th	Perry, Ohio/Perry
32	Tuf Borland	LB	6-1	234	5th	Bolingbrook, Ill./Bolingbrook	90	Jaden McKenzie	DT	6-2	290	R-Fr.	Wake Forest, N.C./Wake Forest
33	Master Teague III	RB	5-11	225	So.	Murfreesboro, Tenn./Blackman	91	Drue Chrisman	P	6-3	222	5th	Lawrenceburg, Ind./Cincinnati LaSalle
34	Mitch Rossi	RB	6-0	245	Jr.	Franklin, Tenn./Franklin	92	Haskell Garrett	DT	6-2	299	Sr.	Las Vegas, Nev./Bishop Gorman
34	Alec Taylor	DB	6-1	195	Jr.	Steubenville, Ohio/Steubenville	93	Jacolbe Cowan	DL	6-4	275	Fr.	Charlotte, N.C./Providence Day School
35	Tommy Eichenberg	LB	6-2	238	R-Fr.	Cleveland, Ohio/St. Ignatius	94	Roen McCullough	LS	6-1	230	So.	Columbus, Ohio/Worthington Kilbourne
36	K'Vaughan Pope	LB	6-1	232	Jr.	Dinwiddie, Va./Dinwiddie	95	Blake Haubeil	K	6-3	230	Sr.	Buffalo, N.Y./Canisius
37	Mitchell Melton	LB	6-3	243	Fr.	Olney, Md./Good Counsel	96	Michael O'Shaughnessy	P	6-3	200	R-Fr.	New Albany, Ohio/New Albany
38	Marvin Davies	WR	5-11	200	Fr.	Cleveland, Ohio/Orange	97	Noah Potter	DE	6-6	271	R-Fr.	Mentor, Ohio/Mentor
38	Cameron Kittle	DB	6-0	185	Fr.	Glouster, Ohio/Trimble	98	Jake Seibert	K	6-1	200	Fr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/La Salle
39	Cody Simon	LB	6-1	225	Fr.	Jersey City, N.J./St. Peter's Prep							



Ryan Day

Name	Position
Ryan Day	Head Coach
Larry Johnson	Associate Head Coach/Defensive Line Coach
Greg Mattison	Co-Defensive Coordinator
Al Washington	Linebackers Coach
Kerry Coombs	Defensive Coordinator/Secondary Coach
Tony Alford	Assistant Head Coach/Running Backs Coach
Brian Hartline	Wide Receivers Coach
Greg Studrawa	Offensive Line Coach
Kevin Wilson	Offensive Coordinator/Tight Ends Coach
Matt Barnes	Safeties/Special Team's Coordinator
Mickey Marotti	Assistant AD, Director of Football
Corey Dennis	Quarterbacks Coach

Name	Position
Keenan Bailey	Quality Control Coach – Offense
Parker Fleming	Quality Control Coach - Special Teams
Drew Christ	Quality Control Coach – Defense
Billy Fessler	Graduate Assistant – Offense
Kennedy Cook	Graduate Assistant - Offense
Joe Bolden	Quality Control Coach - Defense
Grayson Miller	Graduate Assistant - Defense



Larry Johnson

2020 Big Ten Schedule

	West Division							East Division						
	ILLINOIS	IOWA	MINNESOTA	NEBRASKA	N'WESTERN	PURDUE	WISCONSIN	INDIANA	MARYLAND	MICHIGAN	MICHIGAN STATE	OHIO STATE	PENN STATE	RUTGERS
Oct. 24	at Wisconsin	at Purdue	MICHIGAN	at Ohio State	MARYLAND	IOWA	ILLINOIS	PENN STATE	at N'western	at Minnesota	RUTGERS	NEBRASKA	at Indiana	at Michigan State
Oct. 31	PURDUE	N'WESTERN	at Maryland	WISCONSIN	at Iowa	at Illinois	at Nebraska	at Rutgers	MINNESOTA	MICHIGAN STATE	at Michigan	at Penn State	OHIO STATE	INDIANA
Nov. 7	MINNESOTA	MICHIGAN STATE	at Illinois	at N'western	NEBRASKA	at Wisconsin	PURDUE	MICHIGAN	at Penn State	at Indiana	at Iowa	RUTGERS	MARYLAND	at Ohio State
Nov. 14	at Rutgers	at Minnesota	IOWA	PENN STATE	at Purdue	N'WESTERN	at Michigan	at Michigan State	OHIO STATE	WISCONSIN	INDIANA	at Maryland	at Nebraska	ILLINOIS
Nov. 21	at Nebraska	at Penn State	PURDUE	ILLINOIS	WISCONSIN	at Minnesota	at N'western	at Ohio State	MICHIGAN STATE	at Rutgers	at Maryland	INDIANA	IOWA	MICHIGAN
Nov. 28	OHIO STATE	NEBRASKA	at Wisconsin	at Iowa	at Michigan State	RUTGERS	MINNESOTA	MARYLAND	at Indiana	PENN STATE	N'WESTERN	at Illinois	at Michigan	at Purdue
Dec. 5	IOWA	at Illinois	N'WESTERN	at Purdue	at Minnesota	NEBRASKA	INDIANA	at Wisconsin	at Michigan	MARYLAND	OHIO STATE	at Michigan State	at Rutgers	PENN STATE
Dec. 12	at N'western	WISCONSIN	at Nebraska	MINNESOTA	ILLINOIS	at Indiana	at Iowa	PURDUE	RUTGERS	at Ohio State	at Penn State	MICHIGAN	MICHIGAN STATE	at Maryland
Dec. 19	Big Ten Championship Game • Lucas Oil Stadium, Indianapolis • 8 p.m. ET • Other Games TBD													

Ohio State Names Seven Team Captains For 2020

By ANDREW LIND
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Just as it has done in four of the last five years, Ohio State named seven team captains for the 2020 season.

The group includes a pair of returning captains in linebacker Tuf Borland and defensive end Jonathon Cooper, as well as offensive guard Wyatt Davis, quarterback Justin Fields, linebacker Justin Hilliard, center Josh Myers and cornerback Shaun Wade.

"I think this is really impressive in so many areas," head coach Ryan Day after the captains were named. "When you look at their list of accomplishments in their careers as a group, it's already really long.

"I promise you our leadership has kept this team hungry and I think we're training right now at a championship level. It's really cool to see."

A native of Bolingbrook, Ill., Borland becomes just the second three-time captain in Ohio State history, joining former quarterback J.T. Barrett (2015-17). He's registered 180 tackles, 15½ tackles for loss and five sacks in 44 career games, including 34 starts.

"It's very humbling," Borland said of being named a three-time captain. "I'm honored to be with a guy like J.T., who was an unbelievable leader here for many years. There's a huge responsibility that comes with that, and in a sense, all eyes are on you every day. So you have to attack it with great energy and a great demeanor in the way that you work because everyone will be watching."

Cooper – who hails from nearby Gahanna, Ohio – returns for an unexpected fifth year, as he was slowed by an ankle injury in 2019 and ultimately decided to redshirt. He's played in 37 career games, recording 51 tackles, 11½ tackles for loss and 6½ sacks and is poised to take on an even bigger role following the departure of first-round pick Chase Young.

In addition to being named a team captain, Cooper also will be the first player in Ohio State history to wear the No. 0 after the NCAA adopted a proposal to make it a legal jersey number this season.

"Jonathon Cooper represents everything that an Ohio State football player should be," Day said when he presented Cooper with the jersey on Oct. 10. "He's tough. He's accountable. He loves this university and this state. He's someone who continually embodies our culture of 'fight.' And that's in everything that he does, on and off the field. I'm proud of Coop."

The Buckeyes are referring to the new tradition as the Block "0" in honor of former defensive lineman Bill Willis, who was an All-American and national champion during his career in Columbus (1942-44) and later helped break the color barrier in the NFL.

"This honor stands out from the rest," Cooper said. "Being a captain, all the great things that have happened here at Ohio State, this one stands out a lot more to me personally. It doesn't just represent me, it represents a great man, a great player who played here. I know when I put that jersey on, I'm representing him and I have to go out there and be my very best, and I have to do that every single day. This one really means a lot to me."

A former five-star prospect from Bellflower (Calif.) St. John Bosco, Davis was named first-team All-Big Ten and a unanimous first-team All-American in 2019, his first full season as a starter. He is widely considered one of the nation's best offensive linemen, as evidenced by his selection to the Big Ten Network's All-Decade team while still being an active player.



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

TEAM LEADERS – From left to right, Ohio State offensive guard Wyatt Davis, linebacker Tuf Borland, cornerback Shaun Wade, linebacker Justin Hilliard, quarterback Justin Fields, defensive end Jonathon Cooper and center Josh Myers were named captains by their teammates.

"Last year, when we weren't captains, we were still trying to lead the younger guys. But now, we have to expand our leadership larger than just the offensive line and to the whole team," said Davis, who declared for the draft on Sept. 11 and subsequently announced his return when the Big Ten reinstated the season five days later. "With being a captain at Ohio State comes great responsibility, and the expectations of always doing things right is at an all-time high."

Fields, meanwhile, had arguably the greatest season ever for an Ohio State quarterback in 2019. He threw for 3,273 yards and 41 touchdowns compared to just three interceptions and rushed for 484 yards and 10 more scores to lead the Buckeyes to the College Football Playoff in his first season as a starter after transferring from Georgia.

A finalist for the Heisman Trophy and the Davey O'Brien Award, Fields was also named the Big Ten Graham-George Offensive Player of the Year and Griese-Brees Quarterback of the Year.

"It's just a blessing (to be named a team captain), really," Fields said. "All that I've been through in the last couple years, from going to Georgia and then coming here, getting introduced to new teammates, who all welcomed

me, it's been a blessing. I know how big of a deal it is to be elected by my teammates as a captain here at Ohio State, so it's something that I will forever be grateful for."

Hilliard, a sixth-year senior from Cincinnati St. Xavier, has battled injuries throughout his career, including tearing both biceps, his meniscus and Achilles. He played in 12 games (three starts) last season, though, and recorded 13 tackles, three tackles for loss and his first career interception, which came in the fourth quarter of the 28-17 win over Penn State.

"Sometimes I just have to sit back and reflect on some of the hurdles I've had to overcome over the years," Hilliard said. "But honestly, I think a lot of people had this view of me that I'm just here feeling sorry for myself for all the terrible things that have happened to me. But these past five years have been awesome for me. I've had the time of my life. It just means so much to (be named a captain)."

Like Davis, Myers was a first-year starter last season on a unit that helped pave the way for running back J.K. Dobbins to become the program's first-ever 2,000-yard rusher. The Miamisburg, Ohio, native was named to the preseason watch list for the Rimington Trophy, which former Buckeyes Pat Elflein and Billy Price won in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

Myers echoed Davis' sentiment about already feeling like a leader along the offensive line and acknowledged his role only expands with this announcement but also admitted Ohio State will only go as far as Fields takes them.

"He's just a natural leader," Myers said. "Some people have it and some people don't. He just has this natural ability to lead other people. He always has confidence in what he's doing and he's always trying to help people, and that is the biggest thing in my eyes."

Wade, a fourth-year junior from Jacksonville (Fla.) Trinity Christian, is moving to outside cornerback after starting in the slot last season, where he recorded 25 tackles, eight pass break-ups, four tackles for loss, a forced fumble and an interception. He was named to the preseason watch list for the Bednarik, Nagurski and Thorpe awards and the Lott IMPACT Trophy, and he is expected to be the leader of a unit that lost first-round picks Jeff Okudah and Damon Arnette.

"I can say that I'm a different type of captain," said Wade, who also initially opted out of the season before announcing his return. "I'm not really a vocal person, but I lead more by example on the field and by just working hard. That's mostly what type of captain I am. And I really appreciate it. I'm thankful for being a captain."

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Buckeyes Will Show How Offensive They Can Be

By CRAIG MERZ
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

With six returning starters, including Heisman Trophy candidate Justin Fields at quarterback and three linemen to protect him, the Ohio State offense is poised once again to post lofty numbers that rank near the top nationally in several categories.

However, in order to have one of the most explosive attacks, the Buckeyes may have to do it slightly differently than last season when they relied heavily on the running of J.K. Dobbins to set up the passing game of Fields.

Dobbins set the school season rushing record with 2,003 yards and scored 21 touchdowns as the Buckeyes finished fifth in the NCAA with 266.8 yards per game on the ground while placing third in scoring at 46.9 points per game.

He took his talents to the Baltimore Ravens, and the task of chewing up yardage will fall mainly to third-year sophomore Master Teague and Oklahoma graduate transfer Trey Sermon.

Each had to overcome injuries with Teague's torn Achilles in March being the most recent. He is expected to be available for the Oct. 24 opener against Nebraska when the battle for carries begins.

"The amount of work he put in to get himself ready to roll is just amazing," head coach Ryan Day said. "But then also, getting Trey in here is really great for us. He's a really good young man who understands football."

When Fields, who threw 41 TDs against three interceptions in his first season in Columbus after transferring from Georgia, wasn't handing the ball to Dobbins, he was looking downfield to a bevy of receivers led by K.J. Hill, who set the OSU career record for catches at 201 before joining the Los Angeles Chargers this season.

Austin Mack, who had 27 receptions for 361 yards (13.4 average) and three touchdowns, and Binjimen Victor (16.4 yards average on 35 catches with six TDs)



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

WEAPONS GALORE – Junior quarterback Justin Fields is primed for a return to the Heisman Trophy ceremony thanks to an offense that includes the likes of wide receiver Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson and running backs Trey Sermon and Master Teague, among others.

also exhausted their eligibility, but the cupboard is not bare.

Junior Chris Olave and sophomore Garrett Wilson lead a dynamic group that includes several potential breakout freshmen.

"We're very, very talented out there," Day said. "Still inexperienced and young but as talented as I've ever been around."

For the backs to find gaps and Fields to have time to throw, the offensive line

needs to excel.

Fortunately for the Buckeyes, All-America right guard Wyatt Davis decided to return. He opted out days before the Big Ten reinstated fall football but changed his mind and was able to regain his eligibility.

Along with returning center Josh Myers and left tackle Thayer Munford, the Buckeyes have a strong start to replicating or bettering their No. 4 ranking in

total offense (529.9 yards).

"We were really good up front last year," offensive coordinator/tight ends coach Kevin Wilson said early in the pre-season camp. "Those guys are back. But an O-line is like a boxer. You have to get back into training and pound a little bit to get really good."

The tight ends room returns fifth-year seniors Luke Farrell (459 snaps in 2019) and Jake Hausmann (235) and junior Jeremy Ruckert (404) to a unit that is better known for blocking than catching. But the trio of veterans bring reliability and confidence to the offense.

"Tight end is probably the biggest developmental position there is, so it just takes a little bit of time," Day said. "Now there's some good depth and experience in that group, so that's going to be a weapon for us."

Outstanding In Fields

Fields did almost everything except win a national championship last season, and that motivates him. He had just three interceptions, but the last came late in the College Football Playoff semifinal against Clemson to thwart a comeback bid in the 29-23 loss.

That pick, caused when Olave broke his route, doesn't diminish a season in which he threw for 3,273 yards and finished third in the Heisman balloting.

Since then he's become a visible leader on the team for social justice and was a vocal advocate in favor of the conference reconsidering its stand against playing in the fall because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I know he feels like he has some unfinished business," Day said.

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: OFFENSIVE OVERVIEW

Fields during the offseason adopted a vegan diet and is eager to show off his new look.

"My body feels great, and I feel faster and stronger," he said.

While he is in the best shape of his life, there is no way to guarantee he will get through the season unscathed, and he did hurt his knee in the Penn State game last season.

With Chris Chugunov out of eligibility, last year's third-stringer – Kentucky transfer Gunnar Hoak – and freshmen Jack Miller and C.J. Stroud will vie for the backup role.

Miller, the No. 14 pro-style quarterback in the 2020 class out of Scottsdale (Ariz.) Chaparral, and Stroud, the four-star prospect from Ranch Cucamonga, Calif., each enrolled in January so they could participate in spring practice, but they got only three sessions before the pandemic shut everything down.

One-Two Punch

Replacing Dobbins will be done by committee, that is if two people can be called a committee.

Teague was capable in spelling Dobbins last season and accumulated 789 yards on 135 carries for a 5.8 average along with four TDs. He had 106 yards against Indiana and 111 in the Maryland game.

The knee injury was a setback, but running backs coach Tony Alford has been impressed by Teague's goal to be ready by the start of the season, albeit one much later than originally planned.

"I'm extremely confident and comfortable that he'll be up to the task," Alford said.

He feels the same way about Sermon, whom he heavily recruited before losing him to the Sooners.

"We just established a great relationship when he recruited me out of high school," Sermon said. "Coach Alford's such a genuine guy, and all the players he comes in contact with, he really cares about them."

Sermon has also struggled with injuries but ran for 2,076 yards in 19 career games for the Sooners. Limited playing time last season prompted him to look elsewhere for an opportunity.

"I just fell in love with the culture here," he said.

Redshirt freshman Steele Chambers could be the next man up after Teague and Sermon, especially since sophomore Marcus Crowley sustained a torn anterior cruciate ligament in November and is not fully recovered.

Chambers had 135 yards on a 7.1 average in four games last season. Crowley rushed for 237 yards (9.5 average) and scored a touchdown in seven games.

True freshman Miyan Williams has shown improvement during camp, Alford said, as has sophomore walk-on Xavier Johnson.

Receiving Is Believing

Olave is likely headed to the NFL after this season. He led the 2019 Buckeyes in receiving yards (849), yards per catch (17.3) and touchdowns (12).

Like Fields, the interception against Clemson has been incentivizing.

"I don't think I'm over it," Olave said. "I still have that chip on my shoulder. I want to show the world."

Wilson is also ready for showtime. He had 30 catches for 432 yards (14.4 average) and five touchdowns playing outside as a freshman but has been moved to the

slot position occupied by Hill in 2019.

Wilson's move probably diminishes the role of fifth-year senior Demario McCall, who has been shuttled between the receiver, running backs and special teams and was looked at as a possible replacement for Hill.

The competition for playing time will be fierce beginning with senior Jaylen Harris, junior Elijah Gardner, and sophomores Jameson Williams and possibly Kamryn Babb, who has missed his first two seasons because of injuries.

"Kam Babb has been through just an amazing couple years here," Day said. "We're hopeful he's going to be able to play for us this season."

Then there's the freshman class with Mookie Cooper, Julian Fleming, Gee Scott Jr. and Jaxon Smith-Njigba. All ranked in the top 16 at their position in the 247Sports.com composite.

Fleming, from Catawissa (Pa.) Southern Columbia, was the top-ranked player overall by ESPN.com for the 2020 class.

End All, Be All

Sure, the tight ends at Ohio State don't get much love or attention, but they're invaluable in their blocking and when called upon to make a catch they'd better be ready.

There's no better example than what might have been the season-saving grab by Ruckert in the 2019 Big Ten title game.

Trailing Wisconsin 21-7 in the third quarter, Ruckert made a spectacular one-handed grab in the back of the end zone of an overthrown pass by Fields to cut the deficit to seven.

OSU then rolled to a 34-21 victory to ensure a spot in the national semifinal.

Earlier, Farrell was the recipient of a 21-yard pass from punter Drue Chrisman on fourth-and-9 to keep a second-quarter drive alive.

In total last season, Ruckert had four TD catches, Farrell two and Hausmann one. Second-year freshman Cade Stover is being worked into the unit after starting his OSU career as a linebacker, and freshman Joe Royer was the No. 11-rated tight end nationally by 247Sports.com.

"We can be one of the most prolific offenses we've seen around here, if not in all of college football," Farrell said.

Line 'Em Up

There were two spots up for grabs once Davis returned to the O-line, and sophomores Nicholas Petit-Frere and Harry Miller appear to have won the competition to replace outgoing seniors Branden Bowen and Jonah Jackson at right tackle and left guard, respectively.

Miller is the center-in-waiting until Myers leaves and could have fifth-year senior Gavin Cupp behind him looking to break into the rotation.

Meanwhile, mammoth Dawand Jones (6-8, 360 pounds) and freshman Paris Johnson will push Petit-Frere for snaps.

The Buckeyes are deep on the line with the likes of sophomores Matthew Jones and Max Wray and redshirt freshmen Ryan Jacoby and Enokk Vimahi. Incoming freshman Josh Fryar was the No. 1 overall player in Indiana, while Luke Wyppler was the second-best player in the state of New Jersey.

"I don't think we can put a wrong person in there," Myers said. "I think we'll be successful no matter who we put in there, which is definitely the mark of a really good offensive line."



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Questions Remain Behind Fields To Start Season

By WYATT CROSER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

As has been the case for many of the most recent seasons of Ohio State football aside from 2015, the debate on the quarterback depth chart does not extend to its starter.

But this time, it's because the Buckeyes are returning a Heisman Trophy finalist at quarterback, the first Heisman finalist to return for another season in Columbus since running back Keith Byars, who came back for the 1985 season after finishing second in voting to Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie.

Byars' 1985 campaign did not go as planned, rushing for 213 yards on just 3.9 yards per rush in an injury-riddled year, but Fields comes into the 2020 season extremely motivated after falling short of a national title last season. To Ohio State offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson, that motivation has come through in what Fields has done both on and off the field, something also emphasized by Fields getting named a captain by his teammates.

"He's leaner, he's faster, he's done a great job taking care of himself," Wilson said. "He's a more complete player, and I think a year ago, as a quarterback but a new guy, he didn't jump out to necessarily be the leader. I think he's more comfortable being one of the strong leaders of this football team and of our offensive unit."

In 2019, Fields completed 67.2 percent of his passes for 3,273 yards and 41 touchdowns to just three interceptions, while also adding 484 yards and 10 scores on the ground. Even after such an impressive first season as starter, the leaner, faster Fields whom Wilson is describing is partially due to a change in diet for this season, with the former five-star prospect taking on a vegan regimen.

Fields told the media he started eating vegan with his family as his father tried to lose weight. The plan was to do the diet for 28 days, but Fields liked the results and he has been avoiding all meat and dairy products ever since.

"My dad wanted to do it because he was kind of heavy, so I just tried it with him and

Projected Starter

Quarterback
1 • Justin Fields

6-3 • 228 • Jr.

Kennesaw (Ga.) Harrison

Became a Heisman Trophy finalist after throwing for 3,273 yards with 41 touchdowns and adding 10 more scores on the ground.

then it kind of turned into a family thing. First it started off as a 28-day challenge," Fields said. "It was really a cleanse. I just liked how I felt after that, and I just kept going on from there. I'm doing it now and I feel great, my body feels great and I feel faster and stronger.

"(Strength coach Mickey Marotti) was skeptical about it at first, and so was our nutritionist. I think I proved to them that I can do that and actually be able to perform even better than I was before. So I think after them seeing that with their own eyes and then they started to believe that, 'Maybe this is working for him.'"

Though only time will tell if the results from the new diet will show up in the games, Fields' new teammate, Oklahoma transfer running back Trey Sermon, has been impressed with what he has seen.

After playing under two Heisman Trophy winners with the Sooners in quarterbacks Baker Mayfield and Kyler Murray, as well as another finalist in Jalen Hurts, Sermon said he would compare Fields most to what he saw out of Murray in 2018.

"For one, they're all great quarterbacks," Sermon said. "They're all very dynamic. And I would kind of say Justin is more similar to Kyler as far as being dynamic. I mean he had great running ability as well. They all have great leadership, and that's just another thing that I have seen in Justin that I saw in those guys. They just take the field. They're confident in what they do. They do a great job of just taking charge of the team."

Even with everything Fields accomplished last season and a comparison to Murray, head coach Ryan Day said that he is not naming Fields the starting quarterback at this point in training camp.

"All positions are up right now," Day said on Oct. 2. "I know you'll laugh at me and say 'Justin Fields,' but everybody, we're all competing right now. There's no depth chart put together. Everybody's out there competing and fighting and getting reps, and we just don't know right now what's going to happen in a week, so there's no use putting a depth chart out right now."

Despite Day not making the decision, it is a safe assumption to make that the Heisman finalist and Big Ten Player of the Year will be the starting quarterback for Ohio State in 2020, but the question of who will be Fields' backup remains much more open.

The main nominees for the backup job are graduate transfer Gunnar Hoak, who came over from Kentucky last offseason, and two true freshmen in Jack Miller and C.J. Stroud. None of the three candidates has lost his black stripe – despite Hoak having a year of extra experience on the first-year signal callers – and there is no clear indication of who currently has an advantage in the battle.

But despite having a very solid No. 1 this season in Fields, Day knows that it is important to have the backup quarterbacks ready, especially in a season when a positive COVID case will take a player out for a minimum of 21 days.



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

AN EYE ON THE FUTURE – The battle to be Justin Fields' backup at quarterback will be a key storyline this fall, with fifth-year senior Gunnar Hoak (pictured) battling true freshmen Jack Miller and C.J. Stroud.

"I think all three of those guys, C.J., Jack and Gunnar, have done a really good job of picking up the offense since they've been here, and they're going to have to be ready to go," Day said. "This year, you have to have depth at every position, and that's a very important area where we have to make sure that those guys are ready. They're one snap away, they're one day away from being in that first game."

Hoak did not see much time for Ohio State in 2019, playing in just five games, but he made the most of his opportunities, completing all six of his pass attempts for 104 yards and a touchdown, with 61 of those yards coming on a connection with Jameson Williams. Hoak's 300.6 efficiency rating was the best on the team.

Miller comes to Ohio State as a four-star prospect out of Scottsdale (Ariz.) Chaparral after throwing for 9,440 yards and 115 touchdowns in four years as a starter. His 247Sports recruit ranking dropped in his final season due to injuries that allowed him to play only seven games his senior season, but he was also one of Ohio State's earliest commits of the class, committing to the Buckeyes on July 1, 2018.

Stroud's recruitment was almost the reverse of Miller's, with the prospect out of Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., ranking as low as No. 860 on Feb. 28, 2019, before impressing at camps and in his final season, climbing up to No. 42 and finishing as a high four-star commit for the Buckeyes.

While at Rancho Cucamonga, Stroud finished his senior campaign with 3,878 passing yards and 47 touchdowns to just nine interceptions, completing 65.9 percent of his passes. Both Miller and Stroud enrolled early but had

a lot of their spring practices wiped out due to COVID-19.

Still, Fields said both have impressed during practices, especially with how much they are willing to listen and learn from him, Day and quarterbacks coach Corey Dennis, who takes over this season for Mike Yurcich.

"I think those guys are really hard workers, they're smart and they really just want to get better just from being around them," Fields said. "They're open to me talking to them and Coach Dennis talking to them, so the biggest thing I see with C.J. and Jack are just their urge to get better and their urge to learn."

"They're both doing awesome, both fast learners and they're both, of course, talented. I mean, if they weren't talented, they wouldn't be here at Ohio State. They both can sling the ball and they're both very athletic, so I think they're doing pretty well."

Bringing in depth to the position is a trio of walk-ons in J.P. Andrade, Jagger LaRoe and Danny Vanatsky, all of whom are third-year sophomores and each of whom had his black stripe removed last season. LaRoe came to the Buckeyes as a transfer from Texas A&M, while Andrade arrived at Ohio State from La Verne (Calif.) Bonita and Vanatsky from Cincinnati Christian Academy.

Ohio State does not have a question mark at quarterback this season, but it does have answers to figure out about who will be the quarterback of the future once Fields departs from the team, likely after this season. With COVID-19 and the potential of injury concerns in play, Day, Dennis and Co. are likely to want an answer to that question sooner rather than later as they move through 2020.

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Teague-Sermon Battle Key In Running Backs Room

By WYATT CROSHER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Aside from quarterback, the running backs room was likely the most straightforward position on Ohio State's roster both heading into and following the 2019 season.

One player – J.K. Dobbins – was the clear starter to begin the year and never looked close to losing his grasp on the position following a 2,000-yard rushing campaign and a top-six finish in the Heisman Trophy race.

But, despite Dobbins' dominance last season, then-redshirt freshman Master Teague found a way to make an impact, largely thanks to the Buckeyes blowing out the vast majority of teams on their schedule and it was assumed he would ascend to the starter's role this season.

In those blowouts, Ohio State was running down the clock with Teague, but he was not just in there wasting time, rushing for 789 yards and four scores with an impressive 5.8 yards per carry despite defenses all but knowing that he would be running on almost every play.

Teague said he learned a lot from working under Dobbins last season but knows that he still has a lot to improve heading into 2020.

"It was good to see an elite back ahead of me and how he worked and how he studied the game and how he just came to work every day, a good example for me," Teague said in a Zoom call with the media on Oct. 6. "But definitely I think this year I feel like I'm going to be a way better player, because also last year I didn't feel like I was my full self as a running back, I don't think, even though I did decent."

With Dobbins departing a year early for the 2020 NFL draft, the starting running back job seemed all but Teague's to lose. But then, in spring practice prior to COVID-19 shutting it all down, Teague suffered an Achilles injury that put the entire position's depth into question.

Fortunately for Ohio State, a talented running back by the name of Trey Sermon announced he would be entering the transfer portal after three years at Oklahoma, and on March 22, Sermon officially transferred over to the Buckeyes as a graduate transfer, making him immediately eligible for the next season.

"I just fell in love with the coaches that are here," Sermon said on choosing Ohio State as his transfer destination. "It's a great coaching staff and just great players here that I've known throughout the recruiting world, and I just felt like it would be the best opportunity for me. This is a big-time program, and there's always great running backs coming through here such as J.K. and (Ezekiel Elliott). So it was a good opportunity once I found out that there was an opening here, and I just wanted to take advantage of it and be a part of this team."

Sermon (6-1, 215) had a successful three seasons with the Sooners, rushing for 2,076 yards and 22 scores on 6.1 yards per carry, but he was never able to be the primary back, with his closest effort coming in 2018, a year in which he finished with 947 yards and 13 touchdowns.

Injuries – specifically a knee injury that cost him the end of his 2019 season – and a crowded backfield stopped Sermon from



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

DIDN'T SKIP A BEAT – Though he suffered an Achilles injury during spring practice, sophomore Master Teague is back to full strength and fighting with Oklahoma transfer Trey Sermon to be the starting running back.

being a workhorse under head coach Lincoln Riley, but it wasn't due to his talent, according to Ohio State running backs coach Tony Alford, who loved what he saw from Sermon on film.

"We studied all of it, and we'd be lying if we said we didn't" Alford said. "We studied all of it from his freshman year all the way through to his injury. We saw a guy that we thought was tough, we saw a guy that we thought had the ability to make plays, and he did. He made some here in the 'Shoe years back. But the kid consistently, when he was in, he made plays."

"I knew him because I recruited him, but from his college days we talked to a lot of the guys from Oklahoma and they had nothing but rave reviews about him and the way he prepared. Team guy, his work ethic was impeccable. So all the things that we were looking for to fit our room, he showed."

That game in Ohio Stadium was Sermon's second game of his collegiate career, a Sept. 9, 2017 matchup between Ohio State and Oklahoma. The Buckeyes fell 31-16, and Sermon made an impact, with the true freshman scoring on a 10-yard pass from quarterback Baker Mayfield to put the Sooners up 24-13, a lead they would not give up.

Sermon ran 17 times for 62 yards and caught three passes for 23 yards and a score in the game, and he said he had flashbacks of that game when he made his first appearance back in Ohio Stadium, this time for a practice while wearing scarlet and gray.

In his time with the Buckeyes, Sermon has already garnered praise from his quarterback, junior Justin Fields.

"He's really picked up the offense quickly," Fields said. "He's determined. He's a hard worker. He's a smart, smart learner. He's just everything you would want in player."

The senior tailback came to Ohio State with the hopes of becoming a starter on a title-contending team, but Teague is not ready to relinquish the job entirely as he used the extended offseason to recover

from his injury. Alford credited Teague's mind-set and desire as main factors in his quick recovery.

"Just his attitude about it. He's so into his faith and never wavered in his belief system that he'd be fine and be back, and just the way he attacked it," Alford said. "When everybody else decided to go home, away from Columbus, he, on the other hand, decided to stay here, stay put, put himself in his one-bedroom apartment and just went to work and never complained. Just whatever he could do plus some was his attitude. It doesn't shock me though. Master's the type of young guy that he will completely immerse himself into whatever he's doing, and so we expected nothing different with this rehab."

Teague echoed what his coach said about the recovery while also adding that he thinks going through this injury, and the road back from it, will ultimately make him a better player in the long run.

"I just had to be disciplined and do everything that I was told to do by the trainers and the staff here in order to get right, so I worked hard in my apartment and woke up every morning and did my training, did my treatment," Teague said. "It was definitely another chance for me just to grow as a person, as a man, as a player and continue to build discipline in my life to help me with certain things down the road."

Alford said back on Oct. 6 that if Ohio State were playing the next day, Teague (5-11, 225) would be able to play. But the third-year sophomore took it a step further when asked what his timetable would have been if the season started on Sept. 5 as initially planned.

"I definitely would have been good," Teague said. "I think I would have been 100 percent."

Teague may have had a strong showing overall in 2019, but his final game, a seven-carry, nine-yard outing in the College Football Playoff semifinal against Clemson, did not sit right with the former four-star recruit out of Murfreesboro

(Tenn.) Blackman.

"That definitely wasn't a performance that I want to have," Teague said. "It's something that I've thought about and want to make sure that I display that I can make those plays, I can make big plays in those heated games like that. In the big games I can still contribute and make a difference, so definitely that's one of the things that I have thought about, and I feel like I'll definitely do better with that this year."

On the other side of the battle, Sermon said he is fully recovered from his knee injury and comes into the 2020 season in a state of health he has not seen during his four years at the college level, while also applauding many of his fellow backs in helping him develop.

"This is the best I've ever felt in my entire career," Sermon said. "Just to be in the room with guys like Master, Steele (Chambers), Xavier (Johnson), just all great guys and we come in and compete every day."

Chambers (6-1, 220) appeared to be set for the largest increase in his role following the Teague injury, but even without a starting role likely to open up, the redshirt freshman has an opportunity to make an impact in the same sort of way Teague did in 2019.

In four games as a redshirt last season, Chambers finished with 19 carries for 135 yards and a touchdown, ending his first year with a higher yards per carry (7.1) than both Dobbins (6.7) and Teague (5.8), though it was in a significantly smaller sample size.

"All the attention's being garnered toward Trey, of course, being new, and Master, but Steele Chambers has also had a really good growth spurt as far as his maturity in our offense," Alford said. "He's grown up a lot and he's continued to make plays. He's big, so he's another bigger-bodied guy and he's long. He's a perfectionist by nature, which is great but also can be harmful at times, too, if it's not going exactly the way he wants it to go. But he's done well, and he's a guy that I'll be comfortable putting him in the game as well."

Also mentioned by Sermon was Johnson (6-2, 215), a former walk-on entering his third season with the team. Johnson had previously swapped from running back to wide receiver as Ohio State tried to utilize his ability as both a rusher and a receiver, but the third-year sophomore is starting to make a real impact with the current tailback unit.

Alford said that people absolutely should be on the lookout for Johnson and that he has been one of the more vocal members of the running backs room this season. He also said that, while consistent playing time may not be in the cards in 2020, he is developing very well and is making the right strides toward eventually finding his role.

"He's been at receiver, came to running back, went back to receiver. Now he's back at running back," Alford said. "He's gaining weight. I think he's about 215 pounds give or take. But he's another guy who understands the routes and how to run the routes and where he fits in the patterns and continues to impress our entire staff with just the way he comes to work every single day, and he's done a nice job. Now where that will go as far as

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: RUNNING BACKS

Projected Starters

Running Back
8 • **Trey Sermon**

6-1 • 215 • Sr.

Marietta (Ga.) Sprayberry

Amassed 2,076 rushing yards and 22 rushing touchdowns in three seasons at Oklahoma.

Running Back
33 • **Master Teague**

5-11 • 225 • So.

Murfreesboro (Tenn.) Blackman

Ran for 789 yards and four touchdowns on 135 carries in a backup role for the Buckeyes in 2019.

reps and things like that, time will tell, but he's done a nice job. I'm very pleased with him, and I love the kid. He's an extremely mature kid and takes care of his business, and so I'm excited about the prospects for X."

Behind Dobbins, Teague and Fields in carries last season was true freshman Marcus Crowley, who rushed the ball 25 times for 237 yards and a touchdown, with his 9.5 yards per carry finishing as the best on the team aside from Amari McMahon, who ran the ball once for 10 yards.

Crowley's numbers likely would have been even stronger if it had not been for a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee during a Nov. 9 game against Maryland that cost the former four-star prospect out of Jacksonville (Fla.) Trinity the remainder of the season.

With almost a full year going by since Crowley's injury ahead of Ohio State's Oct. 24 season opener against Nebraska, it had appeared that the 6-1, 205-pound back would have enough time to fully recover and be a more consistent part of the offense, but after a step back in his recovery, that seems to be up in the air.

"We did have a minor setback with him, but he's coming back strong now," Alford said. "When he'll be back? I don't know that. I'm not a doctor. That's up to our training staff. I really don't know when he'll be back, but I do know he's coming back, incrementally coming back a little bit more every single day. But he's fine, mentally he's fine. He understands where he's at, and it is what it is.

"Obviously it's a setback, but you can sit and sulk if you want, but it is what it is. This is the hand that we're dealt with and we make the best of it and we get ourselves prepared to play when we can and do as much as you possibly can."

Another running back entering the fray for Ohio State this year is freshman Miyan Williams, a three-star prospect out of Cincinnati Winton Woods. A late addition to the 2019 class, Williams (5-8, 227) has already lost his black stripe after impressing early on in training camp.

Alford likes what the shorter, stockier Williams brings to the running backs room, even joking that he is "about 2½ feet tall" compared to some of the other tailbacks in the room. But Alford was not joking when he talked about just how much he has liked what he's seen early on from one of his youngest players.

"Miyan is tough," Alford said. "I mean he will put his face on you. He's a high-collision guy. He doesn't mind contact, runs hard. One of the things with him is he's smaller in stature, an extremely, extremely strong kid. But when he gets up into the line of scrimmage, in the holes they'll lose him. They can lose sight of him behind all those bigger bodies. And people will laugh and say, 'That's cliché, that's not real,' but it's extremely real because they can't find you.

"And so I've been impressed with him. It took him a little bit longer to understand the playbook and just how fast things go in the college game and the magnitude of the

playbook and how many things there are to know. And not just know on the periphery, but really know.

"He's come a long way in the past week and a half, week or so," Alford continued on Oct. 6. "He's starting to really understand it more, and so I'm pleased with him and where he's going. He wants to be a good player and do well, so he's coming along, and I'm pleased we have him here."

Rounding out the room is junior Mitch Rossi (6-0, 245), who had a catch for 8 yards last season and has gone back and forth between running back and tight end, as well as sophomore Robert Cope (5-9, 198), who saw action twice in 2019 in Ohio State's games against Rutgers and Maryland.

With a lot of depth – and no surefire starter – in the backfield for the Buckeyes this season, there are some question marks when it comes to how exactly it will look, especially when comparing it to what Dobbins did in 2019. But Alford said there is a clear characteristic he will be looking for out of any running back who expects to see playing time for Ohio State this season.

"Consistency. It's sheer consistency of what you're doing. You can't be on that roller coaster and the highs and lows," Alford said. "Obviously you have to be able to make plays, but they all are capable of making plays or they wouldn't be here. But your consistency level of making the plays when the opportunity presents itself and then obviously making a play when maybe something isn't there. Consistency of knowing what to do, when to do it, and then performing that duty."

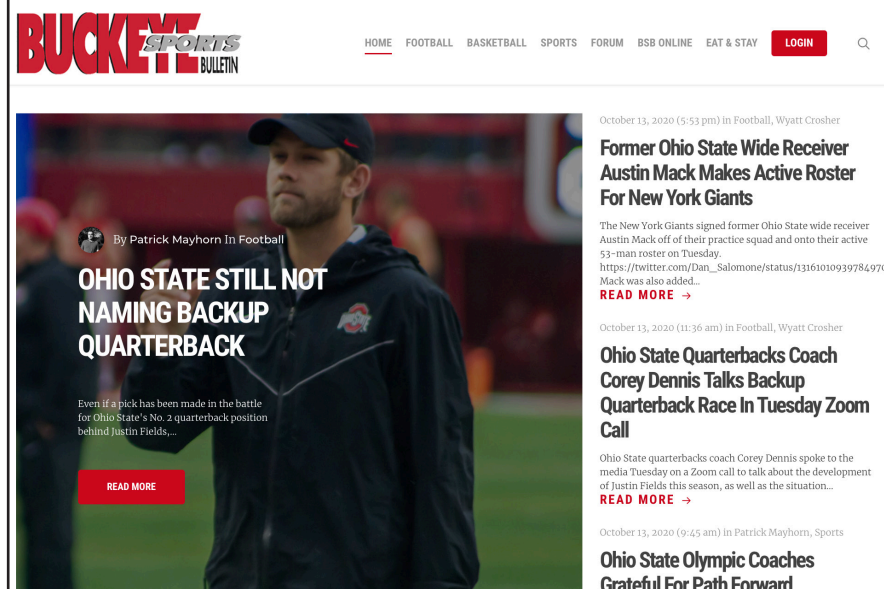
Back on Sept. 25, offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson said he expected a "50-50" split in carries between Teague and Sermon as Ohio State starts its season. Whether that is the split will not be decided until the Buckeyes face off against the Cornhuskers.

Regardless, this season's running backs room is more potential than surefire results compared to both last year's room, as well as many of Ohio State's previous running back rooms throughout the program's history. But head coach Ryan Day has liked what he has seen in camp and likes the amount of options that the Buckeyes have to utilize coming out of the backfield with Fields.

"We have more depth there than we've had in a long time," Day said on Oct. 2. "We're going to play depth, we've always liked to play depth. So as we get into these first couple weeks, it's a good battle. Master's the incumbent and obviously did a great job last year, and then Trey's come in and done a really good job as well. They are both really versatile, but the other guys have done a really nice job as well.

"Xavier Johnson's done a really good job. Steele Chambers and now Miyan's really getting an opportunity to play. So all five of those guys are doing a great job, and we're looking forward to getting Marcus back. So there is a lot of depth there, which is exciting, and that competition will continue."

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Young, Talented WR Room Brings Lofty Expectations

By WYATT CROSHER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The past two seasons, Ohio State has had successful passing attacks with two separate quarterbacks, both of which were equally efficient, but different in execution.

In 2018, Dwayne Haskins led the most prolific passing offense Ohio State has ever had, throwing for the majority of a total of 5,100 passing yards for the Buckeyes in 14 games – the most passing yards in the country – and doing so with a passing efficiency of 174.1, No. 3 in the country behind only Alabama (197.3) and Oklahoma (194.9).

This past season, it was Justin Fields who was getting his first season as a starter, and though Ohio State dropped in total passing yards with 3,684 total, No. 27 in the FBS, the efficiency remained strong, coming in fifth with a 180.5 rating. Both the 2018 and 2019 passing attacks also had completion percentages ranking in the top 15 in the country.

But there was also another similarity between the two offenses through the air: experience. In 2018, that experience was through Parris Campbell, Terry McLaurin and Johnnie Dixon, three fifth-year seniors who excelled under Haskins and all found themselves on NFL teams the following year.

Last year, even with three wideouts with 15 total years at Ohio State gone to the next level, the Buckeyes had three more seniors waiting in the wings: fifth-year wideout K.J. Hill and true seniors Austin Mack and Binjimen Victor. The trio combined for 19 of the offense's 48 touchdowns through the air while Hill broke the program record for receptions, finishing his collegiate career with 201.

Most seasons, losing three key members of the receiving room would lead to a down year, especially when that same room lost three the season prior. But despite only two players with more than six receptions returning from 2019, expectations are higher than ever for wide receivers coach Brian Hartline's unit heading into the shortened season.

That is because one of those two returning players with seven-plus catches, Chris Olave, led the Buckeyes with 849 yards and 12 touchdowns on 49 catches, while the other, Garrett Wilson, is a five-star prospect who finished his true freshman season with 30 catches for 432 yards and five touchdowns.

Speaking of five-stars, Ohio State has two more coming in at receiver this season: Julian Fleming and Jaxon Smith-Njigba, the former of whom was the top-rated receiver in the 2020 class and the latter of whom put up some of the most impressive high school numbers the state of Texas has ever seen.

Having two five-star commits is enough to bolster the room, but head coach Ryan Day and Hartline did not stop there. Ohio State also got two more high four-stars, both finishing in the top 100 of all recruits: Gee Scott (No. 66) and Mookie Cooper (No. 93).

All these names have put a spotlight on the wide receivers room, but Day still said they have to prove it more than through recruiting rankings and high school success.



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

AT YOUR SERVICE – Ohio State wide receivers coach Brian Hartline will call upon sophomore Jameson Williams, left, and junior Chris Olave to be leaders of a young but talented wide receivers room.

Projected Starters

Wide Receiver 2 • Chris Olave	Wide Receiver 6 • Jameson Williams	H-Back 5 • Garrett Wilson
6-1 • 188 • Jr. San Marcos (Calif.) Mission Hills	6-2 • 188 • So. St. Louis Cardinal Ritter College Prep	6-0 • 193 • So. Austin (Texas) Lake Travis
Led the team with 849 yards and 12 touchdowns, while finishing second with 49 receptions.	Finished 2019 with six receptions for 112 yards, including a 61-yard touchdown.	In his true freshman season he caught 30 passes for 432 yards and five touchdowns.

"There's certainly a lot of talent there, but those guys are going to have to step up in those areas and yes, we're going to have to play young and we're going to have to play some depth there, and that's just the way it's going to be," Day said. "That's the way it's always been. But there's a chance there. We just have to see how it goes and see how those guys can handle playing in a game situation and taking care of the little things and playing hard and strong and tough."

While the youth has been the subject of a lot of the talk, much of the pressure in the room falls on the shoulders of Olave (6-1, 188), Ohio State's top receiver in 2019. He returns this year following an off-season that was filled with the uncertainty of even having a college football season in the first place. But something that was certain was Olave's commitment to returning to Ohio State for another year, whether it would have been this season or in 2021.

"I would have come back, that's a guarantee," Olave said when asked if he would have gone to the NFL draft if the 2020 season were canceled. "I couldn't leave with that as the last play. I would have come back, but we got the season reinstated and we're ready to go."

"That" last play of Olave's sophomore

season was a play from the Clemson 23-yard line as Ohio State trailed 29-23 with 43 seconds to go in the College Football Playoff semifinal. Fields dropped back to pass, scanned the field and threw a ball into the middle of the end zone, where he expected Olave to finish his route.

Olave thought Fields elected to leave the pocket, and he started to do the second part of his route. The miscommunication led to an easy interception by Nolan Turner to seal the game and the spot in the final for the Tigers.

On Jan. 15, Day said he wasn't sure if Olave "ate solid food for about three or four days after that game. He was crushed."

More than nine months later, the play still isn't fully out of Olave's head, but he is now ready to use it as motivation to improve in 2020.

"It was tough for me, especially for me," Olave said. "I care so much about this team and this university. The first couple months was tough. I still don't think I got over it. I was going through it for like 4-5 months, especially during quarantine with all that free time. When I found myself getting bored and I was going through it, I just went to go work out. So I could find myself working out 2-3 times a day just trying to take my mind

off things and trying to play video games, hang around my brothers, hang around my family. But it was tough.

"When we got back, I just wanted to try and get better every day and try to spread that energy throughout the receiver room, try to be the best room in the nation. I don't think I've gotten over it still, and I still have that chip on my shoulder, and I want to show the world."

Wilson (6-0, 193) is a full year behind Olave, but comes into the 2020 season as the receiver with the second-most in-game experience on the roster. This season, Wilson is moving inside as a slot receiver, taking over where Hill left off.

Aside from Hill, Wilson said he has watched three-time Pro Bowl wide receiver Davante Adams of the Green Bay Packers, who has finished with at least 885 yards in each of his past five seasons, as a source of inspiration to develop his game.

"Being able to see K.J. last year, that was huge for me, and being able to learn from him, he's as good of a slot as it gets," Wilson said. "The thing with Davante Adams is he can play the inside and outside. So to be able to have that versatility, that's something that I want to be able to bring to the table."

Wilson said he is slowly adapting to the slot, which he called a "whole different

position” compared to playing outside as he is used to, but that he is getting more used to it with every practice. Hartline agrees and said that his skill set matches with all the qualities he will need to bring to the slot moving into this season.

“Having a guy that’s very dynamic inside is very important,” Hartline said. “I think a guy that’s really smart, has ability to identify space and work around linebackers, and also is tough enough to block linebackers and be able to work in space but also take the seam is really important. I think the guy inside, more than maybe any other position, may be asked to do more things.”

Along with the praise from his wide receivers coach, Wilson has garnered praise from the guy who will likely be throwing to him this year. Fields said Wilson has a very high ceiling with his talent and that he expects that the second-year wideout will be able to show it off more this season.

“Garrett’s a talented receiver,” Fields said. “I mean he might be one of the best receivers in the country. Of course he didn’t get to really play that much last year, but I think he’s going to make a big impact for us this year. He can really do everything. He has speed, he has hands, he can jump. There’s really not anything he can’t do, so just having him in the slot, it opens up our offense more because he can go in or out. He has more routes that he can run.

“Just having him there, it’s going to help us a lot on offense, and he’s becoming a leader more and more every day.”

The last pure receiver who finished with more than one reception from the year before is Jameson Williams, who came to Ohio State in the same 2019 class that featured Wilson. While not a five-star, Williams was still a top-100 player from St. Louis Cardinal Ritter College Prep (No. 82) but was not able to make quite the same impact as his classmate.

Still, Williams showed the potential to eventually be a breakout receiver for the Buckeyes when he took a routine throw from backup quarterback Gunnar Hoak and blew by every defender, running it 61 yards for a touchdown in a 76-5 rout over Miami (Ohio). On the season, Williams finished with six catches for 112 yards and that lone score.

Heading into the 2020 season, Williams is expected to earn a more sizable role and is even someone Fields specifically highlighted as a player impressing at practices thus far. Hartline also had praise for the 6-2, 188-pound receiver as Williams continues to develop the other pieces of his game that aren’t his speed.

“I think he’s trying to operate in a world of ‘What if I wasn’t that fast?’ And if you’re able to embody that approach, a really special player can come out of that,” Hartline said. “He really understands being crafty and really wanting to be some of the best ever in his position and really working that way, and again I think a lot of it, too, for him may be organizing off-the-field stuff so he’s better on the field.

“It’s just being a younger athlete and maturing into an older athlete. So he’s had a great amount of growth. He still has a ways to go, but I think he’s just not trying to rely purely on his ability to run.”

While Olave, Wilson and Williams appear set to be the three starting receivers for Ohio State this season, there will be plenty of opportunities for other wideouts to make an impact, and Hartline is not shy in allowing first-year players to get an



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

LARGER ROLE – Sophomore wide receiver Garrett Wilson has moved from the outside to the slot, where he’ll be a more prominent part of the offensive attack.

opportunity in crunch time, as he showed last season with Wilson.

“I think that anytime guys are out there playing, it’s not always just about what I think, although it’s probably the majority of it,” Hartline said. “But Coach Day and the rest of the offensive staff, Coach Wilson, will be a big part of that. But at the end of the day, the film doesn’t lie. Guys that earn it, they earn it. Nothing’s given, and we’ll keep approaching it that way. We always want the best guys on the field, but I can’t emphasize enough being able to play multiple roles and understand concepts, not just your position, will be very important this year, probably more than ever.

“Whether it be on special teams rushing a punt or holding up a punt or being a gunner now, or whether it be on offense, I think at the end of the day, a lot of the cream will rise of the crop, and you have to be able to play multiple positions, no matter where on the field.”

Fleming (6-2, 200) is the top prospect of the bunch, ranking as the No. 3 recruit overall in the 2020 class along with being the top receiver, but he is also coming from a wishbone offense in Catawissa (Pa.) Southern Columbia, an offense that did not throw as often as most modern offenses.

On the other end, Smith-Njigba (6-0, 196) put up lofty numbers out of Rockwall, Texas, finishing his senior campaign with 109 receptions for 2,132 yards and 34 touchdowns. Scott (6-3, 210) looks the readiest of the group from a purely physical viewpoint, while Cooper (5-10, 190) was highly rated for his quickness and ability out of an H-back style of position.

Cooper also has to play catch-up with the other receivers after being ruled ineligible to play in his final year of high school following a transfer to St. Louis Pattonville that he made in order to enroll at Ohio State early. But that loss of a sea-

son has not stopped Cooper from making an impression on Hartline in the early practices.

“I think Mookie is much further along than I, frankly, anticipated,” Hartline said. “He is removed from football from his senior year. He did play a lot of running back in high school, but his natural approach to receiver play – and it’s funny, we’ll do some drills sometimes and I’ll be coaching up on it, and it might not be quite right (from Cooper). But then he’ll just run out there and just do it and it’s perfect. So his natural ability to just play football and feel space (is impressive), and he does things that you really can’t even coach. So I think Mookie is doing a phenomenal job.”

These four receivers are joining a room that already has a lot of talented individuals, including some who have not yet found their way to much meaningful time thus far at Ohio State. That includes senior Jaylen Harris, who had just one catch for 5 yards in 2019. Harris possesses unique height (6-5, 215) and experience in the room as the lone senior wide receiver on the roster.

Another player who has not had his opportunity yet, but for different reasons, is sophomore Kamryn Babb. Babb (6-0, 197) has lost both of his seasons at Ohio State thus far to injury but comes into 2020 healthy, something that Hartline has loved to see in early practices.

“Kam Babb is a special individual,” Hartline said. “Anytime he’s around the team or in the room or on the field, he’s going to bring a dynamic that is special. He’s a great football player and an even better young man, and I think that we’re blessed to have him here. It’s great to see him out there, catching footballs, making plays and I’m very excited to see what his future holds.”

While not technically listed at receiver, it appears that fifth-year senior Demario

McCall (5-9, 195) will be trying to make his dent in the offense more as a pass catcher than a runner. Though his role has not been fully described by either Day or Hartline, the former top-50 prospect from North Ridgeville, Ohio, has a world of potential to add to the team.

“Coach Day always has a great plan when it comes to guys with versatile skill sets, and I think that he’s definitely one of those guys that has that,” Hartline said of McCall. “I think that from a week-to-week standpoint, how we could take advantage of those matchups that he provides will be pretty important.”

There is even more depth to this position group past McCall, with junior Elijah Gardiner (6-3, 200) looking to make more of an impact after earning just one reception for 10 yards last season. There is also a solid list of non-scholarship players in the room like Chris Booker, Marvin Davies, Austin Kutscher and Sam Wiglusz, with the latter making one catch for 11 yards in 2019.

The wide receiver position is one of the most highly anticipated pieces of what is expected to be a title-contending team at Ohio State, even without years and years of experience to show for it.

And while adding four top-100 players into an already talented room has led to concern from some that there might be too much talent in the room and too many mouths to feed, Hartline is not worried about that heading into this season.

“To me, it was always the mind-set of if I want to make more money, I’m going to surround myself with people that make more money than me. If I want to be smarter, I’m going to hang out with smarter people,” Hartline said. “So, if I want to be the best football player I can be, especially a receiver, I want to be surrounded by some of the best receivers in the country, and I think that’s been a big part of it all.”

Tight End Room As Experienced As Ever In 2020

By WYATT CROSER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Last year, BSB's preview of the tight ends opened with this sentence: "The Ohio State tight end unit is the most experienced position group on the team."

That group was led by a pair of juniors, Luke Farrell and Jake Hausmann, a fifth-year senior in Rashod Berry and sophomore Jeremy Ruckert. While Berry is gone, the Buckeyes still bring back Farrell, Hausmann and Ruckert, each with another year of experience under his belt, and it remains one of the most experienced rooms on Ohio State's roster, especially on the offensive side of the ball.

"I think the tight ends are very, very undervalued by a lot of people," said Ohio State offensive coordinator and tight ends coach Kevin Wilson. "It's a great group, it's a tremendous group. They're all older, they're more confident, they've had more time, even though it's been way, to some

degree, more time with Coach Mick's training so they're stronger, their bodies are more mature. They've really gotten strong in the blocking game. I think even Jake's had his best offseason, so it's a great group of guys."

Farrell, who comes into the season as a fifth-year senior, was the starter for the tight end room in 2019 and is expected to do the same in what could be his final year with the Buckeyes, unless he returns for another season after the NCAA granted an extra year of eligibility to fall sport student-athletes.

Listed at 6-6, 258, Farrell used his size primarily in the blocking game, bringing in just seven receptions for 119 yards and a pair of touchdowns despite leading the room in total snaps.

Most of the receiving duties went to Ruckert (6-5, 253), a high four-star recruit in the 2018 class who was expected by many to become the first major pass-catching tight end at Ohio State in years. Ruckert started to gain more of a spot in the pass

game in 2019, finishing with 14 catches for 142 yards and four touchdowns, including a highlight one-handed touchdown grab against Wisconsin in the Big Ten Championship Game.

But Farrell and the rest of the tight end unit, while clearly wanting to be a part of the offense, understand that they will do whatever it takes to win for the team, whether that means catching more passes or blocking for more runs.

When asked about trying to reach the statistical numbers that former Ohio State tight end Rickey Dudley had in 1995 – 37 receptions, 575 yards and seven touchdowns – Farrell said that the unit is not concerned in reaching any specific milestones when it comes to receiving totals.

"Among the tight end unit, we don't really talk about numbers like that," Farrell said. "We're obviously always lobbying to get the tight end the ball, no matter who it is. Can we get that special play in that week to give us a chance to get that extra opportunity? But I haven't talked to those guys about numbers like that."

Ruckert also is not glued in to having a more impressive stat line in 2020, instead hoping to simply become a better player in whatever areas he still must grow in as he becomes more of a leader for the group.

"I just want to keep improving as an all-around tight end," Ruckert said. "I've gotten a lot stronger this offseason, so hopefully that will be put on display this year in my blocking and everything like that. I really just want to step up in all three aspects like that."

Past the top blocking and top receiving tight end in the unit last season is Hausmann (6-4, 255), who, like Farrell, enters his redshirt senior season hoping to make an impact. But unlike Farrell, Hausmann has had to take more of a back seat in the room for much of his time with the Buckeyes.

Even last season, where Hausmann found the most time on the field yet, he finished with 235 offensive snaps, well below that of Farrell (459 snaps) and Ruckert (404) while putting up less in the receiving game, catching just two passes for 13 yards and a touchdown.

But Farrell has liked what he has seen from Hausmann this year, while also saying that the tight end room is so strong this year that it should not skip a beat regardless of who is on the field.

"He's been great," Farrell said. "I think the whole unit has been coming along, but especially, the past two seasons really, he's made huge improvements in every aspect of his game and we've really seen that since last season. He just didn't get as many opportunities to show that on game day. We're just functioning so smoothly as a unit, it doesn't matter who's in there. They'll get the job done, and he definitely contributes to that, no question."

Beyond Farrell, Hausmann and Ruckert, the tight end room has much less experience, as well as one player who has just switched over to the position. Cade Stover, a four-star linebacker recruit in the 2019 class who played at both linebacker and defensive end for Ohio State last season, has made the switch over to tight end this offseason.

At 6-4, 255 and as a redshirt freshman,

Projected Starter

Tight End
89 • Luke Farrell
6-6 • 258 • 5th-Sr.
Perry, Ohio

Farrell finished the 2019 season with seven catches for 119 yards and two touchdowns, with his 17.0 yards per catch being good for third best on the team.

Stover has the time and build to develop in the position, and Hausmann has been impressed so far by the Mansfield (Ohio) Lexington product in the early stages.

"He's doing great," Hausmann said. "He's a super athletic guy. He can go up and get the ball. It's hard to switch positions, but I think he's been doing a really great job. Obviously it's not going to be perfect, but he's as athletic of a guy as any tight end can be. He's just physical and strong as you need him to be. He's really good at the point of attack. He can go up and get the ball. I think he's been doing a great job so far."

Also in the tight end room is true freshman Joe Royer, a three-star prospect from Cincinnati Elder who is listed at 6-5, 240, 15 pounds heavier than the weight listed on his 247Sports recruiting page. There are also a pair of walk-ons in graduate transfer Corey Rau, who is at Ohio State from SMU, as well as freshman Patrick Gurd from New Albany, Ohio.

This year's tight end room offers much of the same that last year's did: experience throughout the room with the potential to help Ohio State both in the blocking game and through the air.

A lot of that has to do with bringing back three of the four major contributors from last year's group, which also leads Farrell to heighten the goals to strive for heading into this season, both as a unit and for the team as a whole.

"Obviously, being at Ohio State, we have high expectations every year, and I think we can, as an offense, be one of the most prolific offenses we've seen around here, if not in college football," Farrell said. "We have high expectations for the offense and for the team. And then I just know with those expectations, my individual stuff will come. I don't have to really necessarily worry about that. If we're successful as an offense, I'll be successful as an individual."

It remains to be seen just how Ohio State will implement tight ends in the offense, especially with one of the most talented receiving corps the program has had in recent memory. But Wilson has loved what he's seen from this group so far through training camp and is excited to see what his veteran unit will bring to the table in 2020.

"I just think you're going to see them playing faster," Wilson said. "We haven't had a ton of touches sometimes. It's been a strong unit, and it's got a chance to be the best we've had since I've been here this year."

"They've gotten to a point where they understand me, they understand us, they understand the offense. They've grown. They have a chance to be special players for us this year."



Luke Farrell

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Pandemic Led Ruckert To Unconventional Workouts

By ANDREW LIND
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When Ohio State shut down the Woody Hayes Athletic Center and sent the football team home amid the coronavirus pandemic in mid-March, players were forced to find creative ways to stay in shape.

Sophomore offensive lineman Matthew Jones lifted milk jugs filled with dirt and sand that acted as dumbbells; sophomore right tackle Nicholas Petit-Frere did pull-ups on the gutter outside of his home, though he pulled the gutter down, which didn't go over well with his mother; and junior tight end Jeremy Ruckert built a squat rack out of wood with his father.

Ruckert was initially working out with friends in his hometown of Lindenhurst, N.Y. But as the pandemic worsened, his parents asked him to stay home.

"Once we were back home in March, it kind of got really bad where I'm from on Long Island," Ruckert said during a teleconference on Sept. 25. "That was one of the worst spots with coronavirus. I was working out with one of my buddies in his garage, but once it started to really heat up, my parents thought it would be best for me not to really go out as much anymore."

Ruckert and his father, Bill, then made several trips to the local Home Depot, where they gathered supplies. Then the two watched do-it-yourself videos on YouTube in order to build the squat rack.

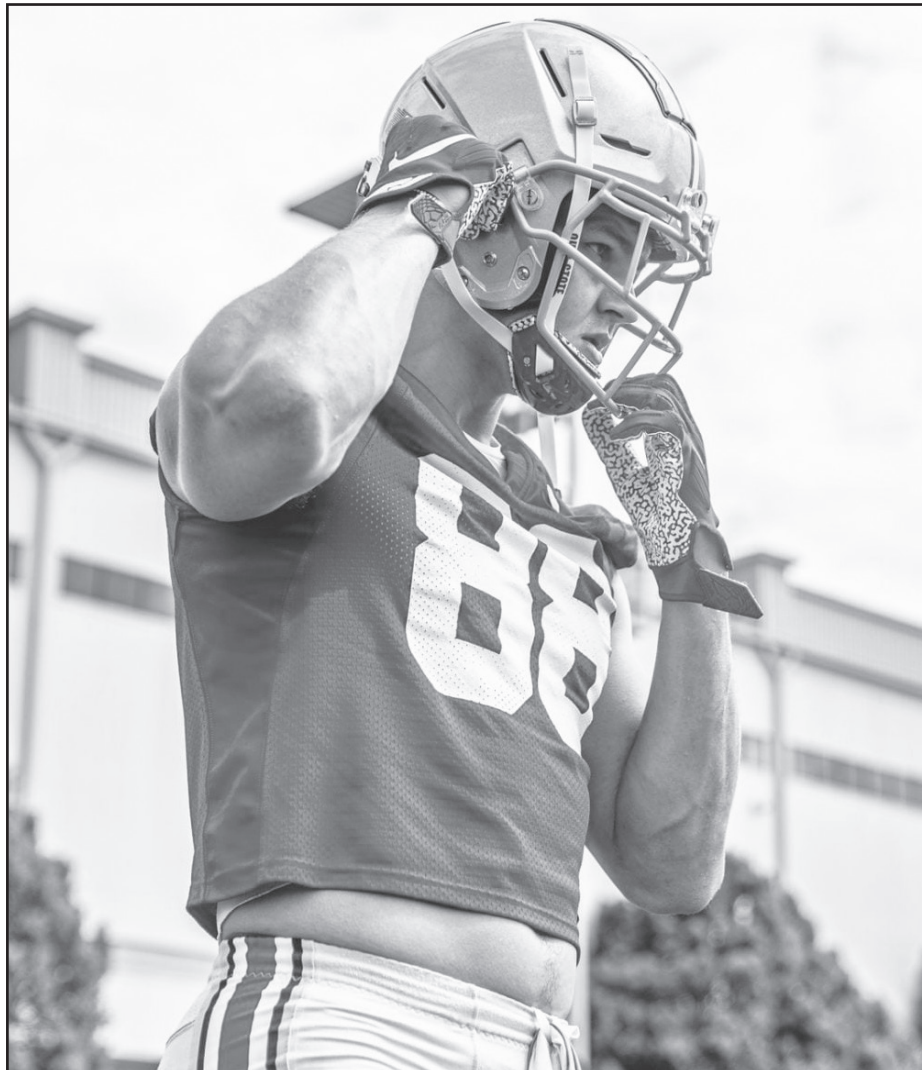
"I definitely consider myself a creative guy," Ruckert said. "I love to draw, I love art and building things, so I would say that was definitely my type of thing. The actual squat rack only took us a day, but we kept adding some little knicks and knacks to it like cable rows and stuff. We still use it."

"I went home a couple weeks ago and it's still up and strong. I'll have that for the rest of my life, and I can go back and remember these times. Although it was tough not being around the guys, it was cool to get back and spend the time with the family."

Ruckert – who caught 14 passes for 142 yards and four touchdowns last season, including a spectacular one-handed reception for a score in the Big Ten championship win over Wisconsin – also filled an old backpack with rocks to do lunges.

"It really was something that not only was it good for me to keep getting workouts in and be safe, but it was cool to be able to do that with my dad and my brothers and get to spend some family time that normally we wouldn't really get," Ruckert said. "It was really cool."

While the rest of the student body remained away from campus, players



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS
CREATIVE WORKOUTS – Ohio State junior tight end Jeremy Ruckert built a squat rack in his garage with his father, Bill, in order to work out at home during the pandemic.

returned to Columbus in June for voluntary workouts. And even with limited access to the facilities and strict guidelines, the Buckeyes remained focused on staying in shape for the season.

So when the Big Ten announced on Aug. 11 that it was postponing fall sports until the spring, Ruckert and his teammates were devastated.

"Just all the work we put in this whole time, going home, doing all the workouts at home and staying on track as a team, and then just to be told that you don't get the chance to go out there and play was heartbreaking," Ruckert said, noting his excitement when the conference reversed course on Sept. 16. "But we didn't skip a beat. We got back to work and we kept working."

Ohio State assistant director of sports performance Mickey Marotti, who oversaw the Buckeyes' workouts at home and

in the facility this offseason, appreciated the players' response to the pandemic and how they made the best out of an unexpected and unprecedented situation.

"It's a test every day of who we are," Marotti said in May. "It's a test of our program's culture, of our strength and

conditioning program's culture. It's a test of what our team is and how accountable they are to each other."

Considering he's entering his third year with the program, this offseason was especially critical for Ruckert's development. And now that the season is quickly approaching – and for real, this time – he's ready to take another step forward.

"It's a big year," Ruckert said. "My main goal is to do whatever we can do to help win the national championship and beat Nebraska (on Oct. 24)."

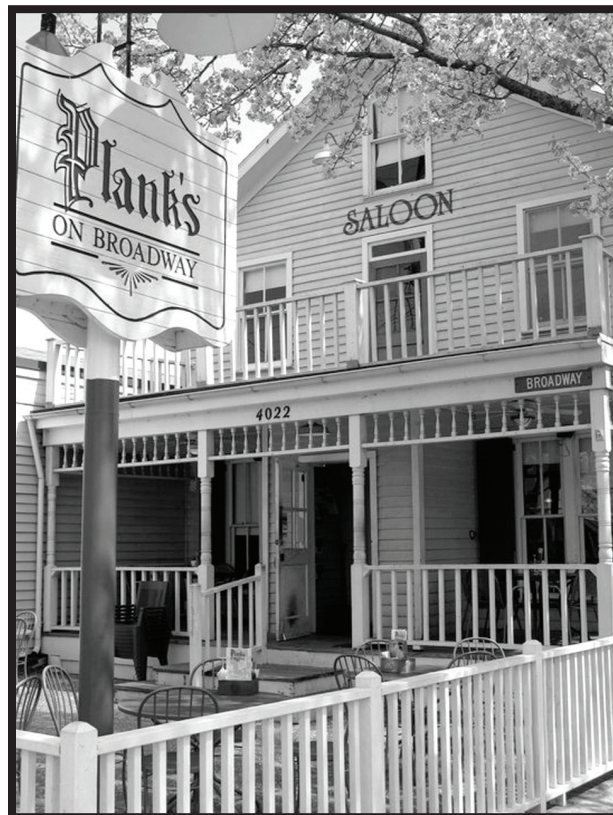
"As for my personal goals, I feel like I've gotten a lot stronger this offseason. So hopefully, that will be put on display this year, in my blocking and everything like that. I really just want to step it up all in all three aspects."

In addition to Ruckert, Ohio State returns a pair of tight ends who saw action last fall in starter Luke Farrell and fifth-year senior Jake Hausmann. Offensive coordinator and tight ends coach Kevin Wilson believes the group has the experience and the talent to be a prominent part of the Buckeyes' attack this season.

"We challenged our (tight ends), and I think we did a great job during those first three practices in spring of really rolling and it's continued," Wilson said. "It's been a little different because we haven't been in pads, but it's playing faster. They're older, they're more confident and their bodies are more mature. I just think you're going to see them playing faster."

How much production Ohio State will actually get from the tight ends remains to be seen, especially because an increase in targets for the position is an annual topic of conversation during fall camp. But if nothing else, Ruckert's creativity and hard work in the offseason have him ready to catch anything thrown his way.

"We always joke around about how we're just blocking tight ends here," Ruckert said back in March. "But we know our offense is open and Justin (Fields) trusts us a lot, so whatever our game plan is for that week, we will try a lot of new things and see how it goes."



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Trio Of Returning Starters Bolsters Buckeyes' O-Line

By WYATT CROSHER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State was potentially facing a major weakness on the offensive side of the ball heading into the 2020 season with two of its starters on the 2019 offensive line – tackle Branden Bowen and guard Jonah Jackson – being fifth-year seniors and the other three starters – guard Wyatt Davis, tackle Thayer Munford and center Josh Myers, each being eligible for the 2020 NFL draft.

But, although the departures of Bowen and Jackson were inevitable, the Buckeyes received great news prior to their Fiesta Bowl matchup against Clemson when Davis, Munford and Myers all said they would be returning to Ohio State for their respective junior, senior and junior seasons.

“I want her to be proud of her son,” Munford said on Dec. 26, referring to a promise he had made to his mother to obtain his undergraduate degree. “I know she’s proud of me right now, but I want to make sure she’s proud of her son and get that degree.”

Davis did submit paperwork for the NFL draft, but strictly to gain feedback before returning.

“Yes, I did (submit draft feedback paperwork), but I want to put out there that I’m returning next year,” Davis also said on Dec. 26. “I haven’t received (feedback) yet. I’m still waiting on it just to see it. But, yes sir, I’m coming back.”

With three starters returning from an offensive line that was a finalist for the Joe Moore Award, given to the best line in the country, Ohio State appears to have a big strength up front for quarterback Justin Fields and running backs Trey Sermon, Master Teague and Co.

Davis is projected as a likely first-round pick for the 2021 NFL draft and nearly changed his mind on returning for his junior campaign following the Big Ten’s initial decision to postpone the football season for the rest of 2020.

On Sept. 11, Davis announced he would

Projected Starters

<p>Left Tackle 75 • Thayer Munford 6-6 • 315 • Sr. Massillon (Ohio) Washington</p> <p>Started in all 14 games last season and in 27 of 28 games over the past two years for the Buckeyes while also earning a second-team All-Big Ten spot.</p>	<p>Center 71 • Josh Myers 6-5 • 312 • Jr. Miamisburg (Ohio)</p> <p>Became a second-team All-Big Ten member by the media and third team by the coaches after playing in 925 total snaps, tied for the most in 2019 with former guard Jonah Jackson.</p>	<p>Right Tackle 78 • Nicholas Petit-Frere 6-5 • 305 • So. Tampa (Fla.) Berkeley Prep</p> <p>Found time in all 14 games last season for Ohio State, totalling 240 snaps, and is a two-time OSU Scholar Athlete and a one-time Academic All-Big Ten member.</p>
<p>Left Guard 76 • Harry Miller 6-4 • 315 • So. Buford, Ga.</p> <p>Played in 13 games as a true freshman at Ohio State, appearing in a total of 181 offensive snaps for the Buckeyes in 2019.</p>	<p>Right Guard 52 • Wyatt Davis 6-4 • 315 • Jr. Bellflower (Calif.) St. John Bosco</p> <p>Was a consensus All-American and a first-team All-Big Ten member in 2019, and comes into this season as a preseason All-American.</p>	

be opting out of this season to prepare for the draft, citing the uncertainty of the upcoming season as the major factor in his departure.

“My family and I were waiting to hear any good news that there would be a possibility to play in the fall,” Davis told Yahoo Sports’ Pete Thamel. “As the weeks went on, after the initial cancellation, the news didn’t seem in favor that we would have an opportunity to play for a national championship if there was a season. At this point, my family and I made the decision that it would be my best decision to take the next step.”

But after the Big Ten reversed course the morning of Sept. 16, Davis announced he would be attempting to opt back in and return to Ohio State this season, an attempt that would ultimately get accepted by the NCAA in the following days.

All three returning starters were also named to the Outland Trophy watch list, which honors the nation’s best offensive lineman or interior defensive lineman, while Davis was also honored as a preseason All-American after earning first-team All-America honors a season ago.

Munford and Myers both stayed strong in their commitments to play out this season. Both also have strong résumés for their

future draft stock in their respective collegiate careers after helping Ohio State have the No. 3 scoring offense (46.9 points per game), No. 5 rushing offense (266.8 yards per game) and No. 4 total offense (529.9 yards per game).

Myers will be entering his second season as the team’s starting center and said in the first media availability for Ohio State players since spring practices were shut down due to COVID-19 that this upcoming season meant a great deal to him and that he desperately wanted it to happen.

“I would do anything really to play this season,” Myers said. “I don’t know what I would do without football, to be honest with you. But with that would come sacrifices, and personally, I’m also willing to make those sacrifices.”

Davis and Myers were also named two of the seven team captains for Ohio State this season and may be expected to be leaders for the two newcomers on the starting offensive line. Those two new starters are not confirmed but are expected to be Harry Miller at left guard and Nicholas Petit-Frere at right tackle.

Miller and Petit-Frere are a pair of five-star recruits who would be first-year starters if they did indeed win the respective jobs, but both did see their fair share of action this past season. While the five starters each had 831 snaps or more in 2019, Petit-Frere came in sixth on the line with 240 snaps and Miller seventh with 181.

Last year, Miller was the backup center for Myers, the position he was recruited for out of Buford, Ga. But with a potential move to guard, offensive line coach Greg Studrawa liked what he saw from the third-year sophomore back in April.

“Harry did a great job through the spring in the short time,” Studrawa said. “He had three practices and looked really, really good.”

Petit-Frere is the highest-rated offensive line commit and the No. 9-rated commit in the modern recruiting era (since 2000) for Ohio State but has not yet been able to live up to the lofty expectations with veteran starters ahead of him on the depth chart.

“This is Nick’s time,” Studrawa said. “He’s finally got his weight up to where it needs to be. He’s finally got his strength up to where it needs to be. And he’s finally learned, inside and out, what we’re doing on the offense. It’s his time to shine.”

Petit-Frere’s main competition will be coming from another highly rated prospect, a true freshman in five-star Paris Johnson out of Cincinnati Princeton. Johnson, who

already lost his black stripe, will have to make up for the experience Petit-Frere possesses but could make it interesting with his clear raw talent.

Another true freshman, four-star Luke Wypler, is likely the backup for Myers as they enter the season, though Ohio State has moved over non-center linemen to play the position multiple times in the past including Pat Elflein, Michael Jordan and Billy Price in the past decade.

At tackle, 6-8, 360-pound sophomore Dawand Jones came into last season as a large freshman who could be molded into an eventual role player, but he impressed early on, showing development that could lead to playing time sooner rather than later, according to head coach Ryan Day.

“Dawand’s done some really good things for us this year,” Day said. “He’s somebody that has a lot of athletic ability and has some good versatility. So we’ve moved him around a little bit, and he’s somebody that we hope can play and get on the field for us this year.”

Redshirt freshman Enokk Vimahi, a late addition to Ohio State’s 2019 class as a four-star guard out of Kahuku, Hawaii, should give more depth to the Buckeyes, as should fifth-year senior Gavin Cupp and sophomore Matthew Jones, with all three of those players seeing action on the offense this past season.

There’s plenty more depth past them, with sophomore Max Wray seeing some special teams action in 2019 and another true freshman in guard Josh Fryar already shedding his black stripe. Other first-year players on the line – guard Jakob James and tackles Trey Leroux and Grant Toutant – are also hoping to make an impact, potentially on special teams.

Redshirt freshmen Zach Stevenson, Ryan Smith and Ryan Jacoby; sophomores Chris Kuhn and Jack Jamieson; and fifth-year senior Nathan Brock all bring more experience to the room and could find some time late in games as well as during special teams scenarios.

On the whole, Ohio State’s offensive line comes into 2020 as one of the strongest pieces of one of the strongest offenses, on paper, in college football, and it has three players it could have easily lost after its playoff run a season ago.

Instead, the line is mostly intact, with Studrawa having to fill out his line with what is expected to be a pair of five-stars who both had strong experience in 2019. Now, with a national title in their sights, the Buckeyes might also have a line capable of being the best in the country.

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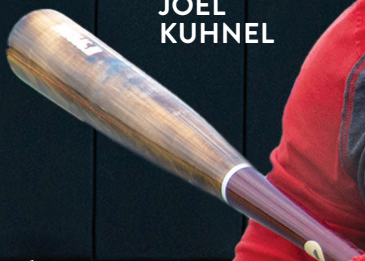
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Reload Necessary At Front And Back Of Defense

By CRAIG MERZ
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The coaching fraternity has this secret handbook, or so it seems, that has a section for clichés to fit all situations. One of those word phrases could apply to the 2020 Ohio State defense as the Buckeyes go about replacing star talent that is now in the NFL: “You coach who you have, not who you don’t.”

OSU must move past the dominant play last season of defensive end Chase Young, which led him to be a finalist for the Heisman Trophy before being the second overall pick to the Washington Football Team in this year’s draft.

To that point, the focus has shifted to developing the next group of stars, and there will be no lack of candidates or opportunities.

There are only four returning starters for the stop troops in graduate senior Jonathon Cooper, senior linebackers Tuf Borland and Pete Werner, and fourth-year junior cornerback/cornerstone Shaun Wade.

That doesn’t mean the Buckeyes are lacking experience, because many players saw a fair amount of time on the field due to the numerous blowouts last season along with the usual fill-in roles for injured teammates.

Still, the Buckeyes have some question marks and position battles heading into the season opener Oct. 24 vs. Nebraska.

All eyes are going to be on the secondary, where cornerbacks Damon Arnette (Las Vegas Raiders) and 2019 All-American Jeff Okudah (Detroit Lions) as well as safety Jordan Fuller (Los Angeles Rams) left for the NFL.

In addition to finding replacements on the back end, a new but familiar face rejoined the coaching staff when Kerry Coombs returned for his second stint (2014-17) after two seasons as an assistant under former Buckeye great Mike Vrabel for the Tennessee Titans. Coombs is the defensive coordinator and secondary coach.

He looks forward to the challenge of finding replacements for a defense that ranked first nationally in pass defense (156.0 yards/game) and total defense (259.7 yards/game) and fourth in scoring defense (13.7 points).

“We’ve got a lot of work to do, but the kids have been playing extremely hard,” Coombs said. “They are working and learning. It is a work in progress. I believe they’re going to get there.”

The good news is Wade, a preseason All-American, twice decided to stick with the Buckeyes and will anchor the secondary with the hope of following Okudah and Arnette as a first-round pick.

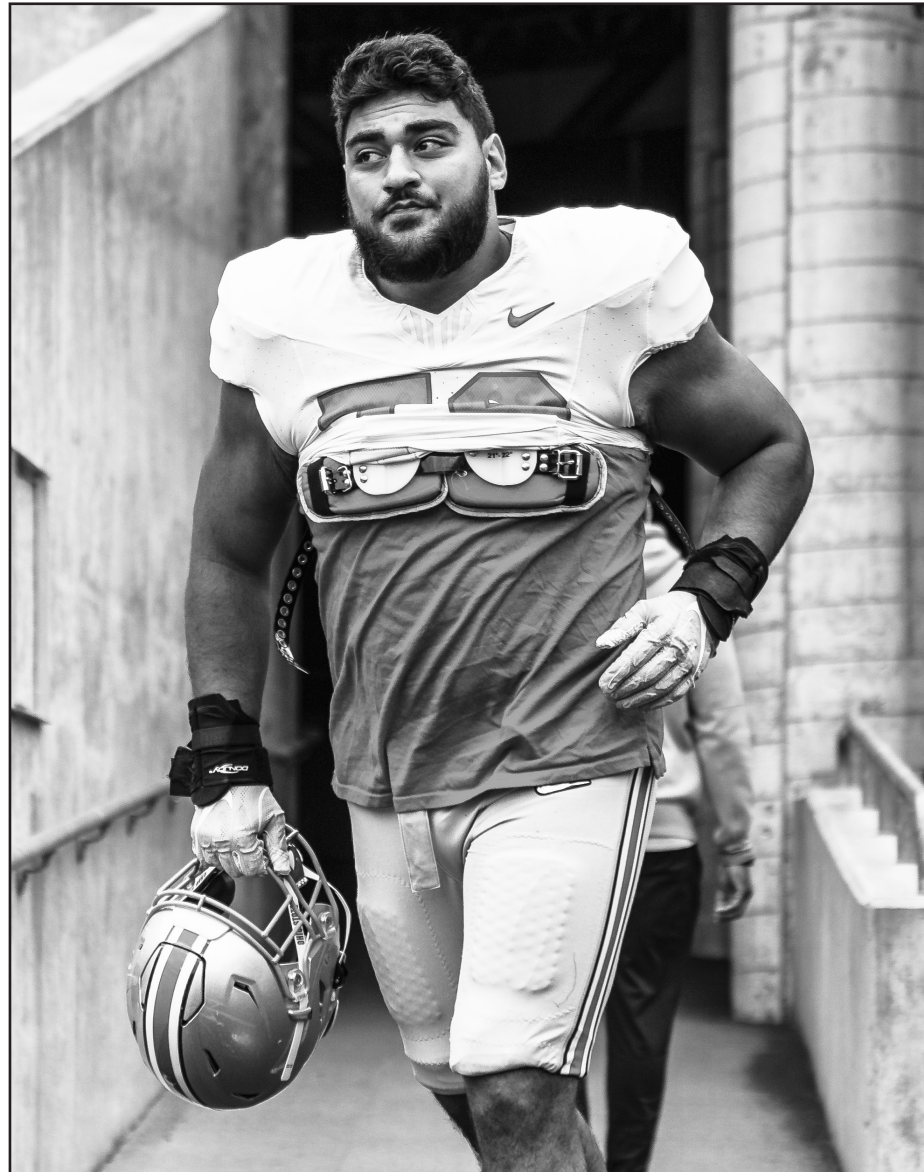
There are also questions about the defensive line, but they are the good ones to have because the competition is fierce to follow in the recent footsteps of standouts Joey and Nick Bosa and Young.

“We do have a bunch of defensive ends,” head coach Ryan Day said. “The expectation level is high for them to compete at a high level when you look at the guys who have come before them.”

The linebackers have the benefit of the veteran leadership of Borland and Werner, sixth-year player Justin Hilliard and senior Baron Browning. Borland joins J.T. Barrett as the only three-time captains in the program’s history.

“He leads like a coach,” linebackers coach Al Washington said of Borland. “He’s an extension of a coach. It’s very comforting because he is also a guy who can help lead and show young guys how to conduct their business.”

“He was impacted by all the great linebackers who’ve come in here over the years. It is



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

NEXT IN LINE – With DaVon Hamilton and Jashon Cornell off to the NFL and Robert Landers exhausting his eligibility, junior Tommy Togiai will have to step up on the interior of the defensive line.

incredibly important to have Tuf Borland in our linebacker room and on our team.”

Despite the Buckeyes’ stingy defensive numbers, cracks began to surface late in the season culminating in allowing several chunk plays that led to their demise against Clemson in the College Football Playoff semifinal.

“When you give up big plays on defense, the game changes, no question about that,” defensive line coach Larry Johnson said. “So you have to look at the big plays. We gave up some big, explosive plays, especially in that last game, and that’s something we have to look at and try to find a fix.”

Holding The Line

Gone from the defensive front are Young and interior linemen Jashon Cornell, DaVon Hamilton and Robert Landers.

Fortunately, Cooper is back after playing in only four games last season. He started 13 games in 2018. The old man of the unit has been a mentor to those expected to carry the torch this season and into the future.

“Our players look up to him,” Johnson said. “The whole entire team looks up to Jonathon Cooper. He’s challenged the younger players, and he’s setting great marks at how you’re supposed to do it as a player.”

One of those youngsters is budding sophomore star Zach Harrison, who totaled 24 tackles, five tackles for loss for minus-20 yards and 3½ sacks last season.

Although the expectations to be the next

Chase Young can be overwhelming, Johnson wants to make sure Harrison puts those thoughts aside.

“He’s got to block the noise from the outside that he’s going to be the next guy and really continue to concentrate on his development,” Johnson said. “That’s what I’ve been talking to him about, ‘Just be the best player you can be, Zach. Don’t worry about the standards set before you. That’s great, but you’ve got to be your own player.’”

Still, Johnson is excited by what he’s seen out of the former five-star recruit from Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy Orange.

“He has all the attributes, what we look for in a player,” Johnson said. “The ceiling is very high for him going into his sophomore season, so I’m really pleased where he’s at right now.”

Harrison and Cooper will be part of the rotation that will include juniors Tyreke Smith and Tyler Friday as well as sophomore Javontae Jean-Baptiste.

“They’re all five starters for me right now” Johnson said. “All five deserve to be starters, and they will be.”

Others expected to contribute include redshirt freshmen Noah Potter and Cormontae Hamilton and true freshman Darrion Henry-Young.

Tommy Togiai replaces DaVon Hamilton at nose guard, and there are plenty of challengers for the other tackle spot in part due to the status of senior Haskell Garrett and sophomore Taron Vincent.

Garrett was shot in the face on Aug. 30 while breaking up an argument and is awaiting medical clearance to practice. Vincent is recovering from a torn labrum in his shoulder that cost him the entire 2019 season.

Graduate Antwan Jackson, who redshirted at Auburn in 2016 before opting to transfer, has made his presence felt during the preseason camp and is expected to fill Cornell’s spot at three-technique.

Johnson went so far as to say Jackson and Togiai are the “foundation of what we’re doing.”

Junior Jerron Cage and redshirt freshman Jaden McKenzie have drawn the attention of Johnson as have true freshmen Jacobbe Cowan and Ty Hamilton (DaVon’s brother).

“I think we do have great depth,” Togiai said. “We have a lot of our young players that have stepped up and have played really well throughout practice this year. And I think the leaders, the older guys have done an incredible job – me, Antwan, Haskell – have done a great job of leading the younger guys and showing them the way, like how we do things on the D-line.

“We’re going to get after it this year and raise the bar even more.”

Where There’s A Will

Day said the linebackers are a position of strength.

“We have great experience with the older group there,” he said.

The interesting part is that with the departure of outside linebacker Malik Harrison (now with the Baltimore Ravens), shuffling of the personnel has created a different look among the linebackers.

Werner played strongside (Sam) last season but is moving to the weakside (Will) position while Browning, who rotated with Borland in the middle (Mike), will move to Sam to join Hilliard.

Washington sees the opportunity for Werner to be an every-down player as Harrison was last year, but the move also frees Browning to be more of a roamer who can pass rush or drop back in coverage.

“Justin’s played (Sam) all year, so he knows it just as well as I do,” Werner said. “Baron, he’s an athletic kid, he’s a smart football player. He’s picked up on it very well.”

The other returning linebackers are juniors Dallas Gant, Teradja Mitchell and K’Vaughan Pope; sophomore Craig Young; redshirt freshman Tommy Eichenberg; and true freshmen Mitchell Melton and Cody Simon.

“All of those guys have done an unbelievable job, guys like Dallas and Teradja,” Borland said. “Top to bottom, the whole room has done an unbelievable job. This offseason was a little bit unique, but you can tell guys have put in a lot of time, and the work shows.”

“Even guys like Mitch and Cody have done an unbelievable job. You can’t say enough good things about this room. I have nothing but confidence that whoever is in the game will perform at a really high level.”

The success of the linebacker unit is essential with so much turnover in front and behind them.

“We have great experience at the linebacker corps with Tuf, Pete, Justin Hilliard and Baron Browning,” Coombs said. “Those guys are directing traffic out there and doing a great job.”

Wade And See

Having Wade back is twice as nice. First, he decided against entering the 2020 NFL draft to the surprise of some. Then, he did opt out of this Buckeye season when it appeared there

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE OVERVIEW

would be no fall football because of the coronavirus pandemic. But once the Big Ten schedule was reinstated, Wade opted to return, and his presence can't be overstated.

"This is a kid that loves his team," Coombs said. "He loves his university."

Wade was third-team All-Big Ten last season with 25 tackles, four TFLs, an interception, one forced fumble and eight pass breakups.

So, who will start opposite Wade? Senior Marcus Williamson as well as juniors Sevyn Banks and Cameron Brown lead a group that also includes sophomore Tyreke Johnson and freshmen Ryan Watts and Lejond Cavazos.

"Some of these guys did play last year," Day said. "Sevyn Banks and Cam Brown played last year. They all played in games. While they are inexperienced in terms of starting and playing in championship-level games, they have played some and have some snaps under their belt. I think they will be able to play at a high level."

Junior Josh Proctor, who played 20 games the past two seasons while backing up Fuller, and sophomore Marcus Hooker could be the starting safeties against Nebraska.

Hooker saw defensive playing time in seven games last season but was a starter on special teams in all 14 games.

Behind them there is little or no experience among redshirt freshmen Ronnie Hickman and Bryson Shaw, and true freshmen Lathan Ransom, Cameron Martinez and Kourt Williams.

"I think we have a lot of talent back there in the back end," Coombs said. "It's just young talent. It's inexperienced talent. But that's what happens when you have great players. We lost a bunch of really good players off of the defense, but we recruited a bunch of really good players to take their place, and guys have been working extremely hard to have that opportunity."



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

MR. CONSISTENCY – Senior linebacker Tuf Borland has played in 42 games for Ohio State over the last three seasons and was named just the second three-time captain in school history this fall.

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No Bosas, No Chase Young: No Problem For D-Line

By JOE DEMPSEY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State defensive line has a lot of holes to fill after losing key members from the 2019 defense to the NFL draft.

Standout defensive end Chase Young, who broke the school record for sacks in a season, went to Washington with the No. 2 overall pick in the draft. Defensive tackle DaVon Hamilton became a fourth-round pick, and tackle/end Jashon Cornell was selected in the seventh. The Buckeyes also lost Robert "B.B." Landers, who was not drafted.

Those departing Buckeyes combined for 293 tackles with 100½ tackles for loss and 47 sacks while donning scarlet and gray. Perhaps more than in recent years, Ohio State defensive line coach Larry Johnson must reload along the defensive line.

In addition to winning the Big Ten's Defensive Player of the Year honor, Young snagged Ohio State's fifth conference defensive lineman of the year award in six years (Young, 2019; Nick Bosa, 2017; Tyquan Lewis, 2016; Joey Bosa, 2014-15).

Although the Buckeye defensive line does not have a superstar named Bosa or Young this season, the group is motivated to show that it is stronger than just a few big names.

"The key thing that Coach (Johnson) keeps telling us, and the most exciting part of the season, is that we're a bunch of no names. We don't have a Bosa, we don't have a Chase Young," junior defensive end Tyler Friday said. "That's just how we like it."

Led by a talented group of defensive ends looking to make a name for themselves, the Ohio State defensive line has the potential to live up to its high standard in 2020. At defensive end, the Buckeyes return two-time captain Jonathon Cooper, who is a fifth-year senior, juniors Tyreke Smith and Friday, and sophomores Zach Harrison and Javontae Jean-Baptiste.

Johnson has always taken pride in having a deep rotation of defensive linemen so that they can play their reps at full speed instead of wearing down throughout the course of a game. Since Young was the lone standout lost at defensive end, the Buckeyes return a lot of talent, and Johnson is confident in that group.

"You've got five guys, and they all could be starting anywhere in the country," Johnson said. "I'm going to treat them that way. They're all five starters for me right now. We're going to do a good job of making sure each guy gets to start as we go through the season."

"Some guys are going to emerge and push themselves ahead. If that happens, we'll make a change. But right now, they all have an opportunity to be a starter."

Defensive ends are typically among the best athletes in all of sports. Convincing future first-round picks like the Bosas or Young that they are going to rotate is a lot to ask, but Johnson continues to bring in highly touted prospects who are willing to buy in.

After tallying only nine tackles (one solo) as a true freshman, Smith (6-4, 267) showed vast improvement. The No. 4 weakside defensive end in the 2018 class emerged as a sophomore with 12 tackles (nine solo), five TFL, three sacks and two pass breakups in 11 games.

Friday made an impact as a second-year player as well, recording eight tackles (five solo), three TFL, two sacks and one fumble recovery in 11 games. Jean-Baptiste (6-5, 250), a third-year sophomore, posted 14 tackles (six solo), 1½ TFL and 1½ sacks in 2019.

Cooper (6-4, 257) has enjoyed the most success in the unit, boasting career numbers of 51 tackles (32 solo), 11½ TFL and 6½ sacks. The No. 3 weakside defensive end in the 2016 class took a redshirt last year due to injury, choosing to return for his fourth and final game of the season against Michigan instead of waiting for the postseason.

Beyond the top five defensive ends for the Buckeyes, redshirt freshman Noah Potter (6-6, 271) and true freshman Darrion Henry-Young (6-4, 275) will provide depth on the edge.

Although Harrison (6-6, 265) has only one year of experience under his belt, he is the most productive returning member on the defensive line, with 24 tackles (14 solo), five TFL and 3½ sacks.

"He's one of the leaders on the D-line already," Smith said of Harrison. "You can already see the tendencies and you already know he's going to take over. He's going to be the one because he's got that mind-set and that mentality. Zach's been great for everybody."

Johnson noted Harrison's maturity as the biggest difference between the 2019 and 2020 versions of him.

Despite playing only one year for the Buckeyes, the comparisons of his potential to that of the Bosas and Young are still associated with Harrison, who was the No. 12 overall recruit in the 2019 class.

"He certainly has the potential to be that," Johnson said. "Going into his sophomore year, every great player I ever coached, the Bosas, Chase, there's an up-and-down in the sophomore year, trying to fill that role and, 'I have to do this. I have to be this.'"

"What happens when you do that is you put too much pressure on yourself and all of a sudden, now you start chasing things you shouldn't chase. We're really just trying to keep Zach balanced. We do a great deal of talking about what is expected of him so he doesn't make the expectation bigger than he can handle."

Harrison, who was a standout sprinter at Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy Orange, tries not to focus on the massive shoes he is expected to fill, but instead on how he can improve.

"Those guys that came before me, they're a bunch of great players," Harrison said. "There are a lot of expectations for me to do so-and-so numbers. Honestly, I don't really try to think about that. Every day at practice, I go out and get better, work on my technique."

The ultra-athletic Harrison finished second to Young's position-high 577 snaps with 284 snaps among Ohio State defensive ends during the 2019 campaign. Despite missing two games, Young played nearly 300 more snaps than any other end, indicating that there will be an abundance of opportunity for Harrison and his fellow D-ends in 2020.

"I did a lot of good things my freshman year," Harrison said. "I started a few games, had a few sacks, a few tackles. But there's always room to improve and that's something looking back on the tape from last year. It's like there are so many things I could have done better. And that's what I'm focusing on most of this year is to really improve on the things that last year were not as strong in my game."

Harrison has been blossoming both on and off the field for the Buckeyes. He was selected to be one of eight Ohio State representatives on the Big Ten's Anti-Hate and Anti-Racism Coalition in June and has continued to impress his teammates and coaches.

"He listens very well," Johnson said of Harrison. "He's very coachable. He has all the attributes of what we look for in a player. Zach

Projected Starters

<i>End</i>	<i>End</i>
9 • Zach Harrison	0 • Jonathon Cooper
6-6 • 265 • So.	6-4 • 257 • 5th-Sr.
Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy Orange	Gahanna (Ohio) Lincoln
Posted a career-high four tackles and one sack in the 2019 Big Ten Championship Game.	Missed all but four games in 2019, but has 11½ TFL and 6½ sacks on his career.
<i>Nose Guard</i>	<i>Three-Tech</i>
72 • Tommy Togiai	6 • Taron Vincent
6-2 • 300 • Jr.	6-2 • 295 • So.
Pocatello (Idaho) Highland	Baltimore (Md.) IMG Academy
The No. 3 defensive tackle in the class of 2017, Togiai has 26 career tackles and four TFL.	Recorded three tackles, one TFL and one sack in 2018, but missed last year with a torn labrum.

is a guy that you tell him to do something and he does it exactly as you asked him to do. And that's what you want your players to do.

"From his freshman year coming in the door, he was different. Finishing the season the way he played, the ceiling's very high for him going into his sophomore season. I'm really pleased with where he's at right now."

The Buckeyes are less deep at defensive tackle after losing three fifth-year seniors in Hamilton, Cornell and Landers, but they still return experience and strong upside in the interior of the line.

Junior Tommy Togiai (6-2, 300) is poised to be the leader of the group at nose guard. Known as the strongest player on the team, Togiai tallied 16 tackles (eight solo) and two TFL as a sophomore last season, and his 250 snaps mark the most among returning defensive tackles.

Former five-star recruit and third-year sophomore Taron Vincent (6-2, 295), who is recovering from a shoulder injury, is expected to be the next game-changer at three-technique for Ohio State.

"Taron, there's a slow progress going on right now, and hopefully, we'll have him by the time we get to game week," Johnson said of Vincent. "With the injury, being out of football for a long time, then the pandemic hit, not being able to practice, so it's a process going forward. You don't just jump back in and be at the same level when you got here, so that's why we're doing a great job of kind of developing him, getting his skill set back to where he needs to be."

"Being out of football for a year is really, really tough for anybody to be able to come back and be ready to go."

Vincent missed all of 2019 due to the torn labrum in his shoulder, but he flashed his sky-high potential against Northwestern as a true freshman in the 2018 Big Ten Championship Game when he sacked the quarterback for a 10-yard loss.

The most experienced defensive tackle the Buckeyes have is senior Haskell Garrett (6-2, 299), who recently suffered a gunshot wound and does not have a return date. Though his 10 tackles (five solo) and 2½ TFL in 2019 do not jump off the page, Garrett's grade of 80.5 from Pro Football Focus for 2019 was four points higher than any other returning defensive tackle in the Big Ten.

"We don't know yet. It was a very sensitive area that he was injured," Johnson said. "So we'll just kind of wait and see what the doctors tell us when he's ready to go. He's in practice – there's just things he cannot do. But he is in practice every day, he's really engaged, he's in great spirits. So we'll just have to wait and see."

Former Auburn/junior college transfer Antwuan Jackson (6-2, 295) is also on the interior of the defensive line and will likely play

an important role in both spots for Ohio State. Jackson recorded 13 tackles (eight solo) and 3½ TFL in 2019 on 201 snaps, which marks the third most behind Togiai and Garrett among returning defensive tackles.

Junior Jerron Cage (6-2, 299), a former four-star recruit, could take on a bigger role if needed. Cage, who has dealt with a series of injuries in his career, possesses the versatility to play either three-technique or nose tackle.

Providing depth along the interior defensive line are redshirt freshman Jaden McKenzie (6-2, 290) and true freshman Ty Hamilton (6-3, 278), who have made great strides during camp.

"I really like Jaden McKenzie," Johnson said of the former three-star recruit. "He's starting to make a push right now. He's done a great job in camp. He's shown value. He can do it."

While McKenzie has been in the program for a year, Ty Hamilton is just a true freshman. Despite being a little green, the younger Hamilton is following in his brother DaVon's footsteps.

"We work in Ty Hamilton a little bit at nose guard and give him a chance to see what he can do," Johnson said. "Ty has been doing really well. Ty has put on 20 pounds since he's been here. He came in at 260. He's about 285 right now. So that's going really well for him right now."

"I like where he's at as a young player. He's still in the development stage, but he's really done a good job since he's been here. He's gotten stronger. He's got a chance to be a player going forward."

Other defensive linemen on the roster include true freshman Jacolbe Cowan (6-4, 275), redshirt freshman Cormontae Hamilton (6-2, 265), who is a converted tight end, and a pair of former walk-ons in junior Zaid Hamdan (5-11, 265) and senior Aaron Cox (6-3, 255).

Despite the loss of three essential members of the 2019 defense and the questions surrounding the status of Vincent and Garrett, Johnson is confident in having enough capable defensive tackles to rotate three at nose tackle and three at three-technique. Togiai, Cage and Hamilton will likely begin at nose tackle, though the latter two could also play three-technique. Vincent, Jackson and McKenzie will typically line up at three-technique.

"We'll have three guys who can play inside, nose tackle, and we'll have three guys who can play three-technique," Johnson said. "We have some young players who have done a great job coming along. So I think we'll be OK starting the season, six guys on the inside that have an opportunity to play."

"We've got enough bodies in there. We've just got to see who's going to emerge as the player as we go forward."

Defensive Line In New Territory Without Star Player

By PATRICK MAYHORN
Special To Buckeye Sports Bulletin

Ohio State defensive line coach Larry Johnson has developed a tradition in recent years. Since his arrival in Columbus prior to the 2014 season, Johnson has produced star defensive end after star defensive end, reeling in five-star prospects and spinning them out as top-five picks three years later with such consistency that it's now almost bizarre to see a Buckeye team without an established elite edge rusher.

He opened the tradition with Class of 2013 five-star signee Joey Bosa, who contributed as a freshman under the tutelage of Mike Vrabel before rocketing into stardom in 2014 and 2015 under Johnson, notching 18½ sacks and 37 tackles for loss on the way to a No. 3 overall selection by the San Diego Chargers in the 2016 NFL draft.

The elder Bosa was followed immediately by his younger brother and Class of 2016 five-star signee Nick Bosa. A season-ending injury in 2018 cut Nick's Ohio State career short before he was able to truly hit his peak as many had expected in 2018, but the younger Bosa still managed 17½ sacks and 29 tackles for loss in 30 games as a Buckeye before being selected with the second pick of the 2019 NFL draft by the San Francisco 49ers.

The final member of that five-star trio had the largest statistical impact during his time in Columbus, both in volume and in the record books. Class of 2017 signee Chase Young put up the most statistically dominant season for a defensive end in school history, shattering the single-season sack record in 2019 with 16½ sacks and following up Nick Bosa's No. 2 pick with a No. 2 pick of his own in 2020.

The common threads for all three are obvious, be it in recruiting profile, statistical output or professional prospects. For Ohio State, all three players certainly played with different styles and changed the game in different ways, but since Johnson took over in 2014, the same thing was always true of every Buckeye defense as it entered the upcoming season: everyone knew exactly who the star was on the defensive line. There was never any doubt that either of the Bosa brothers or Young would be anything but forces on the edge that required serious attention from opposing offenses.

That connecting, constant factor for the Buckeyes is gone entering the 2020 season. Johnson has still accumulated a large amount of talent, including two-time team captain Jonathon Cooper (No. 32 in the 247Sports player rankings in 2016) and former five-star prospect Zach Harrison (No. 22 in 2019), along with high four-star Tyreke Smith (No. 34 in 2018). Even linebacker Baron Browning (No. 11 in 2017) is expected to contribute on the line.

However, none of those players enters the season with the kind of hype and expectation that constantly surrounded the Bosa duo from 2014-18 and Young in 2019. Entering the last six seasons, Ohio State knew exactly who it could rely on for big plays off the edge. In 2020, things have changed, and that star contributor – or contributors – is nowhere near as obvious as he seemingly always has been under Johnson.



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

FILLING THE VOID – Sophomore defensive end Zach Harrison is among the numerous defensive linemen expected to replace the production left by first-round pick Chase Young.

The person who seems to be less concerned about this than just about anyone else is Johnson. He told media in April that he's confident that his players will be able to fill the void left by Young, and he has echoed those sentiments in October as the season rapidly approaches.

"Everybody's going to say, 'We lost the Bosas, what are you going to do?' Well, we got his brother. Then all of a sudden we lose Nick, (and) well now we've got Chase Young.

"Now that Chase is gone, there's probably going to be guys that step up and take the same role again that's going to move this thing to the next level," Johnson said in the spring. "I'm not as much worried about it. I'm not crying about it. They've earned the right to be where they're at and get a chance to play in the NFL. It's just that now you hope you recruited well enough that you have the next guy ready to go."

The quick and simple answer for many appears to be Harrison, the rising sophomore who came to Ohio State with as much – if not more – recruiting hype as those stars who preceded him. At 6-6, 265 pounds, Harrison certainly looks the part,

and he managed to find his way onto the field in all 14 games as a true freshman in 2019, racking up 24 tackles, 5 for a loss and 3½ sacks, while playing on the second-most snaps among all defensive ends on the roster.

"He's really just matured," Johnson said of Harrison. "He has really done a great job of just maturing as a young player. He listens very well, and he's very coachable. He has all the attributes, what we look for in a player. Zach is a guy where you tell him to do something and he's doing it exactly as you asked him to do. And that's what you want your players to do. Zach, from his freshman year coming in the door, he was different and when he finished the season, the way he played, the ceiling is very high for him going into his sophomore season. I'm very pleased with where he's at right now."

However, Johnson was quick to dismiss the need for Harrison to immediately step into Young's shoes, especially as a player who came to Ohio State as an elite athlete whom many recruiting analysts considered to be a "raw" or developmental prospect.

"He's got to block the noise from the

outside that he has to be the next guy and really continue to concentrate on his development," Johnson said. "That's what I've been talking to him about. 'Just be the best player you can be, Zach. Don't worry about the standards set before you. That's great, but you have to be your own player.'

"And that way, he doesn't look at himself and say, 'Hey, I've got to do this, I've got to do that. I've got to get so many sacks.' It's tough doing that, when you start chasing those kind of things. He's done a good job, he's listening. He's done a good job of understanding what it takes to be an elite player, but at the same time he's got to be himself."

If Harrison is unable to reach the level of those former standouts in 2020, Ohio State may need to find its strength up front in its depth, which has been as much a constant under Johnson as that star production. The Buckeyes have rotated defensive linemen constantly under Johnson's lead and are looking to do so again in 2020, with a rotation that Johnson expects to go five-players deep on the outside, similar to what Ohio State did in 2017.

"I think 2017 is a year that we had a lot of depth," Johnson said, referencing a group that featured Nick Bosa, Cooper, Jashon Cornell, Jayln Holmes, Sam Hubbard and Tyquan Lewis. "I think that with Tyreke Smith and Zach (Harrison) and all the other guys, it gives us a chance to have five good guys get going to play with a backup, either Noah Potter or Darrion Henry-Young as we go forward. But it gives me a chance to move those guys around, and we can play fresh. I'm really big on having guys playing fresh and playing fast, and that gives us a chance to do that."

Even though it means more competition for playing time, Ohio State's five-man rotation isn't shying away from sharing the limelight.

"I think it's great," Smith said of the rotation. "I think everybody can learn from everybody. Everybody is different, rushes different, has different strengths and weaknesses and we're all like brothers on the D-line unit. The five defensive ends, we're really tight and we can take constructive criticism (from each other). When we mess up on something, we're good enough and we're tight enough that we can tell each other, 'Hey man, you've got to do this better,' without taking it personally. I think that goes a long way because we can only get better and better from there. The sky is the limit for us."

Star or not, with the brotherhood that he's built in his room and a rotation to lean on, Johnson isn't fretting about the performance of defensive line this season, and his players certainly aren't either. As they tell it, they're right where they want to be.

"We never stopped working, ever since that last game last year against Clemson, and I think, especially Javontae (Jean-Baptiste), Zach and Tyreke, Coop and myself, I think we took that personally and respond by being the best defensive ends that we can be," Tyler Friday said.

"The key thing that Coach (Johnson) keeps telling us, and the most exciting part, is that we're a bunch of no-names. We don't have a Bosa, we don't have a Chase Young right now, but that's just how we like it."

Depth Leads To Versatility For Linebacker Corps

By JOE DEMPSEY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State linebacker corps is the most experienced returning group on the team. Among their key contributors at linebacker last year, the Buckeyes lost only Malik Harrison, with sixth-year senior Justin Hilliard, fifth-year senior Tuf Borland, and true seniors Baron Browning and Pete Werner all returning.

The experience of the Buckeye 'backers goes beyond the starting group in key junior backups Dallas Gant, Teradja Mitchell, and K'Vaughan Pope. The trio of juniors has been waiting in the wings for their opportunity and have impressed during camp.

The linebackers may have been a weak link of the Buckeye defense in 2018, but with two more years of experience under their belts following a solid 2019 season, the group could be one of the strongest this year.

Hilliard (6-1, 231) has become known for his resilience since coming in as a five-star recruit out of Cincinnati St. Xavier in 2015. Hilliard has suffered injuries that have allowed him to have only one full spring camp in his six seasons at Ohio State.

Despite his setbacks, Hilliard has put himself in a position to help the team when his number is called. With a perfect season on the line against Penn State in 2019, Hilliard intercepted a pass on a fourth-quarter, first-and-10 attempt from the Ohio State 27-yard line, sealing the win.

Borland (6-1, 234) was voted by his teammates to become the second three-time captain in school history, tying J.T. Barrett's record. Bringing the most experience to the group, Borland has totaled 180 career tackles (95 solo) with 15½ TFL, five sacks and two forced fumbles as a Buckeye.

Browning (6-3, 240) is the most dangerous pass-rusher among the returning linebackers, recording 10 TFL and five sacks as a junior last season.

Werner (6-3, 242) was the most productive all-around member of the group last year, recording 64 tackles (39 solo) with 5½ tackles for loss, three pass breakups and two fumble recoveries.

With so many members of a talented linebacker group returning, second-year linebackers coach Al Washington faces what is known as a good problem in coaching. He has emphasized the importance of everyone having a specific job so that they can best complement each other.

"You have to give a player a role, a focus and give them the opportunity to exercise that," Washington said. "We are a deep group, but we are going to need, this year in particular, more than just three or four. Throughout the year, we have to develop because you never know what could happen with the situation that we're in. Everybody has a role. Everybody's engaged. I feel like this time period has really brought us closer. Everybody feels like they matter. Everybody has an impact in their own way."

"Our mentality going into the spring to now really hasn't changed much. Our goal is just to get better every day and, when your number is called, get ready to play."

The complementary skill sets of Ohio State's linebackers have allowed Washington to move his guys into more optimal positions following the departure of Harrison.

After rotating with Borland at Mike (middle) linebacker the past two seasons,

Projected Starters

Weakside	Middle	Strongside
20 • Pete Werner	32 • Tuf Borland	5 • Baron Browning
6-3 • 242 • Sr.	6-1 • 234 • 5th-Sr.	6-3 • 240 • Sr.
Indianapolis Cathedral	Bolingbrook, Ill.	Fort Worth (Texas) Kennedale
Werner's 131 career tackles rank second on the team to Tuf Borland.	Borland has played in all 42 games for Ohio State in the past three seasons.	Ranks second on the team in career sacks to fifth-year defensive end Jonathon Cooper.

Browning is moving outside to Sam (strong-side) linebacker, where he can better utilize his elite athleticism. As a five-star prospect, Browning was the No. 1 outside linebacker and No. 11 overall recruit in the 2017 class.

"I feel like it just allows me to show my versatility that I can rush, that I can cover, I can play inside the box and I can play outside," Browning said. "I'm excited."

Browning's ability to play inside or outside and take on the responsibilities that come at both spots will help him when NFL scouts evaluate him.

"I just think it shows I'm versatile and that I have range, especially with me just being able to run sideline to sideline, that I'm just a pure athlete," Browning said. "There's not one position you can label me as. I can fit in anywhere, whether that's outside linebacker, stand-up rushing or middle linebacker."

For Washington, Browning's versatility makes the coach comfortable putting him in a variety of situations.

"With Baron's athleticism, he can play inside. He can play outside," Washington said. "He can do a lot of different things."

Browning's experience on the inside at Mike has made his transition to Sam seamless.

"I adapted and I grew in that role over the last three years, and it helped me a lot to see the bigger picture of the defense," Browning said. "So I feel now making that switch to outside is a lot easier on me because I know how the guys around me work."

Last year, Werner thrived at Sam linebacker under the tutelage of co-defensive coordinator Greg Mattison, who works with the Sams. As a classmate of Browning's, Werner expressed confidence that the Sam spot is a great fit for the former five-star from Fort Worth, Texas.

"Baron, he's an athletic kid," Werner said. "He's a smart football player. He's picked up on it very well."

Along with Browning, Hilliard will also play Sam linebacker, where he occasionally filled in for Werner in 2019. Werner expects both Hilliard, who is a team captain, and Browning to thrive in the versatile role.

"They've done a great job," Werner said. "Justin's played that position all year, so he knows it just as well as I do."

After recovering from an Achilles injury, Hilliard recorded 13 of his 51 career tackles and three of his four tackles for loss in 2019.

Pope (6-1, 231), who posted 13 tackles and two interceptions a year ago, will serve as the primary backup for Browning and Hilliard at Sam.

"K'Vaughan Pope is very athletic, very athletic in space," Washington said. "Very instinctive. There are ways to utilize him."

With Browning moving into Werner's spot, the former four-star out of Indianapolis Cathedral needed a new spot. The Buckeye coaching staff decided to transition Werner into the Will (weakside) linebacker role, where Harrison thrived with a team-leading 75 tackles, along with 16½ TFL and 4½

sacks.

"I was a little bit shocked, knowing the way I played the previous year," Werner said. "But then again, the coaches know what they're doing."

While playing the Sam in 2019, Werner lined up in the box on occasion, particularly in the Fiesta Bowl loss to Clemson. The Ohio State coaching staff liked what they saw with Werner on the inside and Browning on the outside, prompting the switch.

"They saw what I did in the box a few plays during Sam, and they really liked it," Werner said. "And I think switching me and Baron, showing different versatility options, I think they really liked that, and I think they thought it would favor our defense a little bit more."

"I just know that switching this position, the coaches saw something when doing it. I think that because of my leadership role and communication skills, I think that you need that more inside the box than you do outside, and they saw that as a benefit."

After Harrison averaged more than one TFL per game at Will last season, there are high expectations for that position on Ohio State's defense. Washington envisions Werner as a difference-maker in that spot.

"Pete's doing a really good job at the Will position," Washington said. "He's a physical player, he's athletic obviously. He's very bright, he's passionate. He can be an impact player at the Will position."

Entering his fourth year as a Buckeye, Werner will be a starter for the third season. He has already been productive with 131 tackles (83 solo), 13½ TFL, three sacks, two forced fumbles, two fumble recoveries and 10 pass breakups, but the move to Will could help him make even more of an impact.

"I feel like I have the opportunity to make maybe a little bit more plays," Werner said. "But it's just an opportunity to show more of my versatility. Because I know a lot about football, and I've been around the game for a long time, the switch has come very naturally. There's obviously some footwork and some certain things that I need to work on, but as far as transition, it's kind of second nature. But there are minor things that I need to work on."

Borland, who will be a starter for the fourth year, finds great value in moving an intelligent and imposing athlete such as Werner inside the box.

"Extremely versatile, extremely athletic," Borland said of Werner. "He has a lot of experience, so you're going to have that veteran, savvy-type linebacker over there. And most people don't know, he's 245 pounds and he can bring it. He's going to do a great job over there at Will."

Beyond Werner, Mitchell (6-2, 240) and sophomore Craig Young will also play the Will. Young (6-3, 228) will likely play on defense only during lopsided games, but Mitchell could spell Werner for meaningful minutes.

"Teradja Mitchell is an explosive player," Washington said. "We've all seen that – a

very passionate player. Those types of guys, we can find ways to get them closer to the ball and attack the football and get them to play to their strengths."

Staying put at Mike linebacker, Borland provides the Buckeye defense with a veteran presence in the middle. He made 55 tackles (27 solo) last season, with three TFL, one sack, one pass breakup and one interception.

In regard to the reserves, Gant (6-3, 232) should provide a solid presence on the inside as a backup to Borland. Washington said redshirt freshman Tommy Eichenberg (6-2, 238) has also impressed during camp at Mike.

"Dallas Gant is a skilled inside 'backer," Washington said. "He has position flexibility. He can play (middle) and (outside) for us. His value for us is obviously to contribute meaningful minutes, but to help us in different types of ways."

Outside of the returners, Washington welcomed a pair of four-star prospects to the room in Cody Simon (6-1, 225) and Mitchell Melton (6-3, 243).

"The freshmen coming in, I'm really excited about Cody Simon and Mitchell Melton," Washington said. "Those kids are going to be special players. They're both smart. They're both tough, and they both love football. I'm very excited about the youth in the program."

"Those young guys, they just have to have an opportunity to get out there and play. When they get out there, they have to make the impact they know they want to make. Everything leading up to that, they've shown they're capable, so I'm excited."

The linebacker corps also includes a strong group of hard-hitting former walk-ons: juniors Cade Kacherski (6-2, 225), Ben Schmiesing (6-1, 225) and Trayvon Wilburn (5-11, 222), who will all primarily serve on special teams.

Borland has been incredibly pleased with the performance of the linebacker unit as a whole, crediting the up-and-coming 'backers for their willingness to learn and improve.

"The thing about those guys, what makes them special is they're willing to sit back and learn from some of the older guys," Borland said. "We had the opportunity to do that as well, to learn from the older guys who were here when we were young. You can't say enough good things about those guys."

"Top to bottom, the whole room has done an unbelievable job this offseason. It's been a little bit unique, but you can tell guys are putting in a lot of time. The work shows."

Thrilled with the experience and depth in his room, Washington expressed confidence in being able to move his players around and better play to their strengths.

"We do have that depth," Washington said. "And we do have guys with a variety of different skill sets. We can match up better. We can give guys roles, and we can tame guys in the sense of, guys aren't getting worn down, all that while playing great defense. That's exactly what we would like to do."

Biding Time In Loaded OSU's Defensive Backs Room

By **JOE DEMPSEY**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Marcus Williamson came to Columbus in the vaunted 2017 Ohio State recruiting class that included the top two high school cornerbacks and the No. 1 junior college corner in the country.

Jeff Okudah and Shaun Wade were five-star prospects out of high school, while Kendall Sheffield was a four-star recruit and the third-ranked JUCO prospect in the nation.

While Williamson was a four-star prospect and rated the No. 24 cornerback and No. 182 overall prospect in the country out of Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy, he entered a crowded cornerbacks room that already featured future first-round picks Denzel Ward and Damon Arnette.

Now in his fourth year with the program, Williamson will have a different defensive backs coach for the fourth time at Ohio State. For the first time since he was a freshman, Williamson will be coached by the man who recruited him, Kerry Coombs.

"If you know anything about Coach Coombs, you know he always brings the energy," Williamson said of Coombs, who was at Ohio State from 2012-17 before a two-year NFL stint. "I really think he's brought a new life to the secondary. We lost most of our starters from last year, so we've got a lot of young guys that haven't been through the program. And Coach Coombs, he's been here for a long time, and he's able to really bring that culture and what we stand for here at Ohio State."

After Coombs left for the Titans in the NFL, Williamson and his teammates learned from secondary coaches Taver Johnson and Alex Grinch in 2018 and Jeff Hafley and Matt Barnes in 2019.

"Every year it seems we've had some changes in our coaching," Williamson said. "Guys move on to the next level or what have you. And I think all that coaching has brought so much knowledge and so many different techniques and styles that I've been able to utilize on the field."

"I've had a lot of coaching, a lot of different coaches. I've been able to bring a lot of that football knowledge to the position along with my personal skill-set. I'm excited to get started and get to work with Coach Coombs and have a great season."

Although Williamson gained valuable knowledge and experience under his previous coaches, there is no doubt that the Westerville, Ohio, native is excited to play for the coach who helped bring him back to Columbus as a recruit.

"Now that Coach Coombs is back, it's really rejuvenated me and reminded me of why we come here," Williamson said. "We come here to win championships and get to the next level. And Coach Coombs, he preaches that every day."

"We've had that relationship since I was 15 and he started recruiting me, so it's great to have him back and every day we walk in with a smile on our faces ready to get to work."

Coombs and Williamson are ready to work, but where does the former four-star corner fit into what seems to be a perpetually crowded cornerbacks room?

Juniors Sevyn Banks and Cameron Brown

were the first two corners off the bench last season, and third-year sophomore Tyreke Johnson is a former five-star prospect who has impressed in camp. Coombs also helped bring all three of those up-and-coming Buckeye corners to Columbus, in addition to Wade, who is moving from his slot spot to the outside.

Moving Wade to the outside corner spot, where he will likely defend the best receiver on opposing teams, leaves a void at slot corner. Banks, Brown and Johnson are all expected to play on the outside, while red-shirt freshman Ronnie Hickman and true freshman Cameron Martinez will compete with Williamson at the slot spot.

At 5-10 and 186 pounds, Williamson's build best suits him for a slot corner spot, in addition to his footwork, short-area quickness, and strength.

"It's a matchup business," Coombs said. "If he's playing more in the slot than he is outside, it is simply because more of the slots we'll play against will be similar size and stature players. Slot corner is going to major in short-space quickness, whereas the long corner on the outside is going to have probably a little bit more long speed and have some length at the line of scrimmage and press man-to-man against taller wide receivers."

"That's been, to me, an easy transition for Marcus. I have a comfort level with that."

Williamson, who transferred from Westerville South to IMG Academy prior to his senior year of high school, has faced more downs than ups in his injury-riddled Ohio State career. But the return of Coombs and the opportunity for playing time has sparked a fire in Williamson.

"Coach Coombs came in and he understood my career here hasn't been ideal or hasn't been perfect for me," he said. "But he's brought that new sense of energy, and he came in the first day and told me, 'You're still the same player that I recruited, and let's get to work.' And we've been just been making extreme strides since he's been here."

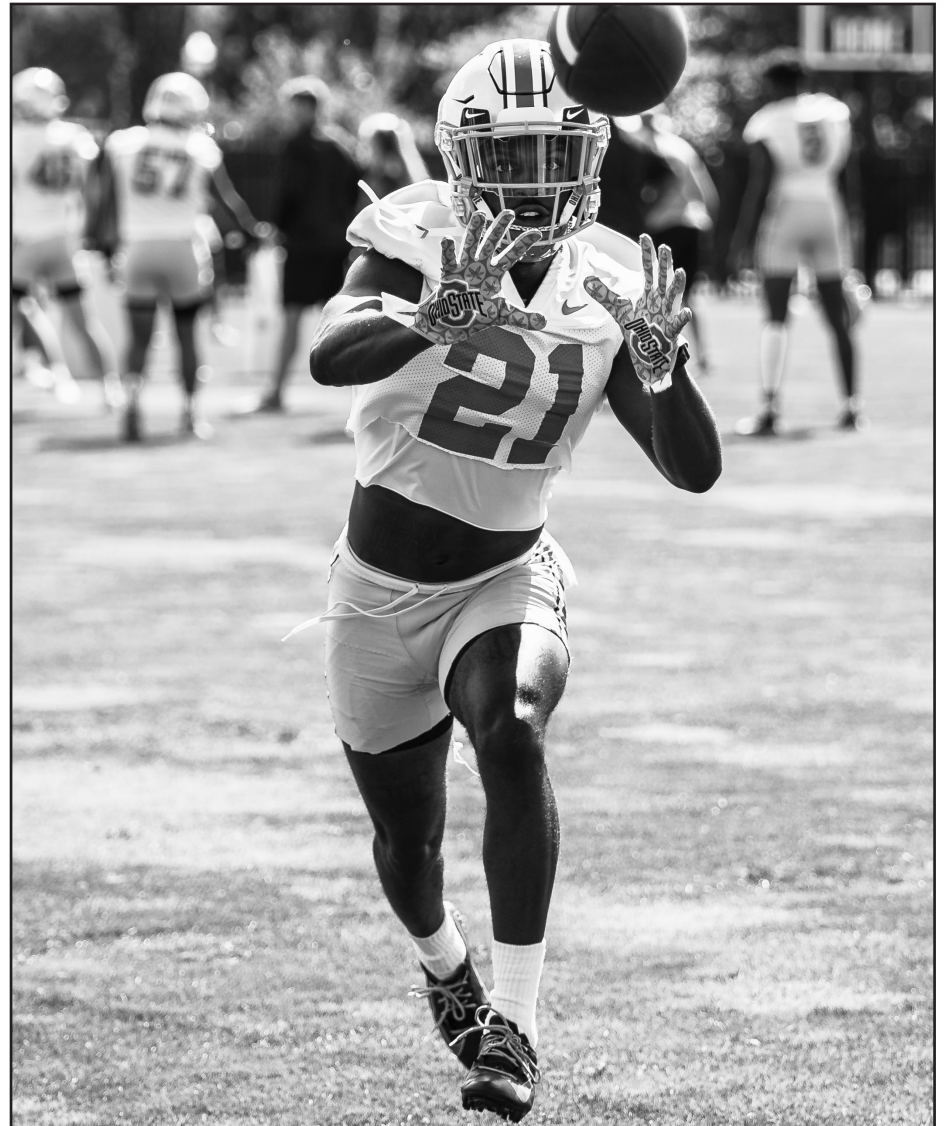
Coombs has always been high on Williamson, who is a three-time Ohio State Scholar-Athlete in addition to his athletic prowess.

"I recruited Marcus out of high school," Coombs said. "I've always found him to be a thoughtful, intelligent player who plays really, really hard. He's had an extraordinary offseason. He's playing really well right now. I'm excited to watch him continue to grow and compete as the season goes forward. He's had a really, really good fall and spring."

After so many setbacks with injuries, crowded depth charts, and most recently COVID-19, Williamson is fired up to finally make a larger impact for the Buckeyes on the field. And since the shortened 2020 season will not count against his eligibility, Williamson still has two more years to live his mark.

"I've had my struggles, and having this extra year, it's given me a new lifeblood," Williamson said. "I'm so ready to help this team and help us win, and that's really the driving force behind it now that I've stepped into a leadership role. I just love this team so much, and I just want to do whatever we can to win."

Having to bide one's time in the talented Ohio State defensive backs room, which the



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

WAITING HIS TURN – Senior cornerback Marcus Williamson was overshadowed in the 2017 recruiting class by five-stars Jeff Okudah and Shaun Wade, but he is ready to make his mark in the Ohio State secondary this season.

players refer to as BIA (best in America), is not a situation unique to Williamson.

Johnson came to Ohio State with sky-high expectations as a five-star prospect in 2018, following the same path to Columbus as Wade, who also had come from Jacksonville (Fla.) Trinity Christian Academy as a five-star recruit just one year prior.

Johnson was viewed as next in line to an exceptional run of defensive backs who thrived at Ohio State on their way to becoming NFL draft picks, often first-rounders, including Bradley Roby, Doran Grant, Eli Apple, Vonn Bell, Marshon Lattimore, Malik Hooker and Gareon Conley.

After redshirting as a true freshman, Johnson recorded just three tackles (one solo) as a redshirt freshman in 2019. The 6-1, 195-pound corner served as a reserve behind starters Arnette, Okudah and Wade, as well as primary backups Banks and Brown.

With Arnette and Okudah both going in the first round of the 2020 NFL draft, the Buckeyes have openings at cornerback beyond Wade, who is a fourth-year junior and expected to leave for the NFL following the season.

Since Wade is moving from his slot corner spot to the outside, either Banks or Brown, who are both juniors, is expected to start opposite him. Johnson will likely compete for time on the outside given his length and how well Williamson has done in camp at slot corner.

Though Johnson has yet to live up to his

recruiting rankings as the nation's No. 21 overall prospect and No. 2 safety, he still has three years of eligibility remaining as a redshirt sophomore.

A fellow member of the 2018 class, Banks said he and Johnson are extremely close and praised his teammates' intellect. According to Banks, Johnson is ready to break out.

"Tyreke, that's my boy," Banks said of Johnson. "We clicked as soon as we got in here. Tyreke's doing well. He's a smart, intelligent player. He's going to get it."

As someone who has also taken some time to make his mark, Williamson understands how tough it is to stand out in such a talented and crowded defensive backs room. From his perspective, Ohio State has reason to be excited about Johnson.

"Tyreke came in with that five-star pedigree and Tyreke's extremely talented," Williamson said of Johnson. "We've had some great guys in our unit and sometimes it's hard to really break through, but Tyreke comes to work every day with his head down and he goes to work."

"We're really excited for Tyreke. He's been showing great things, and we're excited to see him on the field."

They joined the Buckeyes one year apart, but Williamson and Johnson both found themselves as highly touted prospects who were buried on the depth chart.

With openings in the secondary, the time is now for the Ohio State defensive backs to make their mark and live up to the BIA standard.

Ohio State's Secondary Strives For BIA Standard

By JOE DEMPSEY
 Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Perhaps the most important part of the Buckeyes' dominant defense in 2019 was the outstanding play of the secondary, which was led by Jeff Okudah, Damon Arnette and Shaun Wade at cornerback and Jordan Fuller at safety.

Wade is the only starter who remains from the secondary that led the No. 1 pass defense in the country last year, with the other three departing for the NFL.

Arnette and Fuller were three-year starters for the Buckeyes, while Okudah became the No. 3 overall pick in the 2020 NFL draft, so they left big shoes to fill for the Ohio State defensive backs.

Ohio State head coach Ryan Day is well aware of how important the defensive backs were on the defense that allowed only 156.0 passing yards per game in 2019.

"It's great that last year we were able to get those guys some reps under their belt, but it's different when you're a starter, and we've got to replace Jeff (Okudah) and we've got to replace Jordan (Fuller) and we've got to replace Damon (Arnette)," Day said. "Those were major-impact players for us – two first-rounders, and Jordan's a starter right now in the NFL doing a great job."

"We've got to go get some guys that are going to step up for us in the back end. But Kerry's doing a great job with those guys. They're competing every day in practice. It's going to be fun over the next few weeks to watch them keep coming."

Despite the significant losses in the secondary, Ohio State defensive coordinator and secondary coach Kerry Coombs, who returned after a two-year stint in the NFL, expressed his excitement about the up-and-coming group he has now.

"I really like these kids," Coombs said. "We have a lot of talent back there in the back end. It's just young talent. It's inexperienced talent. But that's what happens when you have great players. We lost a bunch of really good players off of the defense, but we recruited a bunch of really good players to take their place, and guys have been working extremely hard to have that opportunity. We're ready to play. We'll be fine."

When Wade decided to return to Ohio State instead of likely becoming a first-round pick in the draft, it was made clear that he would move from the slot to the outside and better showcase his ability as an NFL prospect to pro teams.

Wade is one of the most valuable players in all of college football, and perhaps his value was never more noticeable than against Clemson when he was ejected for targeting and the Buckeyes blew a 16-0 lead in his absence.

Refusing to let that be his final play in an Ohio State uniform, Wade returned for one more year in pursuit of a national championship despite first-round draft grades.

Wade, who could prove to be worthy of a top-10 pick, may be in line for numerous national awards this season, with his name on watch lists for the Nagurski Trophy, Bednarik Award, Jim Thorpe Award and the Ronnie Lott IMPACT Trophy. Wade's value is not lost on the coaching staff, with Coombs and Day praising how much Wade means to the team.

"He should be a Thorpe Award finalist



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

THE SHADOW – Rather than enter the NFL draft after last season, cornerback Shaun Wade returned to school in order to prove himself on the outside after playing exclusively in the slot in 2019.

Projected Starters

Cornerback
24 • Shaun Wade

6-1 • 195 • Jr.

Jacksonville (Fla.) Trinity Christian

Wade's 15 career pass breakups and four interceptions are both team highs among returners.

Slot
21 • Marcus Williamson

5-10 • 186 • Sr.

Westerville, Ohio/IMG Academy

Recovered a fumble near the goal line in the fourth quarter of Ohio State's win over Cincinnati.

Cornerback
7 • Sevyn Banks

6-1 • 200 • Jr.

Orlando (Fla.) Jones

Banks' three pass breakups tie Proctor for second most among returning defensive backs.

Safety
41 • Josh Proctor

6-2 • 202 • Jr.

Owasso, Okla.

Proctor posted 13 tackles (10 solo) with three pass breakups and one interception in 2019.

right off the get-go," Day said of Wade in January. "He's got a chance to be one of the best corners in the country and hopefully a first-round draft pick next year."

If the loaded secondary of Okudah, Arnette and Fuller needed Wade on the field, then the next group of Buckeye defensive backs will most likely need him even more. As a first-time captain, Wade has come a long way since arriving in Columbus as a reserved athlete. Leading by an example of hard work and passionate play, Wade will try to lead the young Buckeye secondary to great heights.

"This is a kid that loves his team," Coombs said. "He loves his university. He committed all the way back when we won a national championship in 2014. He loves to win. I just think he's an extraordinary kid."

Along with Wade on the outside will be junior corners Sevyn Banks (6-1, 200)

and Cameron Brown (6-0, 192), who were the top two corners off the bench last year. Banks recorded 11 tackles (10 solo), 1½ tackles for loss, three pass breakups and one interception in 170 snaps as a sophomore. Brown added 14 tackles (10 solo), two TFL and one pass breakup in 254 snaps.

"Sevyn Banks and Cam (Brown) both come back with experience, so that's really good," Day said. "They got a lot of opportunity to play last season, and that's good going into conference play right off the bat."

Also hoping to emerge on the outside is former five-star prospect Tyreke Johnson (6-1, 195), who is a third-year sophomore. Although Johnson took the field with the defense in only six games last year, he possesses immense upside as the No. 21 overall recruit in the 2018 class.

A pair of four-star freshmen will provide depth at outside cornerback in Lejond Cavazos (6-0, 195) and Ryan Watts (6-3, 195). Coombs described how he likes cornerbacks who play with an edge.

"More than anything, I'm looking for a gritty competitor, a kid that refuses to lose and plays with a fearless mentality of 'my man catches no balls,'" Coombs said. "That's really the mind-set that we have to have, play in and play out."

Every outside corner on Ohio State is at least 6-0 and 192 pounds, and it is no secret that Coombs prefers his corners to have size. While size and speed can benefit corners, Coombs also expressed the importance of having a hardworking, shutdown mentality.

"Physically, I love long, fast corners, and we all know that. But more than anything, I want a mentally tough guy who's going to line up day in, day out, play in, play out, and have the confidence that his guy is not going to get open," Coombs said. "He's going to be in on-body coverage, and he's going to deny that reception."

A third-team All-Big Ten performer in 2019, Wade (6-1, 195) embodies what Coombs is looking for in his cornerbacks. The former five-star prospect from Jacksonville (Fla.) Trinity Christian Academy posted 25 tackles (16 solo), four TFL, two sacks, one forced fumble, eight pass breakups and one interception as a third-year sophomore in 2019.

During his Buckeye career, Wade has lived up to his lofty expectations as the No. 2 corner in the 2017 class, trailing only Okudah. The impact player has totaled 56 tackles (43 solo), four TFL, two sacks and two forced fumbles. In coverage, Wade has made 15 pass breakups and four interceptions, which both lead all returners.

Beyond Wade, Banks is excited to compete for the other outside corner spot following a number switch from No. 12 to No. 7, which holds significance because his name is Sevyn.

"If you look good, you play good," Banks said. "I've got that mind-set, and it's what has been instilled in me."

Back in the spring, Day said Banks "has got to step up," and the Orlando, Fla., native answered the call with a productive camp prior to COVID-19.

From Coombs' perspective, the former four-star prospect has flashed his excellent potential, but in order to solidify a starting spot, consistency is key.

"He's got to be consistent in his performance and his preparation," Coombs said. "At the same time, I've been very, very pleased with Sevyn. He's an explosive athlete who's big and long and very much in the tradition of the corners we've had here at Ohio State. I'm excited to coach him and see how he fares out there."

Banks, who was initially recruited by Coombs, will now have his third secondary coach in as many years. The Orlando Jones product said he brings his best regardless of who is on the team or coaching.

"I always came in to ball, and that's never going to change – no matter who's here, no matter what's going on," Banks said. "I'm just going to do me."

Like Banks, Brown is not short on confidence. Hailing from St. Louis Christian Brothers College, Brown claimed during the offseason that he was the fastest defensive back in the country.

Also competing on the outside is

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE BACKS

Johnson, who has yet to live up to his recruiting rankings as the nation's No. 2 safety in his class.

At 6-1 and 195 pounds, Johnson features great length that made him a highly touted prospect coming out of Jacksonville (Fla.) Trinity Christian Academy. More on Johnson can be found on page 29 of this issue.

Whether it is Banks, Brown or Johnson, Ohio State's outside corners are eager to step up in place of Okudah and Arnette and to show they belong.

"We take it day by day," Banks said. "We're at Ohio State. We have to compete every day, so we are just going to compete. I don't know what to say about that. We're going to compete."

The two true freshmen competing on the outside also bring high upside to the room. Watts was the No. 18 safety and No. 202 overall recruit in 2020, while Cavazos was the No. 26 cornerback and No. 353 overall prospect.

With Wade moving out of his slot corner position, where he was extremely effective in the past, that leaves a big question mark in the middle of Ohio State's defense.

Although most of his playing time has come from special teams, Williamson (5-10, 186) is projected to have a big year in the slot for the Buckeye defense as a senior.

"Marcus Williamson has had a really, really good camp," Day said. "He's done a lot of good stuff for us. He's made a lot of plays. He's got a great attitude."

Williamson's short-area quickness and strength will help him at slot corner, where he will be matched up with a variety of different players from slot receivers to running backs to tight ends. Against run-heavy offenses, Williamson will likely be replaced by an extra linebacker such as Baron Browning or Justin Hilliard.

Williamson brings a tenacity and intelligence necessary at slot corner, and he is featured on page 29 of this paper.

"Every day, we go out with that thought process that we come here and want to be first-rounders and we want to win championships," Williamson said. "And (Coombs) is not afraid to say it, we're not afraid to say it. That's the standard here and that's what we always try to uphold."

Pushing Williamson in the slot are redshirt freshman Ronnie Hickman (6-1, 205) and true freshman Cameron Martinez (5-10, 188). Hickman was the No. 10 safety and No. 115 overall recruit in the 2019 class, but the Wayne, N.J., native missed last season due to injury.

"Ronnie Hickman is a guy who was out last year, but he's been doing some good things," Day said.

Martinez came to Columbus as the No. 14 athlete and No. 323 overall prospect, and his diverse skill set makes him a good fit in the slot.

"We have a great group of freshmen," Coombs said. "They're talented. They don't know what they don't know yet, so we're working on that. They're learning about the toughness about Ohio State and the culture. Those kids are going to contribute. This season more than any other, you're going to have to depend on inexperienced players to step in and fill roles. We're working really hard on coaching our depth."

As a coach, Coombs is known for the abundance of energy he brings to every meeting, practice or game. Through the unusual offseason, Coombs was forced to adjust to virtual meetings, which ended up helping him build stronger bonds with his

players.

"I prefer to be a hands-on coach," Coombs said. "I learned to be a Zoom coach. I think the neat part about that is I probably have more communication with those kids than I would have in a normal recruiting cycle when I would have been on the road."

"It was new, and it gave us an opportunity to spend some time in some areas other than football. We were getting to have conversations. There are a whole lot of those guys that were here the first time around, kids that I recruited. I have a relationship with them."

According to Day, Coombs is leading the secondary as well as ever, inspiring his players to compete with each other every day.

"He hasn't lost his step, that's for sure," Day said of Coombs. "Running around all over the place, just as I remember him – a lot of energy. The guys love playing for him. But he's very intense and extremely competitive. You talk about a guy who fights every single day, that's Kerry Coombs."

When Coombs was last at Ohio State, he primarily worked with the cornerbacks. Now as defensive coordinator, he will spend more time with the safeties as well.

At safety, the Buckeyes lost a three-time All-Big Ten performer in Fuller, who recorded 224 tackles (167 solo), 5½ TFL, 10 pass breakups and five interceptions over four seasons.

Replacing Fuller, whom former secondary coach Jeff Hafley referred to as the "eraser," is a tall task since he was one of college football's best safeties.

Josh Proctor (6-2, 202) is next in line at safety after posting 13 tackles (10 solo), three pass breakups and one interception as a sophomore backup for Fuller. The Owasso, Okla., native came to Columbus as the No. 7 safety and No. 71 overall recruit in the 2018 class.

Proctor has earned rave reviews from his teammates as a standout performer in practice, often intercepting passes and making exciting plays for the defense. A lack of meaningful minutes for Proctor to this point in his career has more to do with how superb Fuller was and is less of an indictment of Proctor's ability.

Ohio State is extremely excited about its young, athletic safety who has a knack for hard hits and big plays, with safeties coach Matt Barnes praising Proctor's ability in man-to-man coverage. The key to Proctor becoming a great safety at Ohio State will be following in Fuller's footsteps in terms of performing at a high level day in, day out.

"The big thing for Josh is consistency," Barnes said. "He's got some unbelievable talent and ability and potential. I've seen him make some outstanding plays. The big thing for Josh is showing up every day, being right on all the little things, all the details, and consistently getting it right."

Marcus Hooker (5-11, 200) enters the season as Proctor's top backup and could push for more playing time with solid play. The New Castle, Pa., native recorded seven tackles (four solo) and one pass breakup as a sophomore.

"When I think of Marcus Hooker, I think of a true center fielder," Barnes said. "I think of a really 'range-y' player that's instinctive, that has freakish ball skills. He really tracks the ball well and does a great job of going to get it. And he runs the alley well for us in the run game."

True freshman Kourt Williams (6-1, 221) has impressed his coaches and team-



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

TOGETHER AGAIN – Junior cornerback Sevy Banks has been reunited this season with defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs, who recruited him out of high school before taking a job with the NFL's Tennessee Titans in 2018.

mates ever since he arrived on campus in January and has the potential to make an impact as a first-year player. Williams was the No. 12 outside linebacker and No. 166 overall prospect in the 2020 class.

"A young guy who has a chance to be a really, really good player," Day said of Williams. "His approach has been excellent. He's versatile. He can do a lot of things. That's someone to keep an eye on."

Williams' classmate Lathan Ransom (6-1, 198) will also provide depth in the secondary. Ransom was highly touted as the No. 11 safety and No. 167 overall recruit in the class.

In addition to the true freshmen, red-shirt freshman Bryson Shaw (6-1, 195) provides depth at safety for Ohio State and has impressed Day with his football IQ.

"When you have really sharp guys like Jordan Fuller last year, he was able to allow us to do so much," Day said. "A guy that's really done a good job is Bryson Shaw, a guy who's really sharp and can get us in and out of stuff."

The Buckeyes also have a strong group of former walk-ons in the secondary.

Junior Darryl Sinclair (5-9, 180) and sophomore Lloyd McFarquhar (5-9, 170) have multiple years of experience in the program at cornerback. Sophomore Ryan Batsch (6-2, 200) and junior Kevin Dever (6-0, 195) will continue to work at safety.

With so many talented defensive backs who are eager to prove themselves in the mix, how will they differentiate themselves and earn playing time under Coombs?

"The guys that run to the ball, the guys that hustle, the guys that spend time outside of this facility preparing themselves to play are going to find a way onto the field," Coombs said. "If they don't make mental errors, and they give you 100 percent of effort. Everybody knows we recruit great athletes. If they show up ready to work and they work, they're going to play. And they're going to play a lot. And they're going to have great value here and at the next level. We've got a bunch of those guys right now."

Although Coombs is in his first year back at Ohio State, many of his defensive backs are already familiar with his expectations because of the time he spent with them in recruiting.

"We're developing that mentality, and I'm excited about these guys and their development of it," Coombs. "But that is really what I'm looking for. It's what I look for when I recruit. I like to recruit winners. I like to recruit guys that their guy doesn't catch the ball."

Perhaps more than any other position group, Ohio State's defensive backs embrace the team mantra of "competitive excellence," with players pushing each other to reach their maximum potential on a daily basis. The ultimate goal is to be the best in America, or BIA.

"The whole mantra of BIA came from being at the best place in America," Coombs said. "If we're at the best place in America, we certainly should be the best in America at what we do. When I recruit kids, I tell them I really only want to be around people who want to be the best in the world at what we do. It doesn't matter if that's the girl that comes in and sprays all the stuff down and is trying to make sure it's healthy for when I return the next day or the kid who's dragging the bags out for my drills every day. I just want to be around people who want to be the best in the world at what we do."

"That's a challenge, because that means there's a standard to live up to every day. That's not something you just say, and somebody slaps it on a shirt or a hashtag and you become that. We try to hold ourselves to be accountable to that every day. The kids have a vision of that. They understand what's required."

Despite the fact that Ohio State has set such a high bar in the secondary, Day is confident in his unproven defensive backs to uphold the standard.

"It's an expectation here that's been set by a lot of great players," he said, "and these guys understand that they have big shoes to fill."

Ohio State Special Teams Returns Experienced Group

By **JOE DEMPSEY**
 Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

In Matt Barnes' first season as special teams coordinator, Ohio State was the most solid all-around it has been on special teams in years. With most of the key members back, the Buckeyes' special teams units expect to thrive in 2020.

Fifth-year senior punter Drue Chrisman (6-3, 222) had another solid season in 2019, but the high-powered Buckeye offense did not give him many opportunities to show off his boot.

Chrisman averaged 44.3 yards per punt on 46 attempts, with 15 punts traveling 50 or more yards. Specializing in pinning opponents deep in their own territory, Chrisman had 18 punts downed inside the 20-yard line last season.

The highlight of Chrisman's season came in the 2019 Big Ten Championship Game when he executed a fake-punt pass to tight end Luke Farrell for a 21-yard completion facing fourth-and-9 from the OSU 26.

"He's as impressive a player as I've ever been around," Barnes said of Chrisman. "And I don't mean that he's an impressive specialist; he's as impressive a football player as I've ever been around. I can remember back to our winter mat drills we were doing, he's matched up against linebackers and he's winning one-on-one reps against them. He really has a tenacity about him that you really appreciate for a

specialist. Again, it's not to quantify that as for a specialist – really, just as a football player.

"I have been unbelievably impressed with him, just the way that he works and goes about his business, as he spends a lot of practice time sort of on his own, kind of doing his own thing, working, and it's never a management issue, making sure he's on his stuff. He's first-class and a true professional already."

Backing up Chrisman at punter, the Buckeyes have senior Zach Hoover (6-2, 200) and sophomore Michael O'Shaughnessy (6-3, 200). Commit Jesse Mirco (6-3, 200), who is the No. 4 punter in the 2021 class, is expected to be the punter of the future in Columbus.

Ohio State was once again tremendous on punt coverage last year, not allowing a return of longer than 7 yards for the entire season. The Buckeyes allowed only 36 punt-return yards on 12 returns for a 3.0 average, which ranked No. 10 in the nation.

"We preach the battle of field position," Barnes said. "We know how important it is to win that battle. Anytime you can pin a team on kickoff or knock a punt down inside their territory, you're making them drive the field. That's one of those things, along with the turnover battle, that's tried and true to help you win football games."

Ohio State senior kicker Blake Haubeil (6-3, 230) had his best season as a Buckeye in 2019, connecting on 13 of 15 field-goal attempts and all 85 of his extra-



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

FIELD FLIPPER – Fifth-year senior Drue Chrisman has averaged 43.9 yards per punt in his career, which ranks fourth in Ohio State history.

point tries. Haubeil drilled his career-long 55-yard field goal right before halftime at Northwestern, when he sent the visiting Buckeyes into intermission with a 31-3 lead.

As a placekicker, Haubeil showed improved range and proved he can be trusted to cap drives with points when called upon.

"We're blessed here with unbelievable talent at specialists. And there's an old adage in special teams, good kick, good coverage," Barnes said. "So whether it's our coverage units, or Blake scoring points for us on extra point and field goal, look for huge things from him this year."

Due to Ohio State's offense scoring so many touchdowns, Haubeil was most active on extra points and kickoffs. The Buffalo, N.Y., native showed improvement on kickoffs, frequently giving the opposition poor starting field position. The Buckeyes allowed only 17.9 yards per return to rank No. 19 nationally.

Junior kicker Dominic DiMaccio (5-8, 192) served as Haubeil's backup in 2019, connecting on 2 of 3 extra-point attempts. The Powell, Ohio, native will be joined by highly touted 2020 commit Jake Seibert (6-1, 200), who is expected to take a grayshirt, meaning he will not be on scholarship until 2021 but can play as a walk-on.

Sophomore linebacker Craig Young (6-3, 228) emerged as an important part of the kickoff team in 2019 as a true freshman. The former two-way standout from Ft. Wayne, Ind., impressed Barnes with his combination of size and speed.

"Craig Young is a guy that has a lot of ability," Barnes told BSB. "Big guys that can run always find their way on special teams, and that's what he is. I look forward to developing Craig Young, and with his skill-set, he should be one of the best special teams players year in and year out in the Big Ten."

Another young Buckeye who stood out on special teams as a true freshman was wide receiver Jameson Williams (6-2, 188). As a speedy wideout, Williams was covet-

ed for his playmaking as the No. 13 wide receiver in the 2019 class, but Barnes has been most impressed with his tenacity.

"Jameson Williams didn't play a ton for us early on special teams and has developed really well," Barnes said. "He's a demon on kickoff for us and played some on punt block, and I look forward to some big plays from him. The biggest thing is his speed. If you can get down the field and just get in the way, that's a big part of it. It's not always about making the tackle necessarily, but it's about getting in front of the ball and stopping the vertical return. As fast as he is, and I know he's a little bit lighter than some of the other guys that you are usually used to seeing run down on kickoff, but he's fearless."

"He's as tough as a guy we've got. If you're really fast and willing, those are two key qualities to being a great player on kickoff. He's got both of them."

Williams enjoys streaking down the field at the Demon position in pursuit of a big hit to spark a defensive stop.

"I just have a lot of fun on kickoff," Williams told BSB. "You can ask anybody, I'm trying to make the play every time. I'm just trying to go out there and have fun, execute for the team, make a big play. Then we're going to turn up on defense. Defense wins games. Defense wins championships. That's the name of the game: special teams."

Ohio State should always be expected to succeed in kickoff coverage with so many highly touted players earning a name for themselves on special teams units, particularly kickoff coverage. Barnes views special teams as a great opportunity for young talented players to make an impact.

"One of the great things about special teams is that it doesn't take as long to get on the field," Barnes said. "There is not as much learning, where a young wide receiver, running back or defensive back would have to come in and learn the system and all the things that go with that. On special teams, a lot of it is just running

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The Numbers Game

Final 2019-20 Football Statistics

2019-20 Game-By-Game				Scoring	TD	EPK	EPR	EPRC	FG	PTS
Date	Opponent	Result	Crowd	J.K. Dobbins	23	-	-	-	-	138
Aug. 31	(5)FLORIDA ATLANTIC	W, 45-21	103,228	Blake Haubeil	-	85-85	-	-	-	124
Sept. 7	(5)CINCINNATI	W 42-0	104,089	Chris Olave	12	-	-	-	-	74
Sept. 14	(6)at Indiana	W, 51-10	47,945	Justin Fields	10	-	-	-	-	60
Sept. 21	(6)MIAMI (OHIO)	W, 76-5	103,190	K.J. Hill	10	-	-	-	-	60
Sept. 28	(5)at Nebraska	W, 48-7	89,759	Binjimen Victor	6	-	-	-	-	36
Oct. 5	(4)MICHIGAN STATE (25)	W, 34-10	104,797	Garrett Wilson	5	-	-	-	-	30
Oct. 18	(4)at Northwestern	W, 52-3	47,330	Master Teague	4	-	-	-	-	24
Oct. 26	(3)WISCONSIN (13)	W, 38-7	102,998	Jeremy Ruckert	4	-	-	-	-	24
Nov. 9	(3)MARYLAND	W, 73-14	101,022	Austin Mack	3	-	-	-	-	18
Nov. 16	(2)at Rutgers	W, 56-21	33,528	Demario McCall	2	-	-	-	-	12
Nov. 23	(2)PENN STATE (8)	W, 28-17	104,355	Luke Farrell	2	-	-	-	-	12
Nov. 30	(2)at Michigan (10)	W, 56-27	112,071	Marcus Crowley	2	-	-	-	-	12
Dec. 7	(2) WISCONSIN (8)	W, 34-21	66,649	Damon Arnette	1	-	-	-	-	6
Dec. 28	(2) vs. Clemson (3)	L, 29-23	71,330	Jameson Williams	1	-	-	-	-	6
OSU's gameday AP ranking is in parentheses before the opponent, while the opponent's ranking is after the name.				Steele Chambers	1	-	-	-	-	6
Team Statistics				Jake Hausmann	1	-	-	-	-	6
				Jaelen Gill	1	-	-	-	-	6
				D. DiMaccio	-	2-3	-	-	-	2
				OSU Totals	88	87-88	-	-	13-15	656
				OPP Totals	23	19-20	1-1	1-1	9-13	192
				FG Distance	0-29	30-39	40-49	50+	Total	
				Blake Haubeil	6-6	3-5	3-3	1-1	13-15	
				OSU Totals	4-4	3-5	3-3	1-1	13-15	
				OPP Totals	5-6	2-3	2-4	0-0	9-13	
				Punting	No.	Yds.	Avg.	Bk	Long	
				Drue Chrisman	46	2037	44.3	0	61	
				TEAM	1	13	13.0	1	13	
				OSU Totals	47	2050	43.6	1	61	
				OPP Totals	102	4159	40.8	2	70	
				Interceptions	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long	
				Jeff Okudah	3	0	0.0	0	0	
				Jordan Fuller	2	26	13.0	0	26	
				Amir Riep	2	16	8.0	0	16	
				K'Vaughan Pope	2	4	2.0	0	3	
				Damon Arnette	1	96	96.0	1	96	
				Tuf Borland	1	42	42.0	0	42	
				Josh Proctor	1	0	0.0	0	0	
				Sevyn Banks	1	0	0.0	0	0	
				Shaun Wade	1	0	0.0	0	0	
				Justin Hilliard	1	0	0.0	0	0	
				OSU Totals	15	184	12.3	1	96	
				OPP Totals	3	37	12.3	0	34	
				Punt Returns	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long	
				Garrett Wilson	14	86	6.1	0	52	
				Demario McCall	8	65	8.1	0	35	
				K.J. Hill	5	38	7.6	0	16	
				Chris Olave	1	18	18.0	0	18	
				Sevyn Banks	1	5	5.0	0	5	
				OSU Totals	29	212	7.3	0	52	
				OPP Totals	12	36	3.0	0	7	
				Kickoff Returns	No.	Yds.	Avg.	TD	Long	
				Demario McCall	10	232	23.2	0	38	
				Xavier Johnson	1	19	19.0	0	19	
				Marcus Crowley	1	17	17.0	0	17	
				Chris Olave	1	15	15.0	0	15	
				OSU Totals	13	283	21.8	0	38	
				OPP Totals	43	770	17.9	0	70	
				Def. Leaders	Solo	Ast.	Tot.	TFL-Yds.	Sacks	
				Malik Harrison	49	26	75	16.5-53	4.5-27	
				Pete Werner	39	25	64	5.5-11	-	
				Jordan Fuller	42	20	62	-	-	
				Tuf Borland	27	28	55	3.0-13	1.0-9	
				Chase Young	32	14	46	21.0-129	16.5-117	
				Baron Browning	26	17	43	10.0-30	5.0-25	
				Damon Arnette	27	8	35	1.0-3	-	
				Jeff Okudah	29	6	35	1.0-1	-	
				Jashon Cornell	16	14	30	6.5-33	4.0-23	
				DaVon Hamilton	18	10	28	10.5-52	6.0-45	
				Shaun Wade	16	9	25	4.0-18	2.0-14	
				Zach Harrison	14	10	24	5.0-20	3.5-18	
				Dallas Gant	9	12	21	3.0-7	1.5-5	
				Amir Riep	10	10	20	-	-	
				Brendon White	15	4	19	2.0-3	1.0-1	
				Tommy Toggiani	8	8	16	2.0-4	-	
				OSU Totals	515	311	826	124-494	54-354	
				OPP Totals	593	444	1037	80-317	35-224	
				Fumbles Forced:	13 - Chase Young (6), Jeff Okudah (2), Shaun Wade, Jashon Cornell, Dallas Gant, Marcus Williamson, Damon Arnette.					
				Fumbles Recovered:	10 - Pete Werner (2), Malik Harrison (2), Jerron Cage, Tyler Friday, Jordan Fuller, DaVon Hamilton, Robert Landers, Marcus Williamson.					

Projected Starters

<p>Kicker 95 • Blake Haubeil 6-3 • 230 • Jr. Buffalo (N.Y.) Canisius</p> <p>Haubeil has connected on all 122 of his extra-point attempts since arriving at Ohio State.</p> <p>Long Snapper 42 • Bradley Robinson 6-1 • 230 • 5th Troy, Mich.</p> <p>Former walk-on who appeared in blowout wins against Miami (Ohio) and Rutgers last season.</p>	<p>Punter 91 • Drue Chrisman 6-3 • 222 • 5th-Sr. Lawrenceburg (Ind.) Cincinnati LaSalle</p> <p>Punted 158 times in scarlet and gray, averaging 43.9 yards per punt with a long of 65.</p> <p>Punt Returner 5 • Garrett Wilson 6-0 • 193 • So. Austin (Texas) Lake Travis</p> <p>Averaged 6.1 yards per punt return as a freshman, with a long of 52 yards against Miami (Ohio).</p>
<p>Kick Returner 3 • Demario McCall 5-9 • 195 • 5th-Sr. North Ridgeville, Ohio</p> <p>Returned 10 kicks last season, averaging 23.2 yards per return with a long of 38.</p>	

and hitting. It gives the opportunity for young guys who may not understand all the ins and outs of an offensive or a defensive playbook but just know how to play really fast and make plays."

The lone onside kick attempt of the season by Haubeil was recovered by Ohio State. The aggressive call caught Maryland by surprise when standout receiver Chris Olave raced down the sideline and reeled in Haubeil's onside kick like it was a precision pass.

The biggest loss from Ohio State's 2019 special teams units is long snapper Liam McCullough, who spent time on the Las Vegas Raiders in pursuit of a professional career. The replacement for McCullough will either be his brother, junior Roen McCullough (6-1, 230), or Bradley Robinson (6-1, 230), who is a senior from Troy, Mich.

Robinson, who is a former Michigan State transfer, was the No. 20 long snapper in the country in 2016. He appeared in two games last season, taking the field in lopsided wins against Miami (Ohio) and Rutgers.

Roen McCullough was the No. 4 long snapper in the country in 2018. The younger McCullough did not take the field for the Buckeyes in 2019.

Return Game

The Buckeyes bring back sophomore wide receiver Garrett Wilson, who flashed his dynamic playmaking ability as a true freshman. Wilson's best punt return was his first, a 52-yard runback that he nearly broke for a touchdown against Miami (Ohio).

Outside of his first return and a 23-yard return against Wisconsin, Wilson struggled as a first-year returner, gaining just 11 yards on his 12 other returns with two fumbles. If Wilson wants to remain the team's primary punt returner, he will have to limit his muffed punts and display more consistency.

The Buckeyes lost their most sure-handed returner in K.J. Hill, who was selected by the San Diego Chargers in the seventh round (No. 220 overall) of the 2020 NFL draft.

Helping Wilson replace Hill, senior H-receiver Demario McCall and freshman H-receiver Mookie Cooper and Jaxon Smith-Njigba are also expected to be in the rotation of kick returners, while defensive back Cameron Martinez and the sure-handed Olave are also returning punts.

McCall was once one of the most highly touted running back prospects in the country, rated the No. 2 all-purpose back and No. 44 overall recruit in the 2016 class. The North Ridgeville, Ohio, native's career has not gone the way many expected on offense, but part of McCall's problem has simply been the talent in front of him. Parris Campbell and J.K. Dobbins started in front of McCall at his primary positions, and both of those players went on to be second-round picks in the NFL.

There is no denying how dangerous McCall can be with the ball in his hands, which he demonstrated with a 35-yard punt return against Florida Atlantic in the 2019 season opener. Although McCall has not been able to find his footing on offense, bouncing between running back and slot receiver, perhaps returning kicks will be his opportunity to shine.

Outside of Wilson and McCall, Cooper possesses a lot of potential as a returner with his agility and ability to make people miss in the open field. Cooper boasts impressive combine scores like his 4.07-second 20-yard shuttle, and his playmaking ability is what made him such an attractive recruit.

On kick returns, Ohio State is expected to use a combination of McCall and Cooper, but former walk-on running back Xavier Johnson could play his way into the rotation. Johnson, who has earned rave reviews from head coach Ryan Day, gained 19 yards on his lone kickoff return in 2019. McCall led the team with a 23.2-yard average on 10 kick returns.

Sophomore running back Marcus Crowley had a 17-yard kick return last year before suffering a season-ending ACL injury, so he is another possibility as a returner. Olave returned one kickoff for 15 yards and one punt for 18 yards last season, so he could be in the mix, but it is not expected given his importance to the offense.

An area where the Buckeyes stood out a year ago was blocking kicks. Ohio State's three blocked kicks tied them for No. 14 in the country, and they came in three consecutive games against Cincinnati, Indiana and Miami (Ohio).

Barnes holds his units to the highest standard, which was a theme passed down from Urban Meyer's tenure. With many key players back, there is no reason not to expect Ohio State special teams units to be among the best in the country again in 2020.

Nebraska Serves As Solid First Test For OSU

By PATRICK MAYHORN
Special To Buckeye Sports Bulletin

In 2019, Nebraska was painted as the first true challenge on the schedule for an Ohio State team that had rolled through its first four opponents, beating Florida Atlantic, Cincinnati, Indiana and Miami (Ohio) by a combined score of 214-36. The 3-1 Cornhuskers certainly didn't stand among the elite in college football, but many expected Ohio State to be tested far more than it had been in the first third of the regular season.

Instead, as BSB phrased it on the cover of the Oct. 5, 2019, edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, Ohio State "obliterated Nebraska, 48-7, in front of 89,759 fans" and put to bed any ideas about a potential challenge or trap game.

Entering another matchup with Ohio State to open the abbreviated 2020 campaign, Scott Frost's Cornhuskers are again being considered a game to watch for the Buckeyes, which many expect will have at least one eye trained on College Football Playoff aspirations through the entire nine-game, 2020 Big Ten season.

Unlike in Frost's first two-seasons in Lincoln which saw Nebraska rattle off four and five wins, respectively, expectations around the program seem to have normalized relative to the talent and relative to a schedule that will see Wisconsin, Penn State and Minnesota come to town, on top of this opening road trip to Columbus. In the eight-game regular season, an even 4-4 or 5-3 record would be perfectly acceptable and a sign of steady progress, according to Hail Varsity's Erin Sorensen.

"I think a lot of Nebraska fans are benchmarking the wins and the losses," Sorensen told BSB of expectations around Lincoln for this upcoming season. "I think for most people 4-4 or 5-3 would be very successful. Anything better than that is just, 'wow.' But 4-4 is what a lot of people are settling around as far as 'that would be a great season.'"

To reach the more ambitious 5-3 record, Nebraska would likely need a standout season from its most recognizable player, junior quarterback Adrian Martinez. Martinez burst onto the scene as a true freshman in 2018, completing 224 of his 347 passes (64.6 percent) for 17 touchdowns to just eight interceptions. On top of that, he rushed 140 times for 629 yards and eight additional scores.

However, Martinez appeared to take a step back in his second year with the program. He saw a dip in every major statistic, completing 149 of 251 passes (59.4 percent) for 10 touchdowns and nine interceptions, while running a team-high 144 times for 626 yards and seven scores. A return to his freshman form – or even a step above it – would serve as a major boost for the Nebraska offense, though taking that step may not be entirely on Martinez.

"He's somebody where, when going into

his junior year, everyone wants to know if he's going to be the Adrian Martinez we saw as a freshman, or the Adrian Martinez that we saw as a sophomore," Sorensen explained. "However, all of the offensive coaches that we've spoken with have said, 'Everyone around Adrian needs to be better.'"

The latter point has been as common a talking point as any among the Nebraska coaching staff this offseason. With 10 returning starters on the offense including Martinez, Frost and new offensive coordinator Matt Lubick are banking on better production from complementary pieces such as running back Dedrick Mills, tight end Jack Stoll and wide receivers such as Wan'Dale Robinson and Omar Manning.

"Everyone sees what the quarterback does, but when we watch cut-ups of last year's season, it's the people around him," Lubick said. "If Adrian performs well, we've got to help him do that."

While that's the focus, Lubick does appear to be pretty optimistic about where his offense stands entering week one. Even on the other side of the ball, defensive coaches are taking notice of improvements on the offense and an increasing number of playmakers who can be relied on consistently.

"It's not just one or two guys anymore, it's six or seven of them now, maybe eight of them now, that can be put on the field," said defensive backs coach Travis Fisher. "There's more speed. There's more athleticism. There's more variety, more ways to attack a defense. There's just more. So it makes practice more competitive every day."

While playmakers such as Robinson and Mills will be key for Nebraska, the offensive line may be the guiding force for the rest of the offense. With five starters returning from last season, expectations are high for a group that had its fair share of struggles in 2019, specifically in the middle, where center Cam Jurgens had snap issues for much of the season.

"The offensive line is going to be key," Sorensen said. "Cam Jurgens, he is going to be a huge piece of this (offense). Early in the (2019) season there were some snap issues. It seems like that has been sorted out. Cam was not a natural center. He actually was moved from tight end to center at Nebraska. He's put on a lot of weight, he's made a lot of gains, over this last offseason especially, but he's one I would keep an eye on."

"The whole offensive line, they've shifted people around, they've made some adjustments. The offensive line coach has now become the run-game coordinator. That's key."

While the offense is searching for improvement from familiar faces, the defense is in need of new contributors to take over, specifically up front, where Carlos Davis, Darrion Daniels and Khalil Davis have all moved on to

Get To Know ... Nebraska

About Nebraska

- **2019 record:** 5-7 (3-6).
- **Team Information:** Offensive Formation – Spread; Defensive Formation – 3-4; Starters Returning – Offense 10, Defense 5, Specialists 0.
- **Head Coach:** Scott Frost, third year, 9-15.
- **Series History:** 9th meeting; Ohio State leads 7-1-0.
- **School Facts:** Location – Lincoln, NE; Enrollment – 25,332; Nickname – Cornhuskers; Color – Red; Conference – Big Ten (West Division); Stadium – Memorial Stadium (Surface, FieldTurf; Capacity – 90,000).

Top Offensive Returners

Rushing	Att.	Net	Avg.	TD
Adrian Martinez	144	626	4.3	7
Dedrick Mills	143	745	5.2	10
Wan'Dale Robinson	88	340	3.9	3

Passing	Comp.-Att.	Pct.	Yds.	TD-INT
Adrian Martinez	149-251	59.4	1956	10-9

Receiving	Rec.	Net	Avg.	TD
Wan'Dale Robinson	40	453	11.3	2
Jack Stoll	25	234	9.4	1
Dedrick Mills	15	123	8.2	0

Team Offensive Stats

Points Per Game – 28.0
Rushing Yards Per Game – 203.3
Passing Yards Per Game – 212.6
Total Offense Avg. Per Game – 415.8

2020 Schedule

Date	Opponent	Time/Result (ET)
Oct. 24	at Ohio State	12 p.m.
Oct. 31	WISCONSIN	TBA
Nov. 7	at Northwestern	TBA
Nov. 14	PENN STATE	TBA
Nov. 21	ILLINOIS	TBA
Nov. 28	at Iowa	TBA
Dec. 5	at Purdue	TBA
Dec. 12	MINNESOTA	TBA
Dec. 19	Big Ten Championship Week	TBA

Top Defensive Returners

Def. Leaders	Solo-Ast.	Tot.	TFL-Yds.	Sacks
Will Honas	43-30	73	5.0-16	1.0-7
Marquel Dismuke	42-25	67	1.5-5	0.0
Collin Miller	35-31	67	5.0-13	1.0-5
JoJo Domann	38-14	52	9.0-40	2.5-21
Cam Britt-Taylor	29-20	49	3.0-20	1.5-15
Dicaprio Bootle	17-14	31	0.0	0.0
Ben Stille	13-18	31	6.5-38	3.0-20
Deontre Thomas	8-11	19	1.5-3	0-0
Caleb Tannor	9-8	17	3.0-15	2.5-14

Interceptions	No.	Yds	Avg	TD	Long
Cam Britt-Taylor	3	95	31.6	1	48
Braxton Clark	1	5	5.0	0	5

Team Defensive Stats

Points Per Game Allowed – 27.8
Rushing Yards Per Game Allowed – 188.1
Passing Yards Per Game Allowed – 200.8
Total Offense Avg. Per Game Allowed – 388.8

the NFL. However, Nebraska is not without potential at the position. Senior Ben Stille was a contributor in 2019 and is expected to move into a full-time starting role in 2020, while redshirt freshman and former four-star Ty Robinson has made an impression in the fall and is expected to battle for a spot as well.

"It seems like Ben Stille is going to be in the middle, so he's going to take that spot, but who's going to be on either side? They said that they've been impressed by Ty Robinson, who's a redshirt freshman," Sorensen said. "It's hard to know what that group is going to look like, but it's good to know that it seems like they have some depth, and what they don't have in experience, they do have in that depth. But experience is important. I don't think it's necessarily a point of weakness. I just think it's something that will need to be addressed, and a team like Ohio State could really take advantage of that."

There are fewer questions in the back eight of the defense, because of the return of such potential stars as outside linebacker JoJo Domann and defensive backs Dicaprio Bootle and Cam Taylor-Britt. All three players have contributed and are known commodities for a defense desperate for stability. Domann is the only returning starter at linebacker, where he moved full time in 2019, though he is still expected to rotate around the defense and see time at a number of positions, including nickelback, safety and inside linebacker on top of his usual role.

"He can play like a defensive back, he could be a guy at safety, almost nickel," outside linebackers coach Mike Dawson said of Domann. "At the same time, he's very physically fit and strong. He's got the body type of almost an inside linebacker, and yet that skill-set and strength is what makes him the guy you don't feel bad about putting him on the field at outside linebacker."

The backfield is likely the strength of the defense with Bootle and Taylor-Britt returning alongside safety Marquel Dismuke and a potential diamond in the rough in senior safety Deontai Williams, a former high school teammate of Ohio State's Shaun Wade at Trinity Christian Academy in Jacksonville, Fla.

"Defensive back is actually one group on this team I feel really good about," Sorensen said. "Cam Taylor-Britt is another player who can do just about everything."

"Deontai Williams is the person you really need to keep an eye on. You have Cam Taylor-Britt, who's fantastic, you have Dicaprio Bootle, who's fantastic. Dismuke, he has some work he can do, but he has those moments. The person though that unfortunately no one really got to see because he was injured in 2019 and it was a huge bummer because he's incredible is Deontai Williams, senior safety. There are few people who play like Deontai. As long as he stays healthy, I am so excited for Big Ten teams to get to see him this year. He is incredible."

After suffering a season-ending shoulder injury in 2019, Williams hasn't just drawn the praise of Nebraska media. He's also caught the eye of Fisher, who singled him out as a pleasure to coach and a player whom Nebraska will need to contribute in 2020.

"Soft-spoken grown man," Fisher said of Williams. "He's not going to be moved off emotions. He's going to let his opportunities present themselves, and he's going to go out and play football. I love the kid. He's great in the room, he has the culture, he brings the younger guys along, he holds the older guys accountable, he holds himself accountable. It's a pleasure to coach him."

Although the Cornhuskers aren't expected to truly push Ohio State to the limits to open the season, the light at the end of the tunnel seems to be approaching for a program that once won 50 games in five seasons from 1993-1997 but has notched just 13 from 2017-19. The focus in Lincoln is not yet on beating teams like Ohio State but on leveling up and closing the gap between itself and the top of the conference. A competitive showing against the Buckeyes could mean a big step in that direction in 2020.

"I'm reluctant to talk about us getting better because we have gotten better but people take that and run with it," Frost said. "We have a lot of work to do. We've covered a lot of ground, but probably still have some ground to cover."

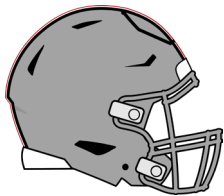
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Projected Depth Charts

How We See It

OHIO STATE RUSH OFFENSE VS. NEBRASKA RUSH DEFENSE

For a period longer than anyone wants to remember, the 2020 season was on, then shortened, then off because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and there was a real possibility there would be no games for the Buckeyes and their conference brethren until at least January. But an about-face by the powers in charge brings us to the opener between schools that barked the loudest about the possibility of no football this fall. Be careful what you wish for, Nebraska, because Ohio State is hell-bent on making the College Football Playoff a second straight season and has the horses to do so beginning with its three-headed running attack. Despite losing J.K. Dobbins and his underrated 2,003 rushing yards to the Baltimore Ravens, the Buckeyes will offer running backs Master Teague (789 yards, 5.8 yards per carry last season) and Oklahoma transfer Trey Sermon (2,076 yards in 19 career starts for the Sooners) to complement the 10 rushing TDs by quarterback Justin Fields. Teague has recovered from a torn Achilles during spring practice and appears ready to compete with Sermon, or vice versa. A key departure for the Nebraska defense is inside linebacker Mohamed Barry (team-best 89 tackles last season). The Huskers allowed 188.1 rushing yards per game last season (94th of 130 teams) and have too many holes to plug. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

NEBRASKA RUSH OFFENSE VS. OHIO STATE RUSH DEFENSE

The Cornhuskers have a dual-threat QB in Adrian Martinez (626 yards and seven TDs on the ground), and leading rusher Dedrick Mills (745 yards, 5.2 avg., 10 TDs) returns. Nebraska is developing (key word) experience on the line and depth at running back after finishing 30th nationally last season in rushing yards per game (203.2). The Buckeyes will be the Buckeyes and that means despite turnover up front, defensive line coach Larry Johnson will have a dominant group with heavy rotation to make life miserable for the hogs across the line. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

OHIO STATE PASS OFFENSE VS. NEBRASKA PASS DEFENSE

Fields was pretty impressive last season in his first go-around in Columbus (3,273 yards, 41 touchdowns, three interceptions) but is driven by his late-game interception in the national semifinal loss to Clemson, as is Chris Olave, who broke his route on that fateful play. Olave leads a robust pass-catching corps that includes Garrett Wilson and Julian Fleming, the nation's top-rated wide receiver for the class of 2020. Tight ends Jeremy Ruckert (four) and Luke Farrell combined for six TDs, and All-America right guard Wyatt Davis initially opted out before deciding to return to an experienced line. The Cornhuskers no longer have their best pass rusher in defensive tackle Khalil Davis (eight sacks), but three starters return in the secondary and Cam Taylor-Britt (three interceptions) can play safety or corner. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

NEBRASKA PASS OFFENSE VS. OHIO STATE PASS DEFENSE

Martinez (149 of 251, 59.4 percent, 1,956 yards, 10 TDs, nine interceptions) was serviceable last season, but that was before J.D. Spielman (18.3 yards per catch, five TDs) transferred to TCU. The Huskers still have versatile Wan'Dale Robinson (40 catches, 453 yards, two TDs; 340 rushing yards, three TDs). Robinson and Jack Stoll (25) are the only returning receivers with 25 or more catches last season. The Buckeyes will break in several new starters in the secondary, but the return of corner Shaun Wade gives OSU fans comfort. The Nebraska line will be under duress to protect Martinez. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Cornhuskers have a new coach in senior special teams analyst Jonathan Rutledge. He added LSU graduate transfer Connor Culp for the kicking game (Nebraska made 12 of 20 field goals with a long of 41 last season) and Australian freshman punter Daniel Cerni. For the Buckeyes, senior Blake Haubeil made 13 of 15 FGs (long 55) and all of his 85 extra points. Senior Drue Chrisman is a two-time Ray Guy (best punter in the nation) semifinalist whose career average of 43.9 yards is fifth on the OSU list. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

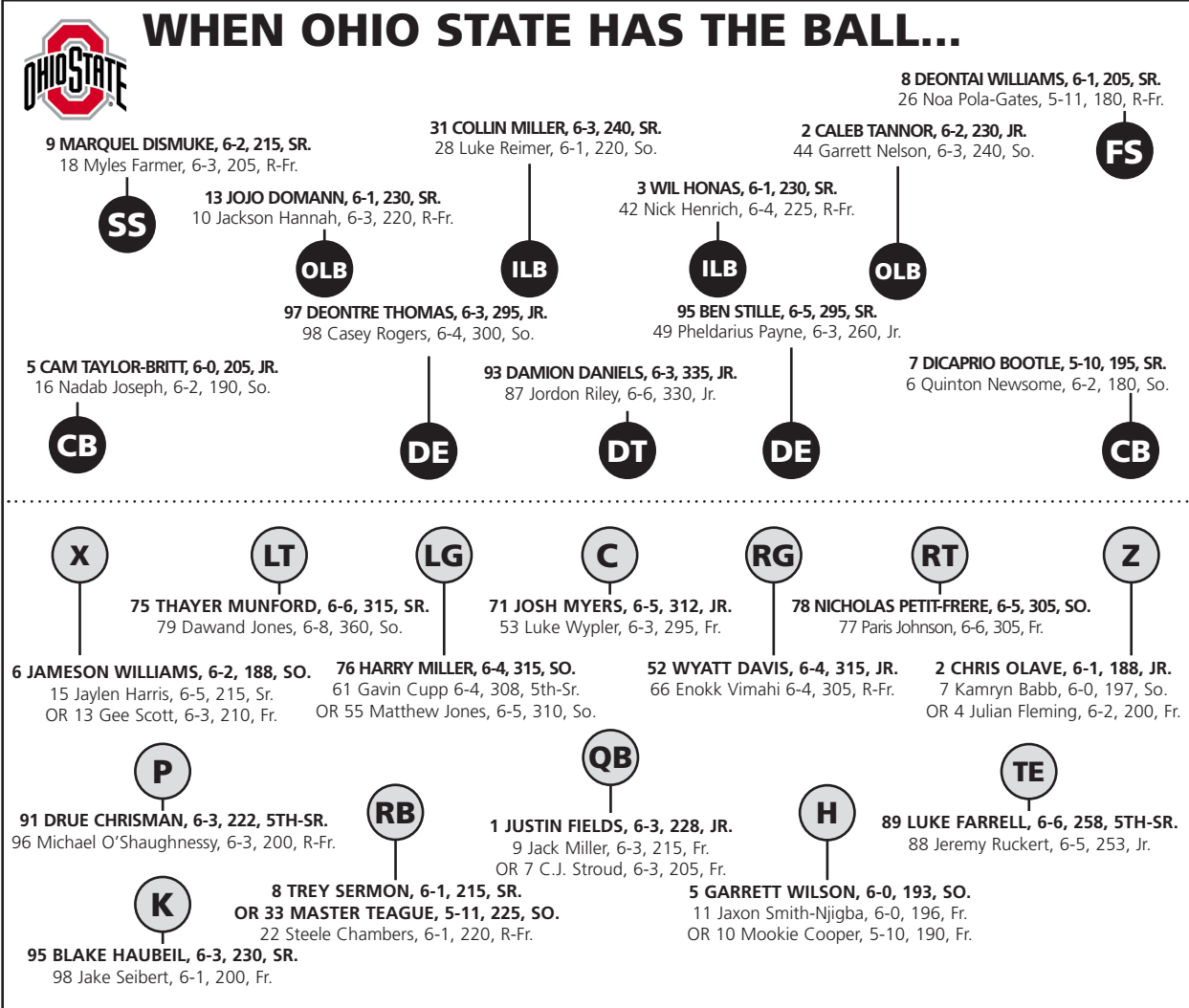
INTANGIBLES

Nebraska still fancies itself as a national power but has barely made a whimper in the Big Ten West. Ohio State understands it can't afford a bad half, much less lose a game, in its pursuit of the national title. The Buckeyes know many people feel the Big Ten returned to play only because they are so good, and those observers are waiting for them to falter. After watching upset after upset in this crazy football season, OSU will be ready. **EDGE: OHIO STATE**

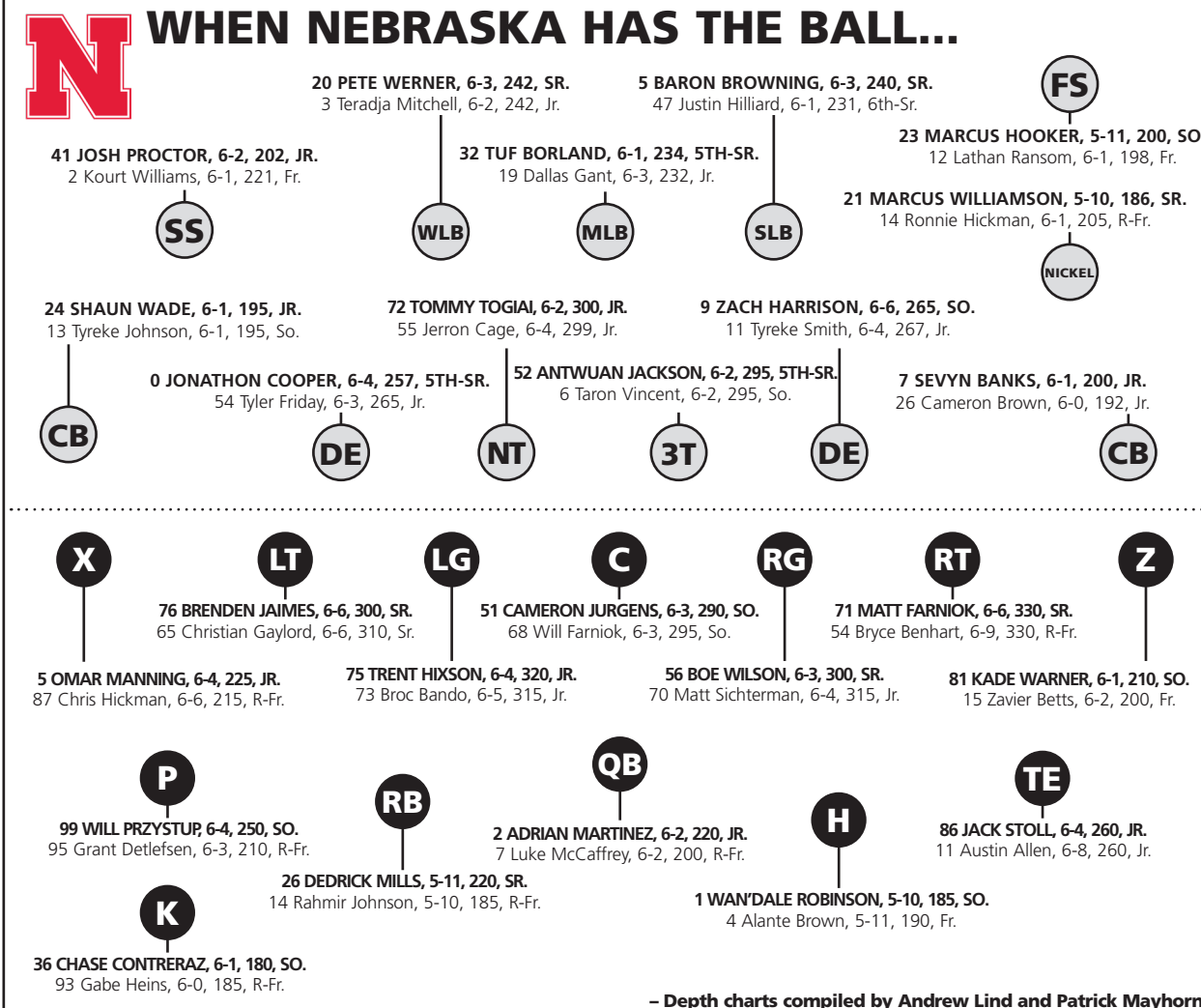
STAFF PREDICTION

If this becomes a blowout, how many OSU starters will still be taking snaps in the fourth quarter in preparation for the next game at Penn State after a l-o-o-o-n-g offseason? In an empty stadium, the excitement and intimidation of 102,000-plus fans will be missing and could keep the final margin down. **OHIO STATE, 49-10**

WHEN OHIO STATE HAS THE BALL...



WHEN NEBRASKA HAS THE BALL...



– Depth charts compiled by Andrew Lind and Patrick Mayhorn

BSB Expects Ohio State, Clemson To Meet Again

Though the season will start a few weeks later than usual amid the coronavirus pandemic that forced the Big Ten to initially postpone fall sports then reverse course under pressure from fans, coaches and players, Ohio State once again enters the 2020 campaign with sky-high expectations.

The Buckeyes, led by second-year head coach Ryan Day and a Heisman Trophy candidate in quarterback Justin Fields, are among the favorites to return to the College Football Playoff for a second consecutive season, even if they are tasked with replacing departed players such as running back J.K. Dobbins, defensive end Chase Young and starting cornerbacks Jeff Okudah and Damon Arnette, among others.

Luckily for Ohio State, the Buckeyes don't rebuild, they reload. Oklahoma transfer Trey Sermon and sophomore Master Teague are expected to pick up Dobbins' slack at running back, while former five-star defensive end Zach Harrison aims to fill Young's shoes. If the secondary, led by Shaun Wade, can replace Okudah and Arnette's production, as well, Ohio State should once again compete for a Big Ten title and national championship this fall.

With that said, the staff writers at Buckeye Sports Bulletin – including Wyatt Crosher, Joe Dempsey, Andrew Lind and Patrick Mayhorn – have shared their predictions for the season below.

Crosher: Bucks Go The Distance

After predicting Ohio State to go to the College Football Playoff and lose last year – though I predicted it with an 11-1 regular-season record – I am expecting the Buckeyes to roll into the CFP undefeated this year and hyper-motivated to right the loss to Clemson.

I think that Ohio State cruises through its conference schedule much like it did last year, with the only close game being against Penn State, which I still think should be decided by two scores. The games after the Nittany Lions should be a whole bunch of blowouts – with the potential exception of Indiana, which I think is heading in the right direction – all the way up until The Game.

Michigan, which I have losing to Minnesota in week one then Penn State in week six, will potentially be interesting, especially if Joe Milton can develop into all that is expected of him by the end of the season. But at this point, there's nothing the Wolverines can show to prove to me that they can beat Ohio State. Then the Buckeyes will be facing undefeated Minnesota in the Big Ten championship, where I think the Gophers put up the best fight of anyone, putting up a lot of points, but not enough to overcome the Buckeyes following a shootout of a matchup.

In the playoff, I think Ohio State comes in at

No. 2 and faces Florida, a team I think will beat Alabama this year. Either way, the Buckeyes get their revenge from the 2006 season and get their chance to play Clemson for all the marbles. This time, I think Ohio State has the talent to take down Trevor Lawrence and Co., defeating the Tigers 31-27.

Justin Fields seems to be as close to a lock as you can get for Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year, and I think he may also do enough to win the Heisman Trophy, though Florida's Kyle Trask feels like a sleeper pick to come in and win it.

While Ryan Day gets beat out by P.J. Fleck for coach of the year and all of Ohio State's freshman wideouts lose out to Wisconsin quarterback Graham Mertz for freshman of the year, I like Baron Browning's chances to make some highlight-reel plays, put up the numbers and earn Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year now that he is set to have a more sizable role in the defense.

Dempsey: Unblemished OSU

I expect Ohio State to repeat as the undefeated Big Ten champion, and Fields will once again visit New York as a Heisman finalist after winning offensive player of the year in the conference.

Perhaps more surprisingly, I predict the Golden Gophers will go 8-0 before losing to the Buckeyes in the Big Ten Championship Game. Beyond the top teams on each side of the conference, I anticipate Penn State and Wisconsin to have excellent seasons.

With an undefeated Ohio State, a one-loss Minnesota and potentially a one-loss Penn State or a one-loss Wisconsin, the Big Ten could put the CFP committee in a tough spot come playoff time.

Beyond the top teams, the conference will struggle with consistency, with Iowa being the only other team above .500. Michigan and Nebraska face tough schedules, and those two former powers will continue to regress this year.

Although Ryan Day will once again lead Ohio State through an unblemished Big Ten slate, I think that he will miss out on the coach of the year award. Since an 8-0 season for Minnesota is much more unlikely than for Ohio State, P.J. Fleck will win the honor.

Picking a Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year is tough. If I were to pick a Buckeye, I would pick Tyreke Smith or Pete Werner, and that is largely because of the roles they have on the team. Smith will be among the team's best pass rushers in Chase Young's spot, while Werner will step into the Will linebacker position where Malik Harrison shone.

Outside of Ohio State, I think Penn State safely Lamont Wade, Purdue defensive end George

Karlaftis and Michigan State linebacker Antjuan Simmons will all have big years. Karlaftis is my pick for player of the year because of what he showed as a freshman with 17 tackles for loss and 7½ sacks.

Freshman of the year is also tough to predict, but I am going with Maryland wide receiver Rakim Jarrett, who is the only five-star true freshman at a Big Ten school not named Ohio State. Jarrett may benefit from catching passes from Alabama transfer Taulia Tagovailoa, and he will presumably be one of the only weapons in the Terrapin offense.

I admit I am not overwhelmingly confident in my predictions of award winners, but I have little doubt in my prediction that Ohio State will return to the CFP as the undefeated Big Ten champ.

Lind: Fifth Time's A Charm

Fields and Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence have been linked to one another from the time they were in high school. And though Lawrence already has a national championship and a head-to-head win under his belt in last year's Fiesta Bowl, it will be Fields who ends his college career with the ultimate bragging rights.

Both programs are once again on a collision course, with the Tigers widely considered the preseason No. 1 and the Buckeyes viewed as the second-best team in the country – at least until the Big Ten initially decided to postpone fall sports, which now has the pollsters unsure of how to properly rank them.

Regardless, both teams should be favored in every game they play this season as a result, even in their respective College Football Playoff semifinal games, which will set the stage for an all-time great national championship.

Fields and Co. have been doing everything they can this offseason to correct the mistakes that contributed to the final score – referees notwithstanding. But before we get to that point, the Buckeyes should breeze through the conference-only, regular-season portion of the schedule, with the toughest tests set to be a trip to Penn State in week two and the opponent in the Big Ten Championship Game determined by the winner of a highly anticipated meeting between Minnesota and Wisconsin.

A convincing win in Indianapolis – no matter if it's against the Badgers or Golden Gophers – gives Ohio State the No. 1 seed in the CFP and a trip to the Rose Bowl, where they'll face Oregon, making up for the Sept. 12 game that was canceled amid the coronavirus pandemic. It also allows them to avoid No. 3 Alabama in the other semifinal at the Sugar Bowl.

Then, when the Buckeyes and Tigers meet in Miami with the national championship on the line, Fields – who will have already been

named Ohio State's seventh Heisman Trophy winner – will engineer a game-winning drive in the final minute with Chris Olave catching the game-winner on the exact route that ended in an interception last time around, giving Ohio State its first win over Clemson in five tries.

Mayhorn: A Familiar Ending

Ohio State may be the biggest beneficiary in the Big Ten from the bizarre circumstances of this season. For a team with its eyes on much more than a Big Ten title, dropping three games (four, if you count the Big Ten championship) from its original schedule, including one against a projected top-10 team in Oregon, can only really serve as a positive for the Buckeyes. Fewer games means a lower chance of losing one of those games, a lower risk of injury or wear and tear.

The chaotic fall camp season also plays well for the Buckeyes from a personnel perspective. While quite a few teams have struggled with small details and discipline early in the season due to the shortened practice time, the teams that haven't had those issues are ones with plenty of continuity on the roster and on the coaching staff. Ohio State doesn't return an inordinate percentage of its starting lineup, but the quarterback, two receivers, basically the entire offensive line, three linebackers and a star cornerback are all back in Columbus.

Along with that, Ohio State retained eight of its on-field coaches, losing only defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley and quarterbacks coach Mike Yurcich. Both coaches were replaced by familiar faces in Kerry Coombs and Corey Dennis, and it's likely fair to assume that Ryan Day was looking for continuity when he made those hires. That experience on the field and in the staff should provide plenty of stability for Ohio State, which it will need immediately as it takes on Nebraska and Penn State in the first two games of the season.

Past those first two games, however, there's not a ton on this schedule to worry about for the Buckeyes. Indiana on Nov. 21 could provide a challenge if quarterback Michael Penix is able to stay healthy, and the Michigan game to end the season is always going to be tough, but save for the opening outing and those two Big Ten East battles, Ohio State isn't set to face much resistance this year.

While Penn State looks like the biggest test for OSU, I see that as a test that the Buckeyes pass, especially without fans to worry about in Happy Valley. Behind Heisman-contender Justin Fields at quarterback, Ohio State rolls to 8-0, knocks off Minnesota in Champions Week and edges out Georgia in the first round of the playoff, before falling in the national championship to a familiar foe: Clemson.

How We See The 2020 Big Ten Race

Here is a look at how members of the BSB staff predict the Big Ten football season:

Wyatt Crosher				Joe Dempsey				Andrew Lind				Patrick Mayhorn			
East	Record	Champ. Week	Bowl	East	Record	Champ. Week	Bowl	East	Record	Champ. Week	Bowl	East	Record	Champ. Week	Bowl
Ohio State	8-0	W	CFP	Ohio State	8-0	W	CFP	Ohio State	8-0	W	CFP	Ohio State	8-0	W	CFP
Penn State	7-1	W	Orange	Penn State	7-1	W	Peach	Penn State	7-1	W	Peach	Penn State	6-2	L	Outback
Michigan	5-3	W	Outback	Michigan	4-4	W	Belk	Michigan	4-4	L	Music City	Indiana	5-3	L	Music City
Indiana	4-4	W	Music City	Michigan State	4-4	L	Pinstripe	Indiana	4-4	W	Belk	Michigan	4-4	W	Pinstripe
Maryland	2-6	L		Indiana	3-5	W	Cactus	Michigan State	3-5	L	Cactus	Michigan State	2-6	L	
Michigan State	1-7	L		Maryland	1-7	L		Maryland	2-6	W		Maryland	1-7	L	
Rutgers	0-8	L		Rutgers	0-8	L		Rutgers	0-8	L		Rutgers	0-8	L	
West	Record	Champ. Week	Bowl	West	Record	Champ. Week	Bowl	West	Record	Champ. Week	Bowl	West	Record	Champ. Week	Bowl
Minnesota	8-0	L	Peach	Minnesota	8-0	L	Fiesta	Minnesota	8-0	L	Fiesta	Minnesota	8-0	L	Orange
Wisconsin	6-2	L	Citrus	Wisconsin	7-1	L	Citrus	Wisconsin	7-1	L	Citrus	Wisconsin	7-1	W	Citrus
Iowa	5-3	L	Belk	Iowa	5-3	L	Outback	Iowa	5-3	W	Outback	Iowa	5-3	W	Belk
Purdue	4-4	L	Cactus	Purdue	3-5	W	Music City	Nebraska	3-5	L	Pinstripe	Nebraska	3-5	L	Cactus
Northwestern	4-4	W	Pinstripe	Northwestern	3-5	L	Redbox	Purdue	3-5	W	QuickLane	Purdue	3-5	W	Redbox
Nebraska	1-7	W		Illinois	2-6	W		Illinois	2-6	L		Northwestern	3-5	W	Quick Lane
Illinois	1-7	W		Nebraska	1-7	W		Northwestern	0-8	W		Illinois	1-7	W	
Big Ten Title Game Winner: Ohio State				Big Ten Title Game Winner: Ohio State				Big Ten Title Game Winner: Ohio State				Big Ten Title Game Winner: Ohio State			

Beat Writers Like OSU's Chances At National Title

By WYATT CROSHER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State football has an intense fan base with fans from all over the country. It also has a significant amount of people and organizations that cover the team, and Buckeye Sports Bulletin wanted to find out what they were expecting from the team this season, as well as which players they think will step up.

BSB spoke to 31 members of the Ohio State beat, and four of our writers – Wyatt Crosher, Joe Dempsey, Andrew Lind and Patrick Mayhorn – also answered the same questions, giving the poll 35 unique answers about everything from Ohio State's title chances to which freshman will have a breakout season.

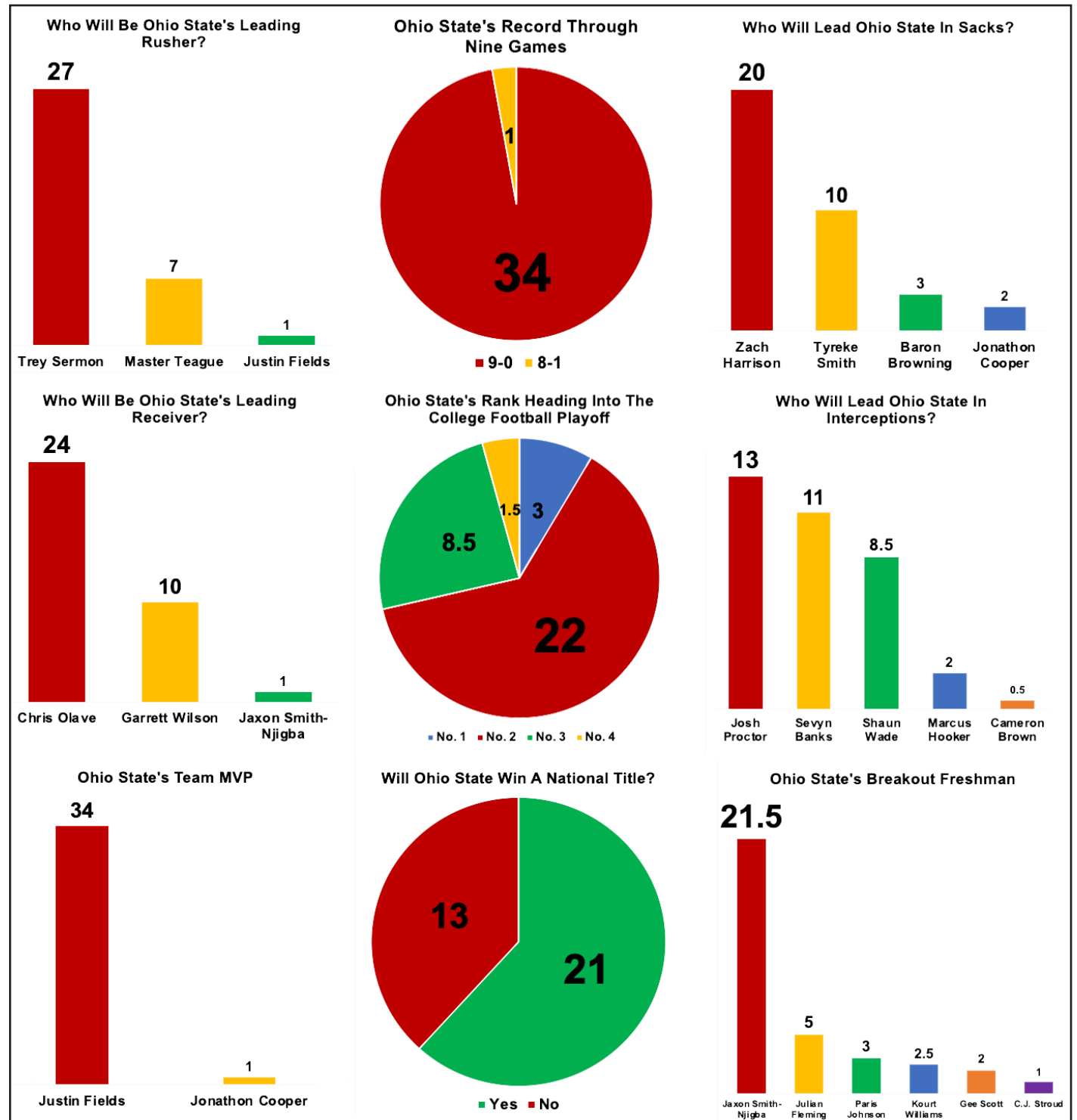
Ohio State's Record Through Nine Games: This was a near-unanimous decision from the beat, with 34 out of 35 polled saying that Ohio State would go undefeated through the regular season and the Big Ten championship. The lone voter for a loss, Tom Orr of Buckeye Scoop, has the Buckeyes losing in Week 2 against Penn State.

Playoff Rank: Orr still had Ohio State in the College Football Playoff despite the early-season loss, meaning all 35 beat members were unanimous in the Buckeyes making the top four after the championship game. From there, 62.9 percent said Ohio State would be ranked second, while 24.3 percent said third, 8.6 percent said first and 4.3 percent said fourth. The half-point shown is from Buckeye Grove's Griffin Strom, who said Ohio State would finish "3 or 4."

Will Ohio State Win A National Title: One of the more even splits from the group came with this question, but just over 60 percent (61.8) had Ohio State avenging last year's loss in the playoff and this time coming home with the hardware. Rob Oller of The Columbus Dispatch specified "but REALLY close" when picking against the Buckeyes, while Bill Rabinowitz of the Dispatch said he likes the Buckeyes' chances but he voted no "because I think it's incredibly difficult to win one." Jacob Bengé of Buckeye Grove elected to keep this one to be determined because "it's so hard to predict a champion for any sport."

Team MVP: Another one that almost had the same answer across the board, this open-ended question on Ohio State's most valuable player ended nearly unanimously with quarterback Justin Fields, and understandably so considering his run last year as a Heisman Trophy finalist. But Patrick Murphy of Bucknuts went with defensive end and fellow captain Jonathon Cooper, who returns following a redshirt season in 2019. "I view this award differently than most and take 'most valuable' literally. I think Cooper is going to impact this team in more ways than the stats indicate," Murphy said.

Ohio State's Leading Rusher: One of the most interesting position battles comes at running back, where Oklahoma transfer Trey Sermon and returning sophomore Master Teague are likely to be the two toward the top of the depth chart. The poll displayed that, with 77.1 percent of voters picking Sermon to come out victorious. There was also one wildcard vote, with The Athletic's Ari Wasserman going for Fields – who had 484 yards and 10 scores on the ground in 2019 – as the top rusher for the Buckeyes this season.



Ohio State's Leading Receiver: Ohio State loses three core wideouts from last season but also is bringing in four top-100 prospects to fill the gaps. The two main returners – junior Chris Olave and sophomore Garrett Wilson – received almost every vote, with Olave (68.6 percent) taking a rather strong majority. Again, there was an outlier, this time from Eleven Warriors' Zack Carpenter, who is picking true freshman Jaxon Smith-Njigba. Buckeye Grove's Kevin Noon and Buckeye Scoop's Tony Gerdeman both split the vote between Olave and Wilson, with Noon liking Olave for receptions and yards but Wilson for touchdowns, and Gerdeman picking Wilson for catches but Olave for yards.

Ohio State's Sack Leader: In a closer battle than most of the other polls, the beat voted that sophomore Zach Harrison was most likely to lead Ohio State in sacks this season, earning 57.1 percent of the votes. Not too far behind was junior Tyreke Smith (28.6 percent), while a pair of seniors in Cooper and linebacker Baron Browning were seen as dark horses to finish at the top.

Ohio State's Interception Leader: The question of who would lead Ohio State in interceptions this season had by far the most debate, and for good reason considering that Jeff Okudah's three picks led the team a season ago and that the starters are not locked in other than preseason All-American Shaun Wade. But Wade got only 24.3 percent of the vote, and he trailed the two lead candidates: safety Josh Proctor (37.1 percent) and cornerback Sevyn Banks (31.4 percent). Cameron Brown earned half a vote, along with Wade, from NBC4's Jerod Smalley, who had the interceptions leader as a tie.

Breakout Freshman: This question led to the most diversity in answers, with six different freshmen getting mentioned, but Smith-Njigba was far and away the top pick, earning 61.4 percent of the votes while fellow wideout Julian Fleming was next closest at 14.3 percent. Safety Kourt Williams was the lone defender selected, and he also split a vote for Carpenter, who had him along with Smith-Njigba. Noon put quarterback C.J. Stroud, with his reasoning being that Ohio State "will need to rotate some when games

get out of hand and to protect Fields" and that the wide receivers "will cancel each other out and Stroud (will be) left standing."

Beat members polled: Andy Anders, Buckeye Grove; Nathan Baird, Cleveland.com; Jacob Bengé, Buckeye Grove; Dave Biddle, Bucknuts; Jeremy Birmingham, Lettermen Row; Zack Carpenter, Eleven Warriors; Wyatt Crosher, BSB; Joe Dempsey, BSB; Jack Emerson, The Lantern; Tony Gerdeman, Buckeye Scoop; Marcus Hartman, Dayton Daily News; Steve Helwagen, Bucknuts; Colin Hass-Hill, Eleven Warriors; Dave Holmes, WBNS; Dan Hope, Eleven Warriors; Marcus Horton, Buckeye Grove; Joey Kaufman, The Columbus Dispatch; Mark Kunz, BCSN; Bill Landis, The Athletic; Doug Lesmerises, Cleveland.com; Andrew Lind, BSB; Keaton Maisano, The Lantern; Patrick Mayhorn, BSB; Stephen Means, Cleveland.com; Patrick Murphy, Bucknuts; Kevin Noon, Buckeye Grove; Rob Oller, The Columbus Dispatch; Tom Orr, Buckeye Scoop; Stephanie Otey, Buckeye Scoop; Bill Rabinowitz, The Columbus Dispatch; Kyle Rowland, Toledo Blade; Jerod Smalley, NBC4; Griffin Strom, Buckeye Grove; Austin Ward, Lettermen Row; Ari Wasserman, The Athletic.

Critical Miscues In Red Zone Make Ohio State Blue

By MIKE WACHSMAN

Throughout the fall, *Buckeye Sports Bulletin* will be "playing" its 40th Anniversary football season with recaps of the biggest Ohio State games of each corresponding week in our publishing history. The following is coverage of what at the time might have seemed a fairly insignificant loss to Illinois, though it was the Buckeyes' fifth straight loss to the Illini. What makes the game significant 28 years later is how the goat of the game became one of Ohio State's GOATs – greatest of all time. Additional features about the game will be posted at BuckeyeSports.com on Thursday, Oct. 15.

Being in the red zone made the Ohio State offense blue in an 18-16 loss to Illinois Oct. 10 in Ohio Stadium.

Prior to the loss, when the Buckeyes got into the red zone, they were in the pink. In the previous four games, OSU had crossed the opponents' 20-yard line 14 times, coming away with 12 scores – nine touchdowns and three field goals. Against the Illini, though, the Buckeyes got into the red zone six times and had to settle for just one touchdown and two field goals.

There were two crucial fumbles, both by freshman running back Eddie George at the one-yard line, one of which was returned for a 96-yard touchdown, and a 31-yard field goal that was missed by place-kicker Tim Williams.

Obviously, in a two-point loss, that lack of success by the Buckeyes cost them the game. That lack of success also made offensive coordinator Joe Hollis see red.

"We turned the ball over three times and not only that, one of them cost us a touchdown," Hollis said. "We're sick about it, but we feel like we're still a good football team. It's going to be a tough week for us, but we'll gather 'em back and go on from there."

Ultimately, the game came down to another missed scoring opportunity when the Buckeyes stalled just outside the red zone in the fourth quarter. That's when Williams hooked a 44-yard field goal wide left with 53 seconds to play. But the game could have been out of reach by the Buckeyes long before Williams' kick.

"Our inability to score once we get the ball down in the red zone has hurt us as much as

anything," said OSU head coach John Cooper. "We turned the ball over twice today in that situation. If we put it in the end zone, you're looking at 30 points.

"We were driving for a touchdown and then turned that around with the fumble and long run for a touchdown. That's a 14-point swing right there. Then we lost another touchdown and they came back with a field goal. There's another 10 points. Give us another 14 points and take away 10 from them and it's a totally different ball game."

OSU had good success on offense between the 20s, racking up 342 yards in total offense, including 160 rushing. But dominance in total offense doesn't win football games.

"We moved the ball pretty well all day long," Hollis said. "We were running and throwing and doing the things we wanted to do. We just didn't cash in. We're disappointed we didn't win the football game because we felt we should have won.

"It doesn't seem like we do things the easy way on offense. We don't get that long touchdown pass or whatever, but the true test of this team is how hard we come back and practice and play next week."

Cooper is now 0-5 against Illinois in his career as Buckeye coach and has seen a few strange things in the five games. There was a forward lateral of a blocked field goal two years ago and Illinois' game-winning three-pointer with just 36 seconds left last year. But it has been a simple thing like not punching the ball into the end zone at golden opportunities that has most often spelled defeat for OSU against the Illini. In the last two games against Illinois, the Buckeyes have taken eight trips to the red zone and scored just one touchdown.

What's more, in those five straight losses to the Illini, the Buckeyes have committed an almost unbelievable 19 turnovers, an average of nearly four per game.

"It's a game of mistakes. I tell that to our team every day," Cooper said. "The team that makes the fewest mistakes is going to win. You can't turn the ball over twice on the goal line and get the ball deep on their end of the field and not come away with any points."

This story originally appeared in the Oct. 17, 1992, issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

The Numbers Game

Illinois 18, Ohio State 16

Oct. 10, 1992 – Ohio Stadium, Columbus, OH

Score by Quarters	1	2	3	4	F
ILLINOIS	7	8	0	3	18
OHIO STATE	3	10	3	0	16

First Quarter

ILL – Arneson, 96-yard fumble return (Richardson kick), 11:43.

OSU – T. Williams, 50-yard field goal, 3:09.

Second Quarter

OSU – George, 4-yard run (T. Williams kick), 13:20.

ILL – Safety, Rob. Smith tackled in end zone by Blackman, 11:24.

ILL – Kinney, 3-yard run (run failed), 4:48.

OSU – T. Williams, 25-yard field goal, 0:00.

Third Quarter

OSU – T. Williams, 29-yard field goal, 6:47.

Fourth Quarter

ILL – Richardson, 21-yard field goal, 4:56.

Att. – 93,982

Team Statistics

	ILL	OSU
First Downs	14	21
Rushing	8	10
Passing	5	9
Penalty	1	2
Rushes-Yards	44-131	42-160
Passing Yards	139	182
Passes (Comp.-Att.-Int.)	12-25-1	15-27-0
Offensive Plays	69	69
Total Net Yards	270	342
Third Down Efficiency	8-18	5-15
Punts-Avg.	7-31.4	3-33.7
Fumbles-Lost	3-1	6-3
Penalties	4-40	4-17
Time of Possession	30:40	29:20

Individual Statistics

RUSHING (Att.-Net Yds.) – ILL: Boyer 18-73; Jackson 9-71; Feagin 7-14; Kinney 10-(-27). OSU: Harris 18-74; Rob. Smith 6-40; Cothran 7-26; Sanders 1-24; Herbstreit 4-3; George 6-(-7).

PASSING (Comp.-Att.-Int.-Yds.-TD) – ILL: Kinney 12-25-1-139-0. OSU: Herbstreit 15-27-0-182-0.

RECEIVING (Rec.-Yds.) – ILL: Koester 4-38; Boyer 3-41; Olson 3-25; Klein 1-25; Wright 1-10. OSU: Stablein 6-85; Cothran 4-41; Saunders 3-20; Sanders 1-13; By'not'e 1-13.

PUNTING (No.-Avg.-Long) – ILL: Wells 4-36.5-43. OSU: Kessel 3-33.7-36.

PUNT RETURNS (No.-Avg.-Long.) – ILL: None. OSU: Stablein 2-9.0-14; Taylor 1-1.0-1.

KICKOFF RETURNS (No.-Avg.-Long.) – ILL: Lynch 2-14.0-16; Voelker 1-8.0-8. OSU: By'not'e 2-26.0-41; Sanders 1-18.0-18.

FUMBLE RECOVERIES – ILL: Arneson, Rucker, Rice. OSU: Taylor.

INTERCEPTIONS – ILL: None. OSU: Walton.

TACKLES FOR LOSS – ILL: Howard, Holecek, Leach, Cole, Hardy, Blackman. OSU: Wilkinson (3), Team (3), Simmons (2), M. Williams, Foster, G. Smith.

TACKLES (Solo-Asst.-Tot.) – ILL: Howard 7-8-15; Holecek 5-3-8; Rucker 4-4-8; Arneson 3-5-8; F. Johnson 4-2-6; Cole 4-2-6; Leach 1-5-6; Hardy 2-3-5; Copher 2-3-5; Hasenstab 0-4-4; Crumpton 2-1-3; Patton 0-2-2; Collins 0-2-2; Washington 1-0-1; Voelker 1-0-1; Bierman 1-0-1; Blackman 1-0-1; Rice 1-0-1; Richards 0-1-1; Hill 0-1-1; Shelby 0-1-1; Olson 0-1-1. OSU: Tovar 3-10-13; M. Williams 6-6-12; Wilkinson 3-7-10; Nelson 2-6-8; Cook 3-4-7; Simmons 3-4-7; Harper 3-2-5; Powell 3-2-5; Foster 3-2-5; Walton 1-3-4; G. Smith 1-3-4; Team 3-0-3; R. Brown 2-1-3; Styles 2-1-3; Taylor 1-1-2; Kerner 0-2-2; Rodriguez 0-2-2.

Players In The Game

ILL – Hasenstab, Foggey, Cole, McCloud, Copher, Blackman, Leach, Rice, Hardy, Collins, Holecek, Howard, Crumpton, Rucker, Qualls, Arneson, Patton, Washington, Johnson, Boykin, Klein, Strong, Hopkins, Pesek, Engel, Kerr, Bierman, Olson, Koester, Kinney, Boyer, Pierce, Scott, Feagin, Jackson, Lynch, Wright, Fisher, Richardson, Wells, Larsen, Hill, Gabrione, Sidari, Roberts, Allen, Cox, Richards, Russell, Voelker, Rathke.

OSU – Stablein, Beatty, Kline, Hartman, Long, Monnot, Rod Smith, Stringer, Winrow, Saunders, D.J. Jones, Metzger, Herbstreit, Cothran, George, Harris, By'not'e, Rob Smith, Sanders, DeGraffenreid, Foster, R. Brown, Wilkinson, Beckman, G. Smith, Bonhaus, Simmons, M. Williams, Styles, Tovar, Rodriguez, Powell, Cook, Paul, Harper, Patillo, Nelson, Taylor, Walton, Kerner, T. Williams, Thrushm Borchers, Lease.

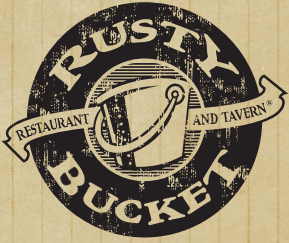
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Jinx Sinks Buckeyes' Chances Against Fighting Illini

By MARK REA

Everyone made so much over the "Badger Jinx" when Wisconsin beat Ohio State five times in seven seasons from 1981-87.

Well, after the Buckeyes lost 18-16 to Illinois on Oct. 10, the fifth straight loss and the seventh in the last 10 meetings to the Illini, Ohio State is in the midst of a full-fledged "Illini Jinx."

How else could you explain a game in which the Buckeyes fumble twice at the one-yard line, one of which is returned for a touchdown? How else could you explain the Buckeyes holding the opposing team to just 270 total yards, the lowest total in the last 10 games, and still losing? And how else could you explain a missed 44-yard field goal attempt by a kicker who had previously kicked a 50-yarder in the game?

"It must be a jinx," said OSU senior cornerback Bryan Cook, who has been a witness to all five consecutive losses to the Illini. "I don't know what else it is. When you have a better team, you're supposed to win and we didn't do it."

OSU defensive coordinator Bill Young debunked that theory, saying the outcome was simply another example of what can happen on any given Saturday in college football.

"I'm not sure this has anything to do with who is the better team," Young said. "I'm not sure Northwestern had a better team last year when they beat Illinois. You just have to get up every week to play. It's how you play that day that counts."

"I'm not sure that if Florida State and Miami played 10 times, Miami wouldn't lose more than they'd win. But they only play once and Miami won that game. It's not a jinx; that's the way things go in this crazy game."

Young was talking about football in general with that "crazy game" statement, but he just as easily could have been talking about the OSU-Illinois game.

It was a game fraught with mistakes by both teams, although the Buckeyes made theirs at the most inopportune times.

The first came less than four minutes into the game. Ohio State had taken the game's opening possession and, thanks to being set up with a 41-yard kickoff return by Butler By'not'e, a 20-yard burst by junior tailback Raymont Harris and a personal foul penalty on Illinois, was threatening to score an early touchdown.

The Buckeyes got first-and-goal, then went to their short-yardage lineup, the one that previously netted four touchdowns for freshman running back Eddie George. On third-and-goal from the one, George got the call and was met immediately by Illini linebacker Dana Howard and defensive back Jeff Arneson.

George lost the handle on the football and it dropped to the turf, where Illini defensive back Derrick Rucker tried to smother it. But as Rucker went for the ball, OSU quarterback Kirk Herbstreit hit him and Rucker inadvertently tossed the ball into the air.

That's when Arneson entered the picture again. He scooped up the loose ball and, getting a block from teammate Kevin Hardy on OSU receiver Greg Beatty, ran 96 yards for an Illinois touchdown.

Ohio State head coach John Cooper said that was a tough play for him to watch.

"I've never had that happen to me in my career," he said. "We're going in for a touchdown, and all of a sudden, boom. That's a 14-point swing. Instead of us scoring and being up 7-0 early in the game, all of a sudden we're down 7-0."

But the Buckeyes came back. Later in the first quarter, they drove to Illinois' 33-yard line and got a 50-yard field goal from kicker Tim Williams. The scoring drive still had its strange moments – senior split end Brian Stablein dropped two passes, extremely uncharacteristic for the normally sure-handed receiver.

Ohio State's defense allowed the team to pull in front with a good stand at the end of the first period. Illinois took a possession at its own 17-yard line and wound up having to punt from is 16. A short punt put the Buckeyes in business at the Illini 47 and it took them only four plays to score the go-ahead touchdown and make it 10-7 on a four-yard run by George.

But something strange happened just minutes later when OSU tailback Robert Smith was tackled in the end zone for a safety, making the score 10-9. On the play, the Buckeyes were simply trying to get some breathing room after an Illinois punt had backed them up to their own one-yard line. But Illini defensive tackle Ken Blackman blew through a hole in the OSU line to stuff Smith in the end zone.

Illinois got good field position after the free kick and moved the ball 54 yards in 14 plays for a touchdown that put the Illini back in front 15-10.

But things got strange again on the PAT. Richardson had already booted the extra point, but Ohio State was offside on the play. Just like Cooper did against Wisconsin the week before, Illini head coach Lou Tepper elected to take the point off the board and go for two. And, just like the Buckeyes the week before, the Illini's try for two failed when quarterback Jeff Kinney was tackled by OSU defensive end Derrick Foster short of the goal line.

The Buckeyes got the ball back and drove to the Illinois nine before stalling. They tried to draw the Illini defense offside

Other Big 40th Anniversary Games

There were several other big games at this time throughout the years, including the following:

1982: Knocking off a ranked team like No. 15 Illinois is always a positive, but this 26-21 road win was of special importance because it snapped OSU's three-game losing streak, with all the losses coming at home. Tim Spencer carried 24 times for 151 yards, and Cedric Anderson took a Mike Tomczak pass 74 yards for a touchdown. The Buckeyes reeled off seven straight wins to close the season.

1984: In one of the most famous games in Ohio State football history, the Buckeyes overcame a 24-0 deficit to defeat Illinois, 45-38. Keith Byars rushed for 274 yards and five touchdowns, including the game-winner with 36 seconds remaining and a 67-yarder minus one shoe.

1997: In a top-10 matchup, No. 2 Penn State got revenge for a 38-7 drubbing the year before in Columbus by defeating the No. 7 Buckeyes 31-27 in State College. Ohio native Curtis Enis led the Lions with 211 yards rushing on 23 carries.

2016: No. 8 Wisconsin took second-ranked Ohio State to overtime before the Buckeyes prevailed, 30-23. Noah Brown scored the go-ahead touchdown on a 7-yard pass from J.T. Barrett, and then Tyquan Lewis sacked Badgers QB Alex Hornibrook on fourth down to preserve the victory.

with a long snap count on fourth-and-two, but the ploy didn't work and resulted in a delay of game penalty.

That backed up OSU to the 14 but still meant only a 31-yard field goal attempt by Williams. However, the kicker missed the try, hooking the ball to the left.

With only a minute remaining in the first half, Illinois tried for some more points and looked like it would get them until OSU cornerback Tim Walton intercepted a pass and returned it 59 yards to the Illini eight-yard line.

With only five seconds left in the half, Williams sought redemption and got it, nailing a 25-yarder to make the score 15-13 at halftime.

The second half began rather calmly with Ohio State getting a third field goal from Williams – this one of 29 yards – at the 6:47 mark of the third quarter to put the Buckeyes back in front 16-15.

But the strange things started happening again. OSU safety Walter Taylor caused an Illinois fumble and recovered it himself. Two plays later, OSU fullback Jeff Cothran fumbled the ball back to the Illini. Then on the second play of the fourth quarter, Taylor blocked a punt, setting up the Buckeyes at the Illini 25-yard line.

Three plays later, Herbstreit threw a pass to Cothran, who made an overhead grab and went out of bounds at the one.

On the next play, George was back in the lineup, looking for another touchdown. But he was knocked in the air by Howard, then smacked from behind by Illini backup DB Tyrone Washington.

Washington's hit knocked the ball loose from George and Rucker pounced on it at the 10. From there, the Illini took off on a drive that took 15 plays, covered 86 yards and ate up eight and a half minutes. It ended with Richardson knocking a 21-yard chip shot through the uprights, causing the fourth lead change in the game and giving the Illini an 18-16 lead with 4:56 to go.

The Buckeyes took the ensuing kickoff and moved easily down the field until stalling at the Illini 43, faced with a fourth-and-10. But Herbstreit improvised on a pass play, tucking the ball under his arm and scrambling for 11 yards and the first down.

After that, OSU called three running plays to set Williams up in the middle of the field. And, with three field goals already under his belt, the Buckeyes' kicker trotted out for a 44-yard attempt to win the game.

The ball had plenty of distance but strayed just outside the left upright. After that, the Illini simply ran out the clock to preserve the victory.

This story originally appeared in the Oct. 17, 1992, issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

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Unlikely Comeback Keeps Ohio State Undeclared

By **MARCUS HARTMAN**

Throughout the fall, Buckeye Sports Bulletin will be "playing" its 40th Anniversary football season with recaps of the biggest Ohio State games of each corresponding week in our publishing history. The following is coverage of Ohio State's 2012 overtime victory over Purdue, one of the most exciting wins of the Urban Meyer era and a game that made Kenny Guiton arguably the most popular Ohio State backup quarterback since Ron Maciejowski. Additional features about the game will be posted at BuckeyeSports.com on Thursday, Oct. 22.

Ohio State emerged victorious over Purdue 29-22 on Oct. 20 in a football game as unpredictable as the autumn weather in the Midwest.

Despite more than three quarters of nearly inept offense, more breakdowns on defense and another special teams gaffe, the seventh-ranked Buckeyes improved to 8-0 on the season by rallying in the final minute before dominating overtime.

Overall, it seemed everything about the Buckeyes was imperfect except their record, but no one dressed in scarlet and gray was about to complain after the Boilermakers' last pass fell incomplete on a fourth down in the extra session.

And when it was over, one of the revelers among those remaining of the 105,290 people who filled Ohio Stadium was Urban Meyer. The team's first-year head coach could have been confused for another excited college student in the immediate aftermath of the game if not for the hints of gray in the 47-year-old's dark brown hair.

When the fans in the south stands recognized him in what is becoming his signature white Ohio State windbreaker, they began chanting his name as he and the team gathered in the end zone to face the student section and the band.

The Buckeyes were to take up their 11-year-old tradition of singing the alma mater with fans and the band, but not right away.

When the chants of "Urban! Urban! Urban!" reached the coach, he appeared to be momentarily overcome with emotion.

He first pumped his left hand in the air in exultation then followed with a wild right. Then he threw both arms in the air as the crowd went crazy in response. Players started jumping out of line, raising the volume further.

Then the marching band, rather than strike up "Carmen Ohio," broke into an impromptu version of a new song it has recently begun playing, a hip-hop infused number known as "Buckeye Swag."

"It's an emotional win," defensive end Nathan Williams said, noting a similar celebration three weeks earlier at Michigan State. "Anytime you get an emotional win like that, you wear it on your sleeve. We've got the best damn band in the land that supports us through all adversity, and they started playing and we started dancing."

It was a surreal scene, one hardly imaginable less than an hour earlier.

Rally Not A Moment Too Soon

For much of the afternoon, Ohio State looked to be headed toward a harsh reality check.

Trailing 22-14 with 0:47 seconds left in the game, the Buckeyes had shown hardly any

of the firepower from their 2012 offense that was 20th in the nation in scoring and eighth in rushing entering the contest.

The 2012 Ohio State defense and special teams, on the other hand, had shown themselves a few times as the Boilermakers ripped off big chunks of yards against both.

An 83-yard touchdown pass from Purdue quarterback Caleb TerBush to running back Akeem Shavers gave the Boilermakers a 6-0 lead after one play from scrimmage, and Akeem Hunt's 100-yard kickoff return put them back on top 13-7 after Ohio State's first touchdown of the afternoon.

The Buckeyes took a 14-13 lead midway through the third quarter on a 2-yard Carlos Hyde run that capped an 80-yard drive, but that was short-lived as a coverage breakdown allowed Purdue receiver Gary Bush to go 31 yards for a touchdown on a screen pass with 3:49 left in the third quarter.

To top it all off, that previously powerful Ohio State offense was also without its heart and soul as quarterback Braxton Miller had been carted off the field with a scary looking injury that left him incapacitated late in the third quarter.

And yet, the Buckeyes found a way to win. The heroes were numerous, including some who were unexpected.

Devin Smith, the sophomore wide receiver who has become Ohio State's biggest threat in the passing game this season, caught a 39-yard pass with 33 seconds to go, while starting running back Hyde leapt into the end zone for a touchdown that proved to be the game winner in overtime.

The ever-improving offensive line gave Hyde room to run and provided plenty of time to throw when that was particularly precious down the stretch, but few would have expected Chris Fields and Kenny Guiton to hook up for the touchdown that set up the game-tying two-point conversion.

They did just that, though, as Fields went to the turf in the north end zone to haul in a Guiton pass with 0:03 left on the clock.

"What a coincidence because me and Kenny work every day," Fields said. "I'm with the twos, he's with the twos, sometimes we flip with the ones, but what a coincidence though. Kenny is my brother from another mother. I'm so happy that I got to play with him because I always wanted to."

That was not the entirety of either player's contributions on the day.

Fields entered the game without a catch, but he totaled three against Purdue.

Offensive coordinator Tom Herman also credited Fields with jump-starting the game-tying 61-yard drive at the end of regulation with a heads-up play on the punt return unit. The junior picked up a bouncing Purdue punt at the Ohio State 30-yard line and scampered up the field for 9 yards rather than let the ball be downed by the Boilermakers.

"From 47 seconds it could have been who knows how many if they just let the ball roll around for a while," Herman said. "Maybe that was a bit of an unsung contribution to that drive. He picked it up, had the intestinal fortitude to with really no blockers – we were going after the punt – to pick it up and go out of bounds."

From there, it was Guiton's show as Miller was being transported to the Ohio State University Medical Center for a battery of tests to his upper body following a hard landing on the turf at the conclusion of a 37-yard run.

Miller entered the day with his name on many Heisman Trophy watch lists, but his



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

FROM BACKUP TO LEGEND – Kenny Guiton came off the bench in relief of starting quarterback Braxton Miller and led Ohio State on touchdown drives in the final minute of regulation and in overtime to beat Purdue.

Other Big 40th Anniversary Games

There were several other big games at this time throughout the years, including the following:

2003: No. 8 Ohio State used special teams play to defeat visiting Iowa, 19-10, in a defensive battle. The Buckeyes scored on a 54-yard Michael Jenkins punt return, and Roy Hall blocked a punt that Donte Whitner pounced on in the end zone for another score. The Buckeyes added a safety against the No. 9 Hawkeyes.

2016: In another game that was decided by special teams, second-ranked Ohio State was upset by Penn State, 24-21. The Nittany Lions, who trailed 21-7 entering the fourth quarter, blocked a punt to set up a field goal that cut the margin to 21-17, and Grant Haley returned a blocked field goal 60 yards for the winning touchdown.

2018: Host Purdue derailed Ohio State's bid for an undefeated season with a stunning 49-20 upset of the No. 2 Buckeyes. Rondale Moore paced the Boilermakers, who entered the game at 3-3, with 12 catches for 170 yards and two scores. Dwayne Haskins tried to keep the Buckeyes in the game, throwing 73 passes, completing 49 for 470 yards and a pair of TDs.

teammates all agreed they had plenty of confidence in his backup, the personable Guiton.

"Nobody blinked," center Corey Linsley said. "Kenny's in? All right, good. We're going to go out there and do our thing. We had so little time left, I wasn't really sure how many plays we were going to run, but I kind of had a feeling. I was like, 'Kenny's going to do this thing. I think Kenny's worked hard and he's not going to let this one slip by,' and sure enough he didn't."

Of course, Guiton was not making his first appearance of the season. He briefly replaced Miller in each of the previous three weeks and completed scoring drives in wins over Michigan State, Nebraska and Indiana.

"All the games that I've been in, I've been in red zone situations, and that's where it's hard to score," Guiton said. "I think that helped me a lot. Being in away stadiums, they are pretty loud against us, so that helped me out. Just being out there, it's a lot of fun."

That experience brought a positive vibe, but Herman said more went into Guiton's readiness to play than simply a handful of relief appearances. Paying attention to everything that happens in practice even when he

is on the sideline paid dividends.

"He doesn't get near the amount of reps Braxton does (in practice), but he's a sharp kid," Herman said. "He gets mental reps. He's a coach's kid, and I call him Coach Guiton. He's a coach at practice. He's a coach in the meeting room. He's a coach on the sideline during games, and obviously when he gets in the game he's a cool customer and knows what's going on."

Such preparation went so far as to give the coach confidence Guiton could execute a unique play for the all-important, two-point conversion after Fields' touchdown catch.

A play-action pass called "Y Hide," designed for Guiton to fake a handoff then drop and wait for tight end Jeff Heurman to drift across the formation after pretending to block. Not only is it a play that takes time to develop, it put Guiton in the position of needing to float a pass over a lineman on the back side.

The Buckeyes' No. 1 offense had worked on the play many times in practice, but Guiton – as a backup – had not thrown that specific pass.

"He doesn't need it," Herman said of prac-

tice on the throw. "That's kind of his M.O. He is confident in his ability to lead the team. And despite how he might have started his action there, I think there was no doubt in his mind or really our minds that he was going to be a guy that is capable of leading us down the field to score."

Linsley laughed when asked about the play after the game because it did not unfold exactly how it was supposed to. Heurman nearly got caught in traffic while carrying out his fake and subsequently was slow in getting to his spot in the end zone.

"It says a lot about (Guiton's) discipline, about his composure, the confidence he has," Linsley said. "It also says a lot about the faith he has in his teammates because I know how the play develops and I was sitting there waiting for it and I could see where it was going to develop and it took a lot more time than it usually does. Then I finally saw it all happen."

For Herman, that was just another example of Guiton's natural calm.

"The guy's got ice water in his veins," Herman said. "He's a cool customer. I can't say enough about how fortunate we are to have a guy like him."

Guiton, meanwhile, seemed to shrug it off. He just did what came natural.

"From my point of view, I feel like I'm OK and everything," he said. "I try to stay calm and show my team that it's all going to be OK."

"This is what you play football for. I've always wanted the shot, and I felt like today I got it."

'Holding The Rope'

The Buckeyes' reaction to adversity was markedly different from last season when Miller was knocked out of a game at Nebraska that went down as a 34-27 loss. The Buckeyes led 27-6 when their quarterback went down, and they fell apart afterward.

The afternoon certainly presented opportunities for that to happen, such as the 2:40 mark in the fourth quarter when Guiton's deep pass was deflected by Purdue's Taylor Richards and intercepted by fellow safety Landon Feichter.

Meyer made sure the disappointment of that moment did not linger inside his quarterback as the Boilermakers took possession at their own 18-yard line with a 22-14 lead.

"He threw the pick, and I grabbed him. I said, 'You're going to go win us a game,'" Meyer said. "He looked right at me. I think he was down. I think that moment kind of picked him up, and he looked right back at me and said, 'I gotcha, Coach.'"

The young signal caller explained he was not feeling down, but he was worried he had let the team down in a crucial moment.

"I'm a backup coming off the bench, and I just want to do well for my team," he said. "It took the rest of the offense to pick me up and let me know this game is not over and we were going to get the ball back."

Guiton pulled the trigger, but the comeback was a team effort.

Fields' play on special teams loomed large, and the beleaguered defense pitched a shutout in the fourth quarter and overtime. The Boilermakers did not gain a first down after Guiton's interception or in the extra period.

"We actually talked about that in the hotel this morning - when it really gets really hard, the people that don't work very hard just let go of the rope and do something else," Meyer said. "If you work really hard, just hold onto that rope."

He acknowledged he was citing an old coaching saw and went on to explain it is the motivation for pushing his players hard in the weight room from the winter through the end

of the summer and on the practice fields in the spring and during preseason.

"You come in February, March, when it gets so friggin' hard, you can't give in," Meyer said. "You've got too much invested. That's my opinion why we won the game."

That was a message that hit home for veterans such as Jack Mewhort, a fourth-year junior in his second year as a starter on the offensive line.

"Since January, we've been training harder than anybody in the country for situations like this," Mewhort said. "When the other team gets tired, that's when we start to turn it on. The past eight, nine months, they reminded us every day when the time comes, you're going to have to out-physical them and keep going and keep pushing and we would be prepared for that. They were exactly right. It shows today just the way guys were persisting and making plays."

What the Buckeyes faced against Purdue was arguably the most difficult situation of the season, and they came away feeling more than satisfied with their response.

While they had previously pulled out a seven-point win against California, a one-point triumph at Michigan State and a three-point victory at Indiana, this was the closest they came to tasting their first defeat.

They were less than a minute away.

"We didn't finish games last year," senior Williams said. "We were in a lot, but we didn't finish. This year I think it's a true testament to the coaches and players buying into what Coach Meyer has been preaching, and that's play four quarters. If it's plus one like it was today, then it's a true testament to everybody in this whole program. The best thing about going 8-0 is a chance to go 9-0."

Meyer said he saw performances he would term "legendary," and Herman called it the greatest team win he had ever been a part of.

"From the defense stepping up when they needed to, to other guys performing on offense when we were really struggling to find momentum, and really when all hope seemed lost, the guys never gave up," Herman said. "Even with 47 seconds left we felt like we had a chance to put the game into overtime."

Considering the Buckeyes' record and their opponent, defensive coordinator Luke Fickell might have come up with the most appropriate summation of the afternoon.

A four-year starter on the Ohio State defensive line in the mid-1990s, Fickell has since spent 10 seasons on the coaching staff at his alma mater.

His first as a coach was in 2002 when the Buckeyes went 14-0 and won the national championship. Along the way, they even pulled out a 10-6 win at Purdue with a late touchdown pass from quarterback Craig Krenzel to wide receiver Michael Jenkins. It has come to be known as the "Holy Buckeye" play, and a reminder of it was even shown on the Ohio Stadium video board as part of a promotional ad in the fourth quarter.

"I have been here a long time and had some emotional wins, and 2002 was a long year that we won a lot of really, really really close games on last plays," Fickell said. "But man, this one means a lot. I am not sure they had one quite as emotional. It is a great feeling."

Guiton, meanwhile, called it a dream moment.

"I'm at a big college, a big university, the best in the nation, and I just went out and basically won a game with my team," he said. "That was a lot of fun."

This story originally appeared in the Oct. 27, 2012, issue of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

The Numbers Game

Ohio State 29, Purdue 22 (OT)

Oct. 20, 2012 — Ohio Stadium; Columbus, Ohio

Score by Quarters	1	2	3	4	OT	F
PURDUE	13	0	7	2	0	22
OHIO STATE	7	0	7	8	7	29

First Quarter

PU — Shavers, 83 yard pass from TerBush (Griggs kick blocked), 14:43; 1 play, 83 yards, 0:17 TOP.

OSU — B.Miller, 8 yard run (Basil kick), 5:29; 10 plays, 67 yards, 3:34 TOP.

PU — Hunt, 100 yard kickoff return (Griggs kick), 5:17.

Third Quarter

OSU — Hyde, 2 yard run (Basil kick), 7:41; 8 plays, 80 yards, 4:10 TOP.

PU — Bush, 31 yard pass from TerBush (Griggs kick), 3:49; 8 plays, 82 yards, 3:48 TOP.

Fourth Quarter

PU — TEAM safety (Ohio State flagged for illegal block in end zone), 10:11.

OSU — Fields, 2 yard pass from Guiton (Heurman pass from Guiton), 0:03; 7 plays 61 yards, 0:44 TOP.

Overtime

OSU — Hyde, 1 yard run (Basil kick); 5 plays, 25 yards.

Att. — 105,290.

Weather — 51 degrees, cloudy; wind, WSW 11 mph.

Team Statistics

	PU	OSU
First Downs	16	15
Rushing	5	7
Passing	10	6
Penalty	1	2
Rushes-Yards	39-117	36-152
Passing Yards	230	190
Passes (Comp.-Att.-Int.)	19-30-1	15-32-2
Offensive Plays	69	68
Total Net Yards	347	342
Third Down Efficiency	5-17	6-15
Fourth Down Efficiency	1-2	2-2
Punts-Avg.	7-44.1	5-41.6
Fumbles-Lost	2-0	2-2
Penalties	3-29	4-29
Time of Possession	34:49	25:11

Individual Statistics

RUSHING (Att.-Net Yds.) — **PU**: Bolden 9-35; Shavers 7-30; Cottom 5-15; Hunt 5-15; TerBush 8-14; Webster 1-4; Henry 2-3; Edison 2-1. **OSU**: Hyde 19-91; B.Miller 12-47; P.Brown 1-9; R.Smith 2-3; Guiton 2-2.

PASSING (Comp.-Att.-Int.-Yds.-TD) — **PU**: TerBush 19-30-1-230-2. **OSU**: B.Miller 9-20-1-113-0; Guiton 6-11-1-77-1; TEAM 0-1-0-0-0.

RECEIVING (Rec.-Yds.) — **PU**: Macarthy 6-48; Shavers 3-93; Bush 2-39; Hunt 2-21; Wright 2-13; Edison 2-10; Holmes 2-6. **OSU**: Fields 3-44; P.Brown 3-44; D.Smith 2-48; Spencer 2-15; Hyde 2-6; Stoneburner 1-17; M.Thomas 1-11; Heurman 1-5.

PUNTING (No.-Avg.-Long) — **PU**: Webster 7-44.1-50. **OSU**: Buchanan 5-41.6-47.

PUNT RETURNS (No.-Yds.) — **PU**: J.Johnson 3-3. **OSU**: Fields 2-14; P.Brown 1-6.

KICKOFF RETURNS (No.-Yds.) — **PU**: Hunt 5-139. **OSU**: R.Smith 4-94.

FUMBLE RECOVERIES (No.-Yds.) — **PU**: Short 1-0; Gaston 1-0. **OSU**: None.

INTERCEPTIONS (No.-Yds.) — **PU**: Feichter 1-3; J.Johnson 1-0. **OSU**: Barnett 1-0.

SACKS (No.-Yds.) — **PU**: Russell 1.0-8; Maci 1.0-2. **OSU**: None.

TACKLES FOR LOSS (No.-Yds.) — **PU**: Russell 1.0-8; Maci 1.0-2; J.Johnson 1.0-1. **OSU**: Shazier 1.5-4; Z.Boren 0.5-3.

TACKLES (Solo-Asst.-Tot.) — **PU**: Feichter 6-3-9; Richard 4-3-7; Russell 5-1-6; Gilliam 3-2-5; J.Johnson 3-1-4; F.Williams 3-1-4; Robinson 2-2-4; Higgs 0-4-4; Short 3-0-3; Charlot 2-1-3; Maci 2-0-2; Lucas 1-1-2; Gaston 1-1-2; Phillips 1-0-1; TEAM 1-0-1; Ezenwa 0-1-1; Freytag 0-1-1; A.Brown 0-1-1; Lewis 0-1-1. **OSU**: Shazier 7-5-12; Simon 1-8-9; Hankins 6-2-8; Bryant 4-4-8; Barnett 5-1-6; N.Williams 1-5-6; Z.Boren 0-5-5; Roby 3-1-4; Perkins 3-0-3; Goebel 3-0-3; Bennett 1-1-2; Howard 1-1-2; Spence 1-1-2; O.Johnson 0-2-2; Hale 0-2-2; D.Smith 1-0-1; Tanner 1-0-1; Perry 1-0-1; Haynes 0-1-1; S.Smith 0-1-1; Klein 0-1-1; C.Brown 0-1-1.

PLAYERS IN THE GAME — **PU**: Offense, Ross, Bush, Shavers, T. Thomas, TerBush, Wright, Schmeig, Kugler, Drey, Pamphile, Foy, Griggs. Defense, Russell, Short, Gaston, Maci, Gilliam, Robinson, J.Johnson, F.Williams, Feichter, Charlot, Richards, Webster. Reserves, Higgs, A.Brown, Hunt, Edison, Henry, Macarthy, Torwudzo, Ezenwa, Allen, Bolden, Cottom, Lewis, Quinn, Meadows, A.Williams, Anthop, Heiniger, Lucas, Freytag, Schmitt, Taylor, Davis, Isaac, Cermin, Devin Smith, Sinz, Holmes, Phillips, Latta, Schott. **OSU**: Offense, Mewhort, Norwell, Linsley, M.Hall, Fragel, Heurman, B.Miller, Hyde, M.Thomas, P.Brown, Spencer, Basil. Defense, Simon, Hankins, Goebel, N.Williams, Shazier, Klein, Roby, Bryant, O.Johnson, Barnett, Howard, Buchanan. Reserves, R.Smith, C.Brown, C.Williams, Reed, Spence, Griffin, Stoneburner, D.Grant, Guiton, C.Grant, Devin Smith, Domicone, Perkins, Dunn, Tanner, Rice, Bogard, Marcus, Perry, Haynes, Z.Boren, Homan, Hale, Makridis, Farris, S.Smith, Bennett, Decker, Kramer, C.Carter, Underwood, Baldwin, Fields, Vannett, S.Miller, Washington.

Indiana Offensive Tackle Commits To Buckeyes

Ohio State moved within percentage points of Alabama for the nation's top-rated recruiting class when Floyds Knobs (Ind.) Floyd Central three-star offensive tackle Zen Michalski announced his commitment to the Buckeyes on Oct. 3.

The 6-7, 288-pound Michalski – who is considered the 48th-best offensive tackle and No. 626 prospect overall in the class of 2021 – had been committed to Louisville since April, but an offer from Ohio State on Sept. 8 following a strong start to his senior season shook up his recruitment.

RECRUITING OUTLOOK Andrew Lind

Though Michalski has not been able to meet with coaches amid the NCAA-mandated dead period, he's grown close from afar with head coach Ryan Day, offensive line coach Greg Studrawa and graduate assistant Kennedy Cook in recent weeks.

He also took a trip to Columbus with his father the weekend of Sept. 27 – similar to the extra unofficial visit 2022 Acworth (Ga.) Allatoona three-star tight end Bennett Christian made before he committed to the Buckeyes on Sept. 1 – which ultimately sealed the deal for Ohio State.

Michalski, who decommitted from the Cardinals on Sept. 28, becomes the 20th commitment in Ohio State's 2021 recruiting class, joining Bellaire (Texas) Episcopal five-star guard Donovan Jackson and Richfield (Ohio) Revere four-star guard Ben Christman in the trenches. His pledge pulled the Buckeyes within .08 points of Alabama for the top spot in the 247Sports team recruiting rankings.

Defensive Lineman Lists Ohio State Among Top Schools

Sammamish (Wash.) Eastside Catholic five-star defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau included Ohio State in his top seven on Oct. 1 alongside Alabama, Michigan, Oklahoma, Oregon, USC and Washington.

The 6-5, 277-pound Tuimoloau is considered the second-best strongside defensive end and No. 2 prospect overall in the class of 2022. He recorded 64 tackles, 15 tackles for loss and 11 sacks to lead the Crusaders to their second consecutive state title last season. He also plays tight end at Eastside Catholic, where he hauled in 18 passes for 235 yards and four touchdowns, including the game-winner in the championship game.

Tuimoloau has never been to Columbus, but the Buckeyes are widely considered the favorite in his recruitment thanks to his relationship with defensive line coach Larry Johnson and freshman wide receiver Gee Scott, his former high school teammate. Had he been able to take an official visit this summer as he initially planned, many prognosticators believe he would have already committed to Ohio State.

The coronavirus pandemic put that on hold, however, and now Tuimoloau must wait until the NCAA ends the ongoing recruiting dead period to take visits. Since that runs through at least the end of the calendar year, he now plans to make his college decision on National Signing Day on Feb. 3.

The state of Washington postponed fall sports until the spring, so Tuimoloau will participate in the All-American Bowl and the Polynesian Bowl in January and then cap his high school career with a shortened season in February and March before enrolling at his school of choice over the summer.

Buckeyes Miss Cut For Defensive Tackle

Once considered to be the favorite in his recruitment, Ohio State did not make the cut for Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic

OSU Football Verbal Commitments

Players in the class of 2021 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Jayden Ballard	WR	6-2	175	★★★★	Massillon (Ohio) Washington
Denzel Burke	CB	6-0	189	★★★★	Scottsdale (Ariz.) Saguaro
Reid Carrico	LB	6-3	225	★★★★	Ironton, Ohio
Ben Christman	OT	6-6	299	★★★★	Richfield (Ohio) Revere
Jantzen Dunn	CB	6-2	178	★★★★	Bowling Green (Ky.) South Warren
Michael Hall	DT	6-3	290	★★★★	Streetsboro, Ohio
Jordan Hancock	CB	6-1	170	★★★★	Suwanee (Ga.) North Gwinnett
Marvin Harrison	WR	6-3	190	★★★★	Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep
Sam Hart	TE	6-5	225	★★★	Aurora (Colo.) Cherokee Trail
TreVeyon Henderson	RB	5-11	195	★★★★★	Hopewell, Va.
Donovan Jackson	OG	6-4	308	★★★★★	Bellaire (Texas) Episcopal
Jakailin Johnson	CB	6-1	175	★★★★	St. Louis De Smet Jesuit
Jaylen Johnson	S	6-1	200	★★★	Cincinnati La Salle
Kyle McCord	QB	6-3	215	★★★★★	Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep
Zen Michalski	OT	6-7	288	★★★★	Floyds Knobs (Ind.) Floyd Central
Jesse Mirco	P	6-3	200	★★★	Fremantle, Western Australia
Evan Pryor	RB	5-10	190	★★★★	Cornelius (N.C.) W.A. Hough
Jack Sawyer	DE	6-5	248	★★★★★	Pickerington (Ohio) North
Andre Turrentine	S	6-0	175	★★★★	Nashville (Tenn.) Ensworth
Tyleik Williams	DT	6-3	330	★★★★	Manassas (Va.) Unity Reed

Players in the class of 2022 who have issued a verbal commitment to play football at Ohio State.

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Jyaire Brown	CB	5-11	165	★★★★	West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West
Bennett Christian	TE	6-6	235	★★★	Acworth (Ga.) Allatoona
C.J. Hicks	LB	6-4	218	★★★★	Kettering (Ohio) Archbishop Alter
Dasan McCullough	ATH	6-5	220	★★★★	Overland Park (Kan.) B.V. North
Gabe Powers	LB	6-4	220	★★★★★	Marysville, Ohio
Tegra Tshabola	OT	6-5	340	★★★★	West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West

four-star defensive tackle Tywone Malone, who trimmed his list of nearly 30 scholarship offers down to Florida State, Ole Miss, Tennessee, Texas A&M, Rutgers and USC on Oct. 5

The 6-4, 300-pound Malone – who is considered the fifth-best defensive tackle and No. 55 prospect overall in the class of 2021 – has been outspoken about his desire to play both football and baseball in college, and the schools still vying for his signature have offered him the opportunity to do just that. The Buckeyes, on the other hand, don't often allow players to play two sports in college, unless it's a skill-position player running track.

"The big key was the baseball part of things," Malone told Rivals recruiting analyst Adam Friedman. "I really haven't been talking to Ohio State's baseball program as much as these other schools. Coach (Ryan) Day, Coach (Larry) Johnson and I were calling and texting a lot and that's what I really liked about Ohio State. But like I said, baseball is a big thing in my recruitment and that was making it tough."

Ohio State already has a pair of commitments at defensive tackle in Streetsboro, Ohio, four-star Mike Hall and Manassas (Va.) Unity Reed four-star Tyleik Williams, whose pledge on Aug. 27 effectively ended the Buckeyes' pursuit of Malone since they're both projected to play nose tackle at the next level. Johnson hopes to add at least one more player in the trenches this cycle, though, with Tuimoloau – whom many project to move inside at the next level – at the top of the priority chart and Sumter, S.C., four-star end Justus Boone among those to keep an eye on, as well.

Recruiting Without In-Person Interactions

Johnson is widely considered one of

Ohio State's best recruiters, but he admitted during a teleconference on Oct. 7 that he's had to make significant adjustments to his approach during the pandemic and prolonged dead period.

"The biggest thing is not getting kids on campus," Johnson said. "That's tough with the pandemic, and so you have to really try to take the campus to them and give them the opportunity to see that."

"Really, it's about how the kids see us and how they fit into our system. You try to show that and show exactly how we fit and how you fit in our defensive scheme and what we're looking for."

The Buckeyes staff has conducted numerous virtual visits with prospects to help bridge the gap. But as Johnson said, "There's nothing like getting on campus in person and getting to meet the people you're going to be around. That's probably the toughest thing."

Day Navigates Extra Year Of Eligibility

The NCAA Division I Council approved a proposal earlier this summer that grants all fall student-athletes an extra year of eligibility regardless of whether they play this season or not. And though returning seniors will not count toward next year's 85-man scholarship limit if they decide to return for another season, Day called the situation confusing because of how it impacts underclassmen and future recruiting classes.

"There's a process, and it's a long process," Day said during a teleconference on Oct. 2. "It's very confusing metrics that, boy, it took me about three hours to sit down with (director of player personnel) Mark Pantoni and figure it all out."

"It's kind of a plus-one based on seniors and years of eligibility. It's confusing. It's not easy. But I don't see us being over 85, even next fall, as I project it all out."



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ASK AN ANALYST

With Lettermen Row's Jeremy Birmingham

As someone who is relatively new to his position and still growing, both physically and in his role, what does Ohio State's newest commitment, Floyds Knobs (Ind.) Floyd Central three-star offensive tackle Zen Michalski, bring to the table on the field?

"Michalski is big, he's athletic and he's raw – but that raw thing isn't bad. He's young and has played the offensive line for a little more than a year, and that means he's not developed a lot of the bad habits that young linemen have. From an Ohio State perspective, he also brings positional versatility, and that's a trait the Buckeyes coaching staff loves among its offensive linemen."

With 20 prospects already in the fold and only a handful of top targets remaining, how do you foresee the Buckeyes finishing their 2021 recruiting class? Are there any under-the-radar players who could find their way in late?

"Because of COVID-19 and the way it has limited recruiting camps and evaluations, there are fewer opportunities than ever for the under-recruited prospects around the country to gain exposure."

"When it comes to Ohio State specifically, the attention that remains on the class of 2021 is

focused heavily on some of the biggest fish in the nation, namely five-star prospects like Steilacoom, Wash., wide receiver Emeka Egbuka; Fairfax (Va.) Robinson Secondary offensive tackle Tristan Leigh; and Sammamish (Wash.) Eastside Catholic defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau.

"If there's one position that has a chance to spawn a surprise, it would probably be the offensive line because there are a handful of kids inside of Ohio's borders getting a look right now in the event that Leigh ends up elsewhere."

Ohio State is bringing in a large class at defensive back in 2021 with St. Louis De Smet Jesuit four-star Jakailin Johnson; Suwanee (Ga.) North Gwinnett four-star Jordan Hancock; Nashville Ensworth four-star Andre Turrentine; Scottsdale (Ariz.) Saguaro four-star Denzel Burke; Bowling Green (Ky.) South Warren four-star Jantzen Dunn; and Cincinnati La Salle three-star Jaylen Johnson. How do you see them each fitting into the defense (positionally) once they arrive on campus?

"As with the offensive line, Ohio State loves players that can move around and prefers its defensive backs to be almost position-less at this point, and this

group of defensive backs has a lot of flexibility in it. That being said, I see Hancock, Johnson and Burke starting their Buckeye careers at cornerback while the other three guys are more safety-first types. I do like Dunn as a potential cornerback down the road, though, because of his length and straight-line speed."

With two of the nation's top-rated running backs committed for 2021 in Hopewell, Va., five-star TreVeyon Henderson and Cornelius (N.C.) William Amos Hough four-star Evan Pryor, Ohio State can afford to be selective next cycle. So who are some of the early names to keep in mind for 2022?

"The Buckeyes want to grab a running back in every class, and they're certainly in a position to be patient in the Class of 2022 because of the success in 2021. Ohio State has made sure to build early relationships with Reading (Pa.) Governor Mifflin four-star Nicholas Singleton; Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star KayTron Allen; Memphis Christian Brothers four-star Dallan Hayden; Atlanta Woodward Academy four-star Damari Alston; and a host of others so far, but the real priorities aren't likely to emerge until visits are permissible again."

The Buckeyes – and all other Football Bowl Subdivision schools, for that matter – are required to be down to 85 scholarship players (excluding returning seniors in 2021) by the time fall camp rolls around. Departures for the NFL and transfers should help ease some of the concerns associated with the extra year of eligibility, but Day and Pantoni will also have to be mindful of how many players they take in the next few recruiting classes to balance it all out, especially since the NCAA has yet to make a determination on scholarship limits beyond the 2021 season.

"It's going to have to be something we continually talk about and work through," Day said.

Cornerback Commit Opts Back Into Senior Season

On Aug. 3, Ohio State four-star cornerback commit Jordan Hancock announced he would not play his senior season at Suwanee (Ga.) North Gwinnett in order to limit potential interactions with others amid the coronavirus pandemic. But after numerous conversations with his parents, who both have underlying health conditions, he has decided to rejoin his teammates this fall.

The news was first reported on Oct. 8 by 247Sports director of recruiting Steve Wiltfong.

The 6-1, 170-pound Hancock – who is considered the fourth-best cornerback and No. 66 prospect overall in the class of 2021 – committed to the Buckeyes

in July, just days after he decommitted from Clemson. He initially picked the Tigers because of the program's focus on faith and proximity to his hometown, where his mother was undergoing radiation treatments for cancer that she has since completed.

Hancock was one of five Ohio State commits to opt out of their senior seasons, joining Pickerington (Ohio) North five-star defensive end Jack Sawyer; Hopewell, Va., five-star running back TreVeyon Henderson; Cornelius (N.C.) William Amos Hough four-star running back Evan Pryor; and Aurora (Colo.) Cherokee Trail three-star tight end Sam Hart, who also opted back in after Colorado reinstated its fall schedule.

Sawyer also had that option but decided to focus on enrolling early at Ohio State, while Henderson and Pryor were not given a choice since Virginia and North Carolina are still aiming for spring seasons.

Hancock, who is set to cap his high school career in the 2021 All-American Bowl, will make his season debut on Oct. 16 against Mill Creek. The Bulldogs are 4-2 this season and have three additional games scheduled before the playoffs begin.

Alford Bounces Back On Recruiting Trail

Ohio State running backs coach Tony Alford received his fair share of criticism after the Buckeyes missed out on Tucson

(Ariz.) Salpointe Catholic five-star Bijan Robinson and Deerfield Beach, Fla., four-star Jaylan Knighton as running backs in the 2020 recruiting cycle.

He did, however, turn things around this year by helping Ohio State land commitments from Henderson and Pryor, who are both ranked among the top 100 recruits in their class. His secret? Being open and honest with both players about the Buckeyes' need for two players at this position this cycle.

"I think if you're forthright and honest with what you're doing and everybody knows on the front end, 'This is what we're doing and here's why,' it usually works out for those that are willing to do that," Alford said during a teleconference on Oct. 6. "And for those who aren't, they get off the ship real fast."

"My approach has always been to be as honest and forthright as I can. If it's one guy, here's why it's one guy. If it's two guys, here's why it's two guys, and here's the type of guys we're looking for. To me, it's not hard. You just tell them what it is, and you find the guys that are willing to be involved in that."

As for what Henderson and Pryor bring to the table as the nation's second-best pure running back and second-best all-purpose back, respectively?

"You don't want the same player, obviously, but you want guys that you can develop to be complete players," Alford said. "Some guys' skill set will lend itself to maybe he's a little bit better in this area

than this guy. But both of those things can be developed and hopefully developed at an elite level."


"There are going to be a lot of similarities based on what we do as an offense. You better be able to run the ball between the tackles. You better be able to make some plays out in space as well, on the perimeter. You better be big enough to be able to hold up in pass protection but, at the same time, a guy that we can put you out and use you out of the backfield to catch some balls. If you're a guy that's maybe a better pass receiver than I am, I will continue to work on that skill set. That's more your cup of tea than mine, but we can balance it out that way."

Maintaining Relationships Pays Dividends Down Line

When a prospect commits to a program, fans of the schools he did not choose will undoubtedly unfollow him on social media and pretend they never wanted him in the first place. But that's not how it works for coaches, who build strong bonds with the player and their parents throughout the recruiting process.

The connection doesn't simply end because they don't get to coach the player at the next level, and Alford and Johnson can attest to that after they maintained a relationship with running back Trey Sermon and defensive tackle Antwan Jackson well after they committed to


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Relationships Lead To Second Chance In Recruiting

Continued From Page 43

Oklahoma and Auburn over Ohio State, respectively.

In fact, Sermon played a significant role in the Sooners' 31-16 win at Ohio Stadium in 2017, rushing for 62 yards and hauling in one touchdown reception. Then, after the game, Alford sought him out.

"He was checking in with me, seeing how I was doing," Sermon said during a teleconference on Oct. 6. "It was just unique because Coach Alford is such a genuine guy. All the players he comes in contact with, he really cares about them. I feel that was the thing that stuck out the most. I definitely feel like that's unique with him. You just don't find that too often."

Alford, who landed an early commitment in the 2017 recruiting cycle from J.K. Dobbins, felt Sermon's recruitment ended on a positive note, with both sides finding a good fit. Thus, it made it easy for him to reach out when Sermon entered the transfer portal in the spring.

"Everybody understands that there's a business side to this, too," Alford said. "If things are done properly and the relationships are real and transparent, they are unconditional relationships. Just because you don't do what I want you to, it doesn't mean I think you're a bad guy. If those relationships are unconditional, they have a way of coming back to you later if the situation presents itself, and that's kind of what happened with Trey."

Jackson, meanwhile, was actually com-



COURTESY OF THE OHIO STATE DEPT. OF ATHLETICS

UNBREAKABLE BOND – Ohio State senior running back Trey Sermon built a relationship with running backs coach Tony Alford during his initial recruitment, which led to the Buckeyes eventually landing the Oklahoma transfer.



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mitted to Ohio State for a period of time in 2015 before he flipped his pledge to Auburn. But during his two seasons with the Tigers, he started to think about the relationship he formed with Johnson during the recruiting process, and that eventually led him back to the Buckeyes.

"It was very special," Jackson said. "He built a relationship with me, but also my dad. My dad had been coming off of a stroke and he made a real good connection with him. I really loved that.

"I was just young, and I just didn't understand. I just didn't really get it. My dad was really telling me: 'Ohio State, Ohio State.' Nothing was wrong with Auburn. Auburn was still a good school. Just being there I was really thinking about Coach J a lot and how he could develop me."

Like Alford, Johnson wasted no time in pursuing Jackson once he transferred to Blinn Junior College before the 2017 season. But he wasn't exactly sure he'd be successful in landing Jackson's pledge the second time around, either.

"It is unique," Johnson said. "Very seldom do we go back and get a guy that committed to us, decommitted to go somewhere else and then come back to us. That's tough to do."

Decision Looms For Pennsylvania Safety

One player the Buckeyes consider a luxury more than a necessity right now is

Monroeville (Pa.) Gateway four-star safety Derrick Davis, who said on the "Mr. PA Football Inside Track All Sports Podcast" on Oct. 6 that he will choose among Georgia, Ohio State, Penn State, Pittsburgh and USC on Nov. 14.

The Buckeyes have been recruiting the 6-1, 194-pound Davis – who is considered the second-best safety and No. 53 prospect overall in the class of 2021 – for more than two years. He's been to campus more than a half-dozen times since, including his most recent trip in February for an exclusive visitor weekend that also included Hall and Sawyer.

Davis – who hails from the same high school as former Ohio State defensive back Corey "Pitt" Brown and linebacker Dorian Bell – hoped to take all five official visits this fall before making his college decision, though that obviously changed when the NCAA decided to extend the current recruiting dead period through the end of the calendar year.

Ohio State already holds six commitments in the defensive backfield in Hancock; St. Louis De Smet four-star Jakailin Johnson; Nashville Ensworth four-star Andre Turrentine; Scottsdale (Ariz.) Saguaro four-star Denzel Burke; Bowling Green (Ky.) South Warren four-star Jantzen Dunn; and Cincinnati La Salle three-star Jaylen Johnson, and that logjam doesn't exactly help the Buckeyes in their pursuit of Davis. Instead, it appears the Nittany Lions will be

the ones to land his pledge, as they currently hold 90 percent of the 247Sports crystal ball predictions.

Top-Rated Receiver Trims List Of Offers

Del Valle, Texas, five-star wide receiver Caleb Burton included Ohio State in his top 12 on Oct. 6 alongside Alabama, Auburn, Clemson, Florida, Georgia, LSU, Oklahoma, Oregon, Stanford, Texas and USC.

The 6-0, 165-pound Burton is considered the top-rated wide receiver and No. 10 prospect overall in the class of 2022. He has hauled in 83 passes for 1,491 yards and 18 touchdowns in two seasons at the varsity level.

Day and wide receivers coach Brian Hartline extended an offer to Burton during a Zoom call in March and have maintained contact with him in the months since. He's never been to campus but plans to make the trip with his father – who is also his head coach – whenever the NCAA-mandated recruiting dead period comes to an end.

The Buckeyes are likely to be selective at the wide receiver position in the 2022 cycle with the likes of freshmen Julian Fleming, Jaxon Smith-Njigba, Gee Scott and Mookie Cooper already on the roster and Massillon (Ohio) Washington four-star Jayden Ballard and Philadelphia St. Joseph's Prep four-star Marvin Harrison in the fold for 2021.

Along with Burton, other names to keep in mind at the position include Santa Ana

(Calif.) Mater Dei four-star C.J. Williams; Chicago St. Rita four-star Kaleb Brown; and Lewisville, Texas, four-star Armani Winfield.

Notes From Around The Country

• Kettering (Ohio) Alter four-star linebacker C.J. Hicks on Oct. 8 became the first Ohio State commit from the class of 2022 to land an invitation to play in the All-American Bowl. He has not yet accepted, though it's worth noting the Buckeyes have a nation-leading 12 pledges set to play in the 2021 All-American Bowl.

• Oklahoma landed a commitment on Oct. 9 from 2021 St. Louis Cardinal Ritter Prep five-star wide receiver Luther Burden. Burden, who is the former teammate of Ohio State sophomore wide receiver Jameson Williams, previously listed the Buckeyes among his top five schools.

• Tampa (Fla.) Carrollwood Day four-star tight end Michael Trigg committed to USC on Oct. 11. He previously included Ohio State among his top 10 schools.

• Though he listed Ohio State in his top five back in July, Grandview, Texas, four-star tight end Dametrious Crownover committed to Texas A&M on Oct. 12. His older brother, Earnest, is a sophomore running back for the Aggies.

For the latest in Ohio State football recruiting news, be sure to check out BuckeyeSports.com, free to all BSB subscribers, daily.

A Look Back At Recruiting From The Pages Of BSB

30 Years Ago – 1990

Bubba Lichtenberg, the son of former Ohio State quarterbacks coach and Ohio University head coach Tom Lichtenberg, was turning heads as a quarterback for Athens (Ohio) High School and drawing major interest at the college level.

"Bubba is a big factor to our success," Athens coach Bob Gasser told BSB in October, well into Lichtenberg's senior season. "He came in last spring and got to know the rest of our kids, and he adapted here very easily. He picked everything up here very fast."

Through seven games, Lichtenberg had completed 66 of 119 passes for 972 yards with 12 touchdowns and three interceptions. That line, along with his pedigree, drew eyes from many of the top teams in the Midwest, though Lichtenberg was yet to settle on a final grouping of suitors to focus on.

"I guess I'm thinking about Ohio State, Michigan, Notre Dame, Stanford, Colorado State, South Carolina, Michigan State, most of the Big Ten and maybe a few others," he said.

"I plan to visit five schools, and I have already committed one visit to Arizona. I've traveled quite a few places with my dad and seen a lot of nice schools. I went to the (1987) Cotton Bowl with Ohio State. I knew Chris Spielman, and I knew Jim Karsatos and Tom Tupa pretty well. I'm familiar with Ohio State."

25 Years Ago – 1995

Lancaster, Ohio, offensive lineman Benji Gilbert verbally committed to Ohio State for the second time in mid-October, after first committing to the Buckeyes in June.

Within a week of that first pledge, he backed off, saying he wanted to keep his options open. However, after visiting Ohio State to see the Buckeyes knock off Notre Dame on Sept. 30, Gilbert decided to firm up his commitment and shut down his recruitment.

"It wasn't just about that game," he said. "I talked it over with my family. It's a great school with a great football atmosphere and, of course, the location is a factor. It's close to home. It's where I should go."

Gilbert said he was interested in Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana and Northwestern as well.

"But I didn't really consider them as much as I considered Ohio State."

20 Years Ago – 2000

Ohio State welcomed in roughly 25 prep football prospects for its Oct. 14 home game with Minnesota in Ohio Stadium. Among the players in attendance were verbal commitments

Redgie Arden, Ryan Cook, Brandon McKinney, Adam Olds and Andree Tyree.

Perhaps the top high school prospect in attendance was Columbus Brookhaven running back Maurice Hall. Hall was rated Ohio's fourth-best senior prospect by Bill Kurelic of The Ohio Football Recruiting News. He had rushed for 1,588 yards and 29 touchdowns through mid-October.

With visits with Notre Dame, Penn State, Ohio State, Georgia Tech and Florida State all on the docket for winter, Hall's recruitment was still very much a battle for the in-state Buckeyes.

15 Years Ago – 2005

The coaching staff of the Ohio State football team had been aware of Grant Schwartz for some time – just not as long as Schwartz had been aware of them.

The 6-0, 200-pound safety from Dana Point (Calif.) Dana Hills grew up a Buckeye fan. That was almost preordained, as his father, Brian, played under Woody Hayes and Earle Bruce in the 1970s.

Schwartz had been to Columbus with his father many times – including participating in the Tunnel of Pride prior to the 2002 Michigan game – but it was a trip to the OSU campus over the summer that helped put Schwartz in the situation he found himself in. In June, Schwartz attended Ohio State's camp as a defensive back and impressed the Buckeye coaches, who requested film of his senior season.

With that film into the Buckeyes in October, Ohio State extended an offer to the legacy prospect.

"I talked to (linebackers coach Luke) Fickell and (cornerbacks coach Tim) Beckman," Schwartz said. "They both told me to look forward to being a Buckeye."

The offer was still contingent on head coach Jim Tressel's approval, as he was unable to watch the film prior to Ohio State's matchup with Penn State, but things looked good for Schwartz.

"It's definitely been a dream of mine since I was 6 years old, since I knew what football was," Schwartz said. "I'd like to play at a Big Ten school like that. My dad played there, so I know the tradition and what it means to be a Buckeye. It means a lot to me."

10 Years Ago – 2010

Another one of Ohio's top 2012 prospects claimed an offer from the Buckeyes. Defensive end Adolphus Washington told IrishEyes.com that OSU joined Cincinnati and Kentucky as schools to have offered him.

On Oct. 7, Cincinnati Taft head coach Mike Martin told The Cincinnati Enquirer that Alabama, Texas, Texas A&M, Indiana, Pitt, Boston College and Northwestern were also on the board with an offer out to the talented in-state prospect.

Listed at 6-6, 240-pounds, Washington was already ranked a four-star prospect in Scout's initial 2012 rankings. He was on hand to see OSU host Miami (Fla.) and had also taken in a game at Notre Dame.

While Washington could claim plenty of interest, he didn't yet know where he'd actually end up playing at the next level.

"Ohio State said I would be an outside linebacker, and some of the others have said I would be a defensive end," he told Scout. "Notre Dame has not yet said what they would be looking at me to play."

Five Years Ago – 2015

Four days after the Oct. 14 decommitment of Hubbard, Ohio, four-star running back George Hill, Ohio State secured a commitment from New London (N.C.) North Stanly four-star running back Antonio Williams.

He announced his commitment on Oct. 18, one day after visiting for the Buckeyes' game against Penn State, and said that he planned to enroll early.

"It feels great ... 79 days from now I'll be in class and getting ready to play," Williams told BSB. "It's a great situation. They have a great psychology program, which is what I want to major in."

"And I've had a great relationship with (running backs coach Tony Alford) since he was at Notre Dame. I already have a very close relationship with him. He's going to tell you how it is, and that's the type of person I like."

One Year Ago – 2019

Ohio State started off its big recruiting weekend with a bang when it landed a commitment from Charlotte (N.C.) Providence Day School four-star defensive lineman Jacobbe Cowan the night of Oct. 4.

The 6-5, 262-pound Cowan – who was considered the 15th-best defensive tackle and No. 165 prospect overall in the class of 2020 – actually pledged his services to the Buckeyes following his official visit in mid-June but waited to announce his decision.

Cowan became the 23rd member of Ohio State's 2020 recruiting class, joining Cincinnati Princeton four-star Darrion Henry and Pickerington (Ohio) Central three-star Ty Hamilton along the Buckeyes' defensive line.

Gopher Standout Receiver Bateman Returns

When it appeared that the Big Ten season would never happen, Minnesota wide receiver Rashod Bateman opted out on Aug. 4 and signed with an agent to begin preparing for the NFL draft.

After the Big Ten reinstated its fall football season, Bateman opted back in Sept. 16. The Gophers' 2019 team MVP was able to practice with the team but needed approval for competition.

BIG TEN NOTES

Joe Dempsey

Bateman received clearance for competition this fall and will prepare to lead the Gophers onto the field Oct. 24 for their first game against Michigan at home.

Breaking out as a sophomore, Bateman reeled in 60 receptions for 1,219 yards and 11 touchdowns, earning the honor of the Big Ten's receiver of the year. A Tifton, Ga., native, Bateman was a third-team All America honoree by The Associated Press in addition to being an All-Big Ten first-team member with former Gopher wide receiver Tyler Johnson.

As a true freshman in 2018, Bateman snagged 51 catches for 704 yards and six touchdowns in 13 games. After blossoming into a highly productive wideout,

Bateman could have remained opted out and prepared for the 2021 NFL draft, for which he is ranked the No. 2 wide receiver and No. 10 overall prospect by ESPN's Mel Kiper.

For his junior season, Bateman will be switching his jersey number from 13 to zero to represent "zero tolerance for racism in our culture and ... a call to action to end racism in our society."

"Rashod represents everything that is right about college football, and I am filled with joy for him," said Minnesota head coach P.J. Fleck. "He has always wanted to be a Gopher and now has the opportunity to wear a Minnesota jersey again. Rashod is one of the best football players in the nation, but he's an even better person, teammate and son.

"I am also proud of Rashod for utilizing his platform to encourage social change."

PSU Standout LB Parsons Will Not Return To Team

Penn State linebacker Micah Parsons, who opted out back on Aug. 6, debated a return to the Nittany Lions once the season was reinstated but will instead continue to prepare for the NFL draft.

"I think there was a legitimate possibility for that to happen. But as we continued to talk, the timing of it made it challenging," said Penn State head coach James Franklin. "That won't be happening. We understand the decision. Just like we were on the front end, we're supportive of the decision."

As a sophomore for the 11-2 Nittany Lions, Parsons led the team with 109 tackles (52 solo), including 14 tackles for loss and five sacks, with five pass break-ups, four forced fumbles and a fumble recovery.

His dominant season in 2019 made Parsons a consensus All-American and earned him the honor of the Big Ten's linebacker of the year.

As a five-star prospect out of Harrisburg, Pa., Parsons was initially a priority target for Ohio State in recruiting. The Buckeyes agreed to stop recruiting Parsons after they committed NCAA violations by allowing him onto the set of "ESPN's College GameDay" to take a picture with analyst Kirk Herbstreit, a former Ohio State quarterback.

After choosing Penn State, Parsons immediately became one of the team's most talented players, leading the team in tackles as a true freshman. Parsons posted 83 tackles (48 solo), including five tackles for loss and 1½ sacks, with two forced fumbles to receive first-team Freshman All-American accolades.

Following a decorated two-year career in Happy Valley, Pa., Parsons is projected as a top-five or top-10 pick. He is one of the highest-rated defensive players in the 2021 NFL draft pool.

"What was challenging was Micah had opted out pretty early and was really knee-deep in his training and what he was doing out west," PSU defensive coordinator Brent Pry added. "It was a very tough decision, I'll say that. Micah was pretty torn, and it drug on for a few days before it was official. I'm very thankful for what he did. It was awesome seeing him play in the blue and white and what he did for our defense. I'm going to be pulling for him each and every Sunday in the league."

Wisconsin QB Jack Coan Undergoes Foot Surgery

Wisconsin senior quarterback Jack Coan underwent successful surgery on his right foot to resolve a noncontact injury from practice.

Coan earned an All-Big Ten honorable mention as a junior, passing for 2,727 yards and 18 touchdowns to five interceptions. His passing yards rank third in school history for a single season, as does his 69.6 percent completion percentage.

The Badgers won the Big Ten West division title and earned a trip to the Rose Bowl with Coan at the helm. With Coan out indefinitely, Badger head coach Paul Chryst said redshirt freshman Graham Mertz is now No. 1 on the depth chart, with third-year sophomore Chase Wolf and fourth-year junior Danny Vanden Boom behind him.

"Graham's been our second quarterback with Jack as the starter, and Graham is taking all the reps with the ones," Chryst said. "Then we've got Chase and then Danny gets the rest of the work. Continuing to move forward, I think this is a big week for us coming up."

The No. 3 pro-style quarterback in the 2019 class, Mertz is the highest-ranked quarterback to sign with the Badgers in the modern recruiting era. Mertz, who was the No. 65 overall prospect last year, completed 9 of 10 passes for 73 yards in two games as a true freshman. Chryst expressed full confidence in Mertz as well as all the quarterbacks on the roster.

"I don't feel that any of the quarterbacks necessarily are so different that you're limited, or you can do a lot of one thing and not much of another thing because of who's at quarterback," Chryst said. "System-wise and your offense and your offensive playbook can be similar, but then it's, 'What does each guy do well and how do you play to their strengths that way?' Not necessarily schematically, it's more you just put them in a good position to play efficiently and effectively at the quarterback spot."

There is no timetable on Coan's return, but Chryst said he has been impressed with the way his quarterback has handled the situation, pushing forward toward recovery.

"He's incredibly unselfish," Chryst said. "He cares about this team and doesn't want anything to affect the team in a negative way. He's pretty neat that way. His focus is not about him and feeling sorry for himself. He does focus on the guys and this team. It's what you love about him last week when I was talking about him and love about him today."

Michigan Frosh LB Savage Enters Transfer Portal

Osman Savage, a Michigan freshman linebacker, entered the transfer portal before playing a game. A four-star prospect, Savage was the No. 18 outside linebacker and No. 300 overall recruit in the country in the 2020 class.

A former standout at St. Frances Academy in Baltimore, Savage chose the Wolverines over offers from Maryland, Michigan State, Georgia Tech, Pittsburgh, West Virginia and more.

Savage, a 6-2, 225-pound linebacker, became the second scholarship player from Michigan's 2020 class to enter the transfer portal. Defensive lineman Aaron Lewis left the Maize and Blue in July before heading home to play for Rutgers.

Michigan Fans' Faces To Be In The Big House

Although fans are not allowed at Michigan football games this season, they can pay \$70 to get into Michigan Stadium in cutout form. Many MLB teams offered fan cutouts this season since spectators were banned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Proceeds from Michigan's cutouts will support Wolverine student-athletes.

Though \$70 is the standard price, season-ticket holders can buy their cutouts for \$50 and students for \$35. People or pets are permitted, and the cutouts will be displayed in the north and south end zones. Students can purchase up to two cutouts, which will be placed in a designated section.

The guidelines for which photos will be allowed, including no group shots or selfies; vertical shots; space around head and shoulders so that arms/body are not cropped out. Fans are recommended to wear Wolverine gear but it is not required. However, Michigan fans cannot represent any other NCAA or pro teams in their photos, and that extends to advertising, business or political brands as well.

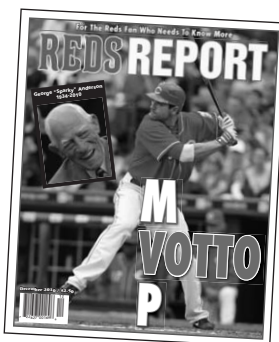
The Wolverines will not be alone in this endeavor, with at least six other Big Ten schools planning to have cutouts this season: Illinois, Iowa, Michigan State, Nebraska, Ohio State and Penn State.

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Delayed Start To Season May Help Injured Buckeyes

Trying to get a handle on the Ohio State 2020-21 men's basketball schedule is harder than avoiding getting pinged in dodgeball, but more on that later.

Nobody wanted to delay the original start date of Nov. 10, but the COVID-19 pandemic that has altered so many ways of life is indiscriminate, so the first games of the men's college basketball season won't be played until Nov. 25.

COURT REPORT Craig Merz

A 15-day pause may benefit the Buckeyes because fourth-year junior forward Seth Towns won't be ready by the opener and fourth-year junior wing Musa Jallow might be questionable as they continue their rehab from injuries, coach Chris Holtmann told the media on Oct. 2.

The downside may be that the late start and contingency dates for coronavirus setbacks could result in a more compacted schedule later – meaning less recovery time – as schools try to play full conference slates.

As BSB was going to print, the Buckeyes' schedule had not been released. What is known is the NCAA has set a maximum of 27 regular-season games, down four from the previous standard.

Meanwhile, the medical report was better for junior forward Justice Sueing. He sat the 2019-20 season after transferring from Cal, where he led the team in scoring (14.3) and rebounding (6.0) as a sophomore. He underwent surgery to repair a damaged ligament in his left foot on Jan. 14, 2020, and was cleared in August to resume training.

Towns, from Columbus Northland, transferred to OSU from Harvard in March. He was the 2017-18 Ivy League Player of the Year as a sophomore but has not played since sustaining a left knee injury in the conference title game on March 11, 2018. He had a fol-

low-up surgical procedure in January 2020.

"I think right now, while he's made progress, I think in terms of being ready to play actual games in late November, I certainly think that is in question, whether he'll be ready for that," Holtmann said. "At this point, I'm not sure he will be ready, and I think he probably feels the same way. He's going to need more time than that."

While it was hoped at the time of his commitment to the Buckeyes that Towns would be at full health for the start of the season, Holtmann is not concerned.

"He has really progressed," Holtmann said. "This particular surgery that he has, it does take varying degrees of recovery before guys feel completely comfortable returning to game action. We were optimistic, and still are, that come late November he's going to be in a place where he feels confident enough to play in game action, but I think it's probably a tall task right now. He's just got a ways to go."

Jallow was a medical redshirt last season because of injuries to his right ankle. Prior to that he played 68 games in two seasons. He underwent exploratory surgery on Oct. 18, 2019, and reconstructive surgery on Jan. 24.

Holtmann was hopeful that Jallow would be available when practice started Oct. 14.

"He's a little further along than Seth, but he's not been able to do workouts yet," the coach said. "There's a possibility with him with the start of practice."

All three players are expected to have pivotal roles. Towns and Sueing are replacements on the wing for Andre Wesson, who completed his eligibility. Jallow adds back up for Duane Washington.

There could be more help on the way. Holtmann revealed Oct. 2 that Ohio State is seeking a waiver to gain immediate use of Bucknell transfer guard Jimmy Sotos, who has one year of eligibility remaining, which is currently for the 2021-22 season.

"We're thin at the perimeter positions," Holtmann said.

As a point guard last season, Sotos led the Bison in scoring (11.5) and assists (3.9).

Still In Flux

As mentioned earlier, schools can play up

OSU Men's Basketball Verbal Commits

Players in the class of 2021 who have issued verbal commitments to play basketball at Ohio State. (Star ratings are from the 247Sports composite rankings.)

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Malaki Branham	SG	6-4	175	★★★★	Akron (Ohio) St. Vincent-St. Mary
Kalen Etzler	PF	6-8	195	★★★★	Convoy (Ohio) Crestview
Meechie Johnson	PG	6-1	185	★★★★	Garfield Heights (Ohio)

Players in the class of 2022 who have issued verbal commitments to play basketball at Ohio State. (Star ratings are from the 247Sports composite rankings.)

Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Stars	High School
Bowen Hardman	SG	6-3	160	★★★	Cincinnati Princeton

to 27 regular-season games. But it's not that simple.

- A team that does not participate in a multi-team event (MTE) can play a maximum of 25 regular-season games.

As discussed in the previous Court Report, MTEs are the big thing now because of the coronavirus. To better control travel and safety protocols, schools are getting together in one secure locale to play several games instead of the usual one-and-done.

- A program can reach 27 games through 25 stand-alone games and an MTE that includes up to two games.

- A school can max out at 27 by playing 24 stand-alone games and an MTE that includes up to three games.

What does this mean for the Buckeyes?

Hard to say without knowing what the Big Ten plans to do. It's likely to stay at 20 conference games but 22 is a possibility. In that scenario OSU would have only five nonconference games.

As of now, the Buckeyes are scheduled to play in the tournament formerly known as the Battle 4 Atlantis. The multi-team event will be played in South Dakota in late November, and Ohio State would probably play three games.

However, if there are 22 conference games, the Buckeyes would not participate in the tournament because they are already committed to two nonconference games – an opponent to be determined in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge and North Carolina somewhere on Dec. 19 in the annual CBS Sports Classic.

Ohio State would like to have some flexibility to schedule mid-major opponents.

Of course, everything is dependent on athletes and staff staying coronavirus-free to avoid postponements or cancellations.

Holtmann said Oct. 2 he has been impressed with how his veteran team is handling everything thrown at them.

"I think we've got a group that is mature, that cares about each other," he said. "That's a good place to start. We've got a lot of questions we've got to answer. But I do feel pretty confident in seeing them operate. We know that there are certain things you can do to prevent the risk of getting COVID, but you can't completely prevent the risk. But I do believe after seeing our guys day to day here for the last 10 weeks, I like our maturity."

Having A Ball

Holtmann and his staff decided that the players needed some team bonding and fun during workouts prior the first official practice. In the past, teams might play paint ball, go bowling or attend a movie together, but in the current environment it's safer to keep activities in house.

In that vein, Holtmann posted on his Instagram a dodgeball game between coaches, staff and players on Oct. 9. This coming after "two hard days of team skills," he said.

The players were shown clips from the 2004 movie "Dodgeball" starring Ben Stiller and Vince Vaughn, and the coaches wore bandanas like the characters in the film. There was no report of winners and losers.

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A College Football Season Unlike Any Other

Just when the Ohio State Buckeyes were poised to start make another national championship run, COVID hit just as spring practice was getting under way. It turned the college football world upside down and, for the Buckeyes, put the 2020 season in jeopardy. Even though the Ohio State medical team was ahead of the game in terms of COVID safety protocol as August camp geared up, the Big Ten Conference pulled the plug on the entire season.

COACH'S CORNER Bill Conley

It was only after weeks of presenting medical evidence by Ohio State medical experts, such as former Buckeye long snapper Dr. Jim Borchers, to conference officials and administrators that the Big Ten reinstated an altered fall season. It will not be the typical Ohio State football season in terms of the schedule, a packed stadium, or the electric atmosphere around campus on game day.

Safety first, football second is the scenario for this fall, and if all goes well, maybe some of those lofty goals set by Coach Ryan Day and staff can still be accomplished.

Hope springs eternal, but keep your fingers crossed the season will go uninterrupted.

A Close Call

The announcement to reinstate came just in time to convince some of the elite players on the Buckeye roster to stay and play instead of declaring to leave and prepare for the NFL. It would be a different squad on the field with the absence of players such as Wyatt Davis, Shaun Wade and Justin Fields.

The loss of these three would have been a huge negative to the program because of their talent and experience as well as their leadership, being they all were team captains. It's highly likely there would have been more players opt out of the season or even consider transferring if these three had not decided to stay. Buckeye fans should appreciate their loyalty to the program and to Ohio State University.

The coaching staff should also be applauded for the continued open line of communication it kept with the entire squad when everything was in limbo. Football recruiting never stops and the staff kept in contact with some of the best high school players from around the country, but the greatest recruiting this fall was done in-house to retain current squad members.

Handling adversity is a great lesson of life that football teaches, and there is no doubt Buckeye players and coaches have lived it for the past few months.

Frosh Behind Schedule

By the time the college football season starts, the coaching staff has a good idea which of the incoming freshmen have the potential to contribute in their first year of eligibility. At a place like Ohio State, it is not uncommon for a new recruit to graduate early from high school and enroll the second semester at the college in which he had signed a scholarship. This is a huge advantage for the newcomer because he can immediately participate in the offseason strength and conditioning program, meet with coaches on a regular basis in order to learn the system, go through his first spring practice, and assimilate with members of the football team.

Even if a new freshman didn't arrive on campus till the summer, going through August camp allows him time to make an impression on the coaching staff regarding his talent level as compared to the returning players. This year's freshman class, through no one's fault, was cheated out of many of those early opportunities to learn and grow. In reality, some true freshmen will see the field this season despite a shortened preseason, but probably not as quickly as freshman classes in the recent past.

Offensive Outlook

One of the reasons for Ohio State's high ranking going into the season was the number of returnees at multiple positions. Three starters on the offensive line in Wyatt Davis, Josh Myer, and Thayer Munford have a ton of playing experience, and Harry Miller and Nicholas Petit-Frere saw considerable action last year. Even with the loss of Rashod Berry from last year's squad, the Buckeyes have arguably the best trio of tight ends in the country. Jeremy Ruckert, Luke Farrell and Jake Hausmann have lettered a combined seven times and have recorded nearly 2,000 snaps. They have the athleticism and versatility needed at that position in terms of blocking and receiving to allow the offense to range from power sets to spread formations.

Chris Olave, Garrett Wilson and Jameson Williams lead the wide receiver corps with the help of hybrid receiver/running back Demario McCall. This position group is traditionally strong, and there is no reason to believe 2020 will be any different.

The return of Fields, one of the nation's very best quarterbacks, is the heart and soul of the Buckeye offense. His passing ability combined with his running talents make him a dangerous threat to opposing defenses. He has the potential to make a big play, every snap, via the air or the ground. The only real question is who is going to be his backup. Gunnar Hoak should get the nod, at least initially, due to his proven experience and knowledge of the system. True freshmen Jack Miller and C.J. Stroud have great potential but may not have had the time to develop due to the COVID situation.

The running back situation is probably the most competitive one on offense. The apparent successor to J.K. Dobbins is Master Teague, but due to his injury history, that role might fall to Oklahoma transfer Trey Sermon. Buckeye coaches want to play multiple running backs this season, so look for Teague, Sermon, Steele Chambers and Marcus Crowley to all audition with game action early on.

Defensive Perspective

The outlook on the defensive side of the

football is positive but not quite as optimistic as it is offensively. The Buckeyes' recent success defensively has been largely due to a standout defensive end whether it be the Bosa brothers or, in the case of last season, Chase Young. Jonathon Cooper must carry the torch this season having played twice the number of snaps as any other defensive end. Time will tell if he can live up to those expectations but guys like Tyreke Smith and Tyler Friday have proved to be solid at the position along with sophomore Zach Harrison, who really came into his own at the end of 2019.

One of the big surprises a year ago was the huge strides made at the nose guard and three-tech. Players like Jashon Cornell, Robert Landers and DaVon Hamilton really stepped it up a notch, but they are gone. In order to dominate the defensive interior, Taron Vincent, Haskell Garrett and Tommy Togiai need to step into their shoes, or should I say cleats, to solidify the defensive line. To add to the defensive interior concerns is the fact that Vincent and Garrett must be medically cleared before they see the field.

The linebacking position at Ohio State is traditionally one of the strongest in the Big Ten every season. This year should be no exception because it, along with the offensive line, is the most experienced position group on the team. Pete Werner, Tuf Borland and Baron Browning will lead a group of linebackers that are proven winners. Look for senior Justin Hilliard to be a major contributor at this position along with juniors Dallas Gant, Teradja Mitchell and K'Vaughan Pope.

Probably the most concerning of all position groups this fall is the defensive backfield. There is only one player in the entire secondary who has taken over 280 snaps, Wade who has had over 1,000. This is especially the case at the safety position where Josh Proctor is the most experienced with only 126 plays. Look for Wade, Cameron Brown, Marcus Williamson and Sevn Banks to hold down the fort at the various corner positions and Proctor along with Marcus Hooker to be at the safety positions. Don't be surprised to see various combinations of these players on the field related to the particular defensive scheme or package determined by the coaching staff.

Freshmen Who Could See Action

As mentioned, it will be much tougher for true freshmen to make major contributions to the team as early on as in the past.

Saying that, the coaching staff must rely on some frosh at least in terms of depth, keeping fresh bodies on the field to wear down the opposition, help out on special teams and be ready in case of injuries to more experienced players.

Some players besides Stroud and Miller at quarterback who may see action are an incredibly talented and highly touted group of wide receivers. Julian Fleming, Jaxon Smith-Njigba, Gee Scott and Mookie Cooper all possess great hands, run solid routes and can turn a short reception into a big play. If the offensive coaching staff is convinced these young receivers can come into the rotation early, it will add another dimension to the passing game for the Buckeyes.

Defensively, there will need to be freshmen working into the two deep sooner than later, especially along the front as well as the secondary. Defensive tackle Ty Hamilton and safety Kourt Williams are two players who fit the bill and have the confidence of the coaching staff.

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Get Ready For A Wild Football Ride This Fall

Shhh. Listen. Can you hear it? It's right around the corner.

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In one of the all-time "better late than never" moments, the conference will (or may have, depending on when you receive this particular issue) kick off its season and be part of the college football landscape for 2020.

THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

There have been some good games so far, a few surprises – Oklahoma losing twice already, defending national champ LSU being out of the discussion almost before being in it – but it has felt strangely incomplete because the Big Ten and Pac-12 have been out of the mix.

That's about to change, and Saturday afternoons will be much better for it.

The opening to the season has been enjoyable, especially given where we were during the summer. It was thought that there might be zero college football, so getting every moment we can has been richly appreciated.

Some in the Midwest have not been watching because they don't have a dog in the fight without their Buckeyes, but soon their eyes will be glued to the big screen and their cheers will echo throughout the neighborhoods and taverns as they cheer on beloved Ohio State.

They should have a lot to cheer, too, as OSU should be squarely in the chase for the national championship – largely due to a cast of all-stars returning at important positions.

People will tell you the most important position on any football team is the quarterback – and they aren't entirely wrong. Yours truly subscribes to the theory that you could have the greatest quarterback in the world and it wouldn't matter if he couldn't stay upright. Which is why I believe the offensive line as a whole is the most important aspect of a successful football team. Combine that with a standout quarterback and you have the makings of an elite squad.

The Buckeyes return both – vital elements of an offensive line that was among the best in the game in 2019 and a quarterback who should be among the front-runners for the Heisman Trophy. That should add up to a lethal offense, so any steps back the defense might take – and it's almost unavoidable after losing Chase Young and Jeff Okudah – should be minimized.

While the O-line is the engine, Justin Fields is the driver. And he can maneuver and navigate any roadblock or hairpin turn with any A.J. Foyt or Richard Petty or Kyle Busch. Georgia fans warned OSU backers in 2019 that Fields was a run-only guy and that they should be careful about setting expectations too high. All the guy did was shatter records and run an offense that was frightening in its explosiveness – an offense that wasn't exactly "three yards and a cloud of dust," either. Ryan Day's playbook is as large as anyone's, and Fields picked it up very quickly. This is the year when he should master it, which is a scary thought

when you consider that he tossed only three interceptions last season. A year wiser and better in tune with the offense? Sign me up.

Fields also provides a running threat, which is a welcome change from Dwayne Haskins. Don't get me wrong. It was great seeing Haskins throw touchdown after touchdown in 2018, but one glaring weakness of that season was his inability to run the RPO offense favored by Day (and Urban Meyer). If you could pressure Haskins you could rattle him, and he wasn't very adept at making teams pay for pressuring him too much.

This is why Fields is so lethal. He is good (and getting better) about going through his progressions, and he throws a pretty deep ball. On the chance a defense can get past the trench guys, Fields can take off and pick up first downs with his legs – a much quicker, better passing version of J.T. Barrett, which is always going to be a hit with this columnist.

But OSU is much more than Fields.

It's Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson and Julian Fleming and Jaxson Smith-Njigba and Gee Scott and Mookie Cooper and Jameson Williams and ... you get the picture. The Buckeyes' receiving depth is off the charts, but if teams decide to devote too much attention to those guys, they will be carved up by Oklahoma transfer Trey Sermon.

Prior to Sermon's transfer, the backfield was a chief concern of mine. I like Master Teague but don't believe he's a big-time back, a guy who will go down in OSU annals as an all-time great. He's an excellent change of pace, but he's a straight-line runner who lacks elusiveness, and it's hard to make a living doing that anymore. You need to be able to avoid contact, put your foot in the ground and make a decisive cut and explode through the hole. Sermon has those qualities, as well as deceptive power. He was one of the leaders in yards after contact in 2018 at Oklahoma, so he's probably not going down on first contact. Backs with that component always have a place in my football-loving heart.

Getting guard Wyatt Davis to opt back into the season was huge. He is easily Ohio State's best offensive lineman. Davis is a staple of 2020 All-America teams and has a shot at being a first-round draft choice in 2021, quite a feat as guards are not often drafted that early. He has nimble feet, long arms and the power to turn defenders inside out, and his loss would have been a tangible one.

Paired with center Josh Myers, another honors candidate, and returning tackle Thayer Munford, Davis brings talent and consistency to a unit that will be breaking in a pair of new starters – most likely sophomore Harry Miller at left guard and true freshman Paris Johnson at right tackle. That last spot is up for grabs, and Johnson won't have an easy time taking the spot from returnee Nicholas Petit-Frere. But Johnson's talent had coaches buzzing, so it's likely he'll be on the field sooner rather than later.

There were losses and changes on defense – the aforementioned Young and Okudah, as well as secondary coach and co-coordinator Jeff Hafley. But the return of Kerry Coombs soothed the nervous constitutions of OSU fans who worried the Buckeyes might be an all-offense, no-defense squad in 2020. Coombs won't deviate much from Hafley's schemes, meaning OSU will still play a majority of Cover 1 and Cover 3, with a single high safety and athletic

talent to creep up into the box to combat opposing run games. That's an approach that works best with elite defensive backs, and with the return of Shaun Wade, Ohio State has that.

A burgeoning star, Wade was tasked with checking opposing slot receivers, but he'll move to the outside this year and take over the role Okudah played so ably. Wade is a very good tackler, and while he may not have quite the same sticky cover ability that Okudah did, he more than makes up for it with his ability to track the football. Teams will learn quickly not to test him, which means it's up to either Sevyn Banks or Cam Brown to hold up their end of things on the other side. Ohio State has a proud tradition of elite cornerbacks, and you can be certain Coombs will do everything in his power to see that that doesn't change.

Safety could be an issue early, as Marcus Williamson, Josh Proctor, Marcus Hooker, Kourt Williams and freshmen Lejond Cavazos and Lathan Ransom vie for two open spots. Williams would seem to be a perfect fit for the Bullet position that was talked about last year but never really used, a hybrid linebacker/safety role that is closer to the line of scrimmage and attacking.

There is leadership and experience among the linebackers, with Tuf Borland in the middle, likely flanked by Baron Browning and Pete Werner. Browning could have a Curtis Grant-like senior-year explosion after teasing fans endlessly, and Werner is – despite criticism from the Buckeye peanut gallery – Ohio State's most versatile 'backer. He's good in coverage, a sure tackler in space and underrated at running to the football. Borland is a typical middleman, tough and powerful and lethal when he's moving straight ahead. Teradja Mitchell, Dallas Gant and Justin Hilliard will all play as the Buckeyes continue the rotation system that has worked so well in recent seasons.

Defensive line is a bit of a mystery – how do you replace an all-world talent such as Young? You don't really. There is talent on the roster, but no one at his level. The hope is that the rotation of Jonathon Cooper, Tyreke Smith, Zach Harrison and Tyler Friday can create havoc while Tommy Togiai, Taron Vincent, Jacob Cowan and Darrion Henry-Young can do their thing inside. That's not including Haskell Garrett, whose status is unknown following a shooting that occurred while he was attempting to break up an altercation. If he can return early, it's a bonus.

The schedule has precious few land mines – a trip to Penn State, sans fans, in week two, and the finale with Michigan the week before the Big Ten Championship Game. Those are the only things standing in the way of Ohio State going unbeaten and securing a spot in the College Football Playoff.

Some people were skeptical of Day at the helm, figuring he wouldn't measure up to the lofty standards set by Meyer. He foiled those naysayers and already looks like one of the best coaches in the business after just a single season.

It's a great time to be an Ohio State football fan as the Buckeyes are one of just three programs – Alabama and Clemson being the other two – recruiting, playing and developing players at an elite level year in and year out. While it's said that coaching matters – and it does – the fact of the matter is a roster lacking in talent isn't

going to win many games.

The Buckeyes have elite talent and depth, much more than their Big Ten brethren, which is why they are not penciled but inked into the league title game. Noting that anything can happen – especially in a season as different as 2020 has been and will be – it would be an all-time shocker if the Buckeyes lose in the regular season and don't make the CFP.

But I guess that's why they play the games, right?

And those games are coming.

If you close your eyes and focus really hard, you can almost hear them.

Picks And Things

It wouldn't be a preview without predictions, right? So, this is where you will get picks for how the league standings will shake out, as well as player honors. It's usually a bit more exhaustive and takes a stab at projecting league teams into bowl games but given the fact that every team is eligible for the postseason in 2020, that seems like an exercise in futility.

East Division

Ohio State (9-0)
Penn State (8-1)
Michigan (6-3)
Indiana (5-4)
Michigan State (3-6)
Maryland (2-7)
Rutgers (0-9)

West Division

Wisconsin (7-2)
Minnesota (6-3)
Iowa (5-4)
Nebraska (4-5)
Northwestern (3-6)
Purdue (3-6)
Illinois (2-7)

Offensive Player of the Year: Justin Fields, Ohio State

Defensive Player of the Year: George Karlaftis, Purdue

Freshman of the Year: Julian Fleming, Ohio State

Coach of the Year: Tom Allen, Indiana

CFP Championship: Clemson over Ohio State



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Elite Quarterback Play Still New To Ohio State

One of the reasons I was so bummed by what looked to be a lost Ohio State football season boiled down – as so many things football do – to quarterback.

Miss this year and we may never see a seasoned Justin Fields in an Ohio State uniform.

Did we already witness the best of Fields? Or did he just scratch the surface last year? Would his second season, and maybe last, in a Buckeye uniform be described as greatness beyond what he has already shown?

Only six of those would have been drafted if the draft had always been just seven rounds, as it is these days. Fields, whenever he chooses to leave OSU, almost surely will be the third since Meyer, a count that increases to four if you're willing to include OSU graduate/LSU Heisman winner Joe Burrow.

Haskins, Burrow and Fields all have been coached by Ryan Day, either as an assistant or head coach at OSU.

Ahead of Day, Cardale Jones went in the fifth round to the Buffalo Bills in 2016 and bounced around the league mostly on practice squads for four seasons. That's not a distinguished NFL career. But picked 139th overall, just five quarterbacks in the history of OSU football before him had gone higher in the draft.

Then Dwayne Haskins was the 15th pick overall in the first round in 2019, going to the Washington Redskins, where he was starting this season. Burrow, the guy Haskins beat out at Ohio State (I was on the record as narrowly favoring Burrow back then), is off to an impressive start as the first overall pick of the Cincinnati Bengals.

And Fields should be next.

From what we've seen of Fields so far, he is the best runner of this recent group, maybe even better in that regard than double-threat Braxton Miller before Miller's injuries. As a passer, Fields, based on last season, probably isn't yet in the Haskins/Burrow class. But that's why it will be so interesting to see what happens this year.

Fields was just two years removed from high school when we saw him last season. He was ahead of both Haskins and Burrow in their second years out of high school. In fact, neither Haskins nor Burrow had become a regular so soon.

(Refresher here: Fields passed for 3,273 yards, ranked third nationally in passing efficiency, helped lead OSU to a 13-1 season and finished third in the Heisman voting behind two QBs now in the NFL, Burrow and Jalen Hurts.)

Now, three years from high school, can Fields as a passer rival what Haskins did in his third and final season of college football (smashing about every OSU passing record), and as a complete quarterback rival what Burrow did in his fifth and final season?

Without an opportunity to play this season, we may have never learned whether Fields was capable of doing what Burrow did last season for LSU – leading a team to a national championship and winning a Heisman Trophy along the way.

Buckeye QBs And The NFL

Excluding Burrow here, these are the 11 Ohio State quarterbacks who have been drafted as QBs over the years in the regular NFL draft.

1955 – John Borton, 13th round, 157th pick overall. Part-time duty in one NFL season for the Cleveland Browns.

1959 – Frank Kremblas, 23rd round, 275th pick. No record of ever playing in the NFL.

1982 – Art Schlichter, first round, fourth pick. Three seasons for the Colts, never winning a game, going 0-6 a starter in a career shortened by gambling issues.

1992 – Kent Graham, eighth round, 211th pick. A transfer to OSU from Notre Dame, Graham played for five NFL teams over 10 seasons, going 17-21 as a starter.

1996 – Bobby Hoying, third round, 85th pick. Hung around for five seasons with the Eagles and Raiders, getting 13 starts and going 3-9-1.

1999 – Joe Germaine, fourth round, 101st pick. Just three games on his NFL résumé, all off the bench in his single season for St. Louis.

2004 – Craig Krenzel, fifth round, 148th pick. Lasted one season in the league, going 3-2 as a starter for the Bears. (He is the only quarterback in this group of draftees with a winning NFL record.)

2007 – Troy Smith, fifth round, 174th pick. The Heisman winner got two starts as a rookie for the Ravens, going 1-1, but didn't

start an NFL game again until his fourth and final season, going 3-3 for the 49ers.

2011 – Terrelle Pryor, third round supplemental draft. Lasted six seasons with five teams, splitting play between quarterback and wide receiver. Nine of his 10 NFL starts at QB came for the Raiders in 2013, when he was 3-6.

2016 – Jones, fourth round, 139th pick. Only NFL game action came during his rookie year, coming off the bench to complete 6 of 11 passes for 96 yards.

2019 – Haskins, first round, 15th overall. Haskins took over as the Redskins' starter midway through last season, going 2-5, and was 1-3 this season through the first four games.

Notable exceptions. Among those not listed above are:

- Mike Tomczak, who had a lengthy career after signing with the Bears as an undrafted free agent in 1985, going 42-31 as a starter.

- Miller who started at OSU as a QB but ended up being drafted by the Houston Texans as a wide receiver in the third round in 2016.

- Rex Kern, picked as a defensive back by the Baltimore Colts in the 10th round of the 1971 draft.

No Room For Error

Ohio State probably has a tougher road to the playoffs than any school outside the Big Ten.

The shortened season, absent big non-conference games, increases the likelihood for multiple undefeated teams this season.

Only Alabama likely would get an invite with a loss, maybe even over an undefeated team from another conference. That makes Alabama's path easier than those for all others.

Clemson has an easier path to an undefeated season in the weak ACC than anyone in the Big Ten. Same goes for whoever may be the champions out of the Big 12 and Pac-12.

And Ohio State is playing in perhaps the toughest division in college football, likely having to defeat both Penn State and Michigan to even make it to the Big Ten title game. Without a big-time non-conference win on the OSU résumé this season, it would be hard to make the case for the playoffs without a Big Ten title.

Put this all together and what do we have? The playoffs essentially start against Nebraska on Oct. 24, having to win each and every time through January.

EXNER POINT

Rich Exner

Assuming the Buckeyes and enough of the Big Ten teams can stay healthy, we'll now get a chance to find out.

By all reasonable expectations, this will mean seeing the development of a future NFL quarterback, the latest in a recent line of OSU quarterbacks getting their shots in the pros after so many decades of not being the case for OSU QBs.

Before Urban Meyer arrived on the scene, just nine Ohio State quarterbacks had been taken in the NFL draft. That's right, nine, in a draft that dates back to 1936. None had winning records as a pro.

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Season Starts In Time For Fields' Heisman Hopes

Maybe it's because I have been on a bit of a self-imposed pandemic lockdown recently. I'm not out and about as much as I might normally be this time of year. For whatever the reason, I just haven't heard as much buzz about the upcoming Ohio State football season and the current version of the Buckeyes as I might have with a normal late-August, early-September start.

This is the same Ohio State football team whose players, coaches, administrators, parents and you the fans believe so strongly is a sure-fire contender for the national championship that most of you relentlessly – and it turns out successfully – fought to bring back the once postponed and possibly canceled 2020 football season.

This brings up an aside. Would everyone have fought so vigorously for a 2020 season if Ohio State was picked to finish in the middle of the Big Ten pack? Is success on the gridiron more important than the health and well-being of our team and nation? Questions for a day when this is all over.

Ohio State is, however, seen as a national contender. I just don't hear people talking about it.

The chatter on our BuckeyeSports.com Forum seems more about Dwayne Haskins' benching than Justin Fields' quest for the Heisman Trophy and the national crown that eluded him last season after the controversial and heartbreaking loss to Clemson, a game that ended on a play especially painful to Fields and his battery-mate, Chris Olave.

Is it just me? Are you hearing the same type of chatter you normally do? Are people suffering from coronavirus fatigue? Do Ohio State fans, in the back of their minds, sense that if their beloved Buckeyes do win the national championship, it will come with an asterisk because of the shortened season? Will the 2020 Buckeyes end up the Roger Maris of college football?

Or do I just need to put my mask on and get out more?

Chatter or not, Ohio State and Big Ten football are finally here, and the Buckeyes look to be the class of the conference.

Because no one seems to want to talk 2020 Ohio State football with me, I have been left to get my Buckeye stimulus from our crack columnists. In editing copy, I was struck by comments from longtime BSB analysts Rich Exner and Mike Wachsman about Fields.

Rich noted that if the Big Ten hadn't decided to play this season, we could possibly have never known how good a college player Fields might be.

"Miss this year and we may never see a seasoned Justin Fields in an Ohio State uniform," he lamented. "Did we already witness the best of Fields? Or did he just scratch the surface last year? Would his second season, and maybe last, in a Buckeye uniform be described as greatness beyond what he has already shown?"

Mike seems confident Fields will only be better in 2020.

"Ryan Day's playbook is as large as anyone's, and Fields picked it up very quickly," he said of last season. "This is the year when he should master it, which is a scary thought when you consider that he tossed only three interceptions last season. A year wiser and better in tune with the offense? Sign me up."

If you listen to these BSB veterans, who have each been covering Ohio State football for nearly 40 years (Rich, in fact has been here since our first year of 1981), it would seem that barring an injury, the sky is the limit for Fields.

I'd have to agree.

He was already pretty high in the stratosphere in his first go-round in 2019. He complet-

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

ed 67.2 percent of his 354 passes for 3,273 yards. More impressive to me was his 41 touchdowns with only three interceptions, a ratio on which I place great importance and a mark that would be impressive for even a savvy veteran, let alone a first-year starter. In fact, he entered the CFP playoff game with Clemson having thrown only one interception the entire season – staggering! (In case you are wondering, Clemson's Trevor Lawrence had 36 touchdown passes and eight picks last season, a 4.5-1 ratio compared to Fields' 13.7 TDs to each interception.)

But there was much more to Fields' game, as he rushed for 484 yards and 10 more TDs. Take away his 31 sacks for 202 yards and he rushed 106 times for 686 yards and a 6.5 average, and this with a bum knee and huge brace during the toughest games of the season. He was credited with just 39 yards on 32 carries in the final three games against Michigan, Wisconsin and the Tigers, but he gutted it out.

It is as if the Buckeyes have a quarterback with the arm of Dwayne Haskins, the legs of Braxton Miller and the grit of J.T. Barrett.

The fact that he never seemed to waver when it came to returning for his junior season, even as the Big Ten dragged its feet in announcing a schedule, would indicate that the way last season ended, with the loss to Clemson and the unfortunate final play on what could have been a game-winning drive for the Buckeyes, left a very bad taste in his mouth, a taste that he wants to eliminate.

"I know he feels like he has some unfinished business," head coach Ryan Day said.

With the condensed schedule, it's doubtful that Fields will be able to post numbers like those posted on the ground by Miller, through the air by Haskins or overall by Barrett.

But he has a chance to do something the others didn't, and that's lead his team to a national championship.

I bet that would create the buzz that I feel is lacking. And I'll learn to live with the asterisk.

Comeback Buckeye Style

While the 2020 Buckeye season is just set to get started, our 40th Anniversary season is in full swing.

The 40th Anniversary Buckeyes entered this issue on a four-game winning streak with wins over No. 2 Oklahoma (1983), No. 7 LSU (1988), No. 15 Notre Dame (1995) and No. 4 Penn State (1996), after a season-opening loss in the Kickoff Classic to No. 5 Alabama (1986).

As a refresher on the 40th Anniversary season, we have been running reprints of stories from the biggest games of each corresponding calendar week in BSB's first 39 years of publishing, with two more games this issue. The biggest game for the week of Oct. 10-16 was, in reality, probably the 1984 comeback win over Illinois, a game in which Keith Byars solidified his place in Buckeye lore with his 274 yards and five touchdowns, including the game-winner with 36 seconds remaining and the 67-yarder minus one shoe.

But that game has been chronicled many times in BSB during the past 36 years (can you believe it's been that long?), and as creator and self-appointed commissioner of the 40th Anniversary season, I decided to choose a game more significant for a key player in the game than for the significance of the game. My choice results in a loss for the Buckeyes to an unranked team – the 1992 loss to Illinois, 18-16.

Fortunately, the story ultimately has a happy ending.

As you may recall, a freshman running back out of Fork Union (Va.) Military Academy was already becoming a Buckeye fan favorite in the early going of that 1992 season. Eddie George entered that fateful Illinois game with 19 carries for 68 yards and a modest 3.6-yard average. But he had four touchdowns on those 19 carries, including three in a huge, 35-12 road win over Syracuse in the third game of the season. The Orangemen had defeated the Buckeyes in the Hall of Fame Bowl that January.

With his prowess near the goal line, the 6-3, 225-pound George had become Ohio State's go-to guy when deep in the red zone. However, the storybook start to the career of one of the Buckeyes' all-time greats came to a harsh end on Oct. 10 of that year – at least the storybook part.

The Buckeyes took the opening kickoff 41 yards to the OSU 41 and quickly drove to the Illini 1, where they naturally called on George. He lost the ball, and Jeff Arneson returned it 96 yards for a touchdown. Not only was it the equivalent of a 14-point swing, but according to Arneson it quickly changed the direction of the game.

"It was their first drive, and they were pretty much blowing us off the ball," Arneson said. "They had fire in their eyes. But the fumble sucked the life out of them and put life into us."

Still, the game went back and forth with both teams guilty of mistakes and turnovers.

Early in the fourth quarter, the Buckeyes led 16-15 and seemed ready to break the game open when Walter Taylor blocked an Illinois punt, putting Ohio State in business at the Illini 25. Three plays later the Buckeyes were back at the 1, and George was called on again and lost a fumble again.

This time Illinois marched 86 yards on 15 plays, more importantly eating 8:29 off the clock. The drive resulted in only a field goal, but it gave the visitors an 18-16 lead and the damage had been done.

Again, George's miscue seemed to do more to the Buckeyes than just turn the ball over.

"After Eddie fumbled a second time, Illinois did take the ball the length of the field for the winning field goal," head coach John Cooper said. "But, you know, you can understand sometimes why that happens. I'm sure (the defense) had a big letdown. We had just blocked a punt. It was just one of those things. If ifs and buts were candy and nuts, what a merry Christmas it would be."

The Buckeyes weren't finished just yet.

They drove down the field on their final drive, and quarterback Kirk Herbstreit scrambled for 11 yards on a fourth-and-10 to move Ohio State to the Illini 32. But Tim Williams, who had hit on three field goals earlier including a 50-yarder, missed from 44, and this one belonged to the Illini.

Cooper didn't call out George by name, but he did the math for the assembled reporters after the game.

"We were driving for a touchdown and then turned that around with the fumble and long run for a touchdown," Cooper explained. "That's a 14-point swing right there. Then we lost another touchdown and they come back with a field goal. There's another 10 points. Give us another 14 points and take 10 away from them and it's a totally different ball game."

Often forgotten is the fact that in between his two fumbles, George scored on a 4-yard run to give Ohio State a 10-7 lead early in the second quarter. But by the time the game had ended, the course of his freshman season had been set.

He did fourth-quarter mop-up duty in a 31-7 victory over Northwestern the following week, rushing nine times for 97 yards (a 10.8 average), including a 60-yard jaunt. But he would carry only three more times for 18 yards in the final six games of the season. As a sophomore he carried just 42 times for 223 yards with a 5.3-yard average and three touchdowns.

It wasn't until his junior season that he once again became an integral part of the Ohio State offense, rushing for 1,442 yard and 12 scores with a 5.2-yard average. By the time his senior season rolled around, that butter-fingered freshman had come full circle, winning the Heisman Trophy with 1,927 yards and 24 rushing touchdowns, becoming one of the most popular Buckeyes of all time in the process.

Our second 40th Anniversary game, from the week of Oct. 17-23, was another contest that won't go down as one of the more critical games in Ohio State history, but it might go down as one of the more entertaining.

With Braxton Miller having been knocked out of the Oct. 20, 2012, game late in the third quarter, backup Kenny Guiton would drive Ohio State 61 yards in 47 seconds to score a TD on a 2-yard pass to Chris Fields with three seconds remaining in regulation against visiting Purdue. He then converted the two-point conversion on a pass to Jeff Heuerman to send the Buckeyes to overtime. Carlos Hyde scored on a 1-yard run in the first extra session to secure the improbable 29-22 victory.

The game did have some significance. It helped maintain Ohio State's undefeated record in Urban Meyer's first season at Ohio State, and it also made Guiton a household name throughout Buckeye Nation.

However, the win may have been most noted for Meyer's excited reaction at game's end.

"When the chants of 'Urban! Urban! Urban!' reached the coach, he appeared to be momentarily overcome with emotion," Marcus Hartman recounted in the Oct. 27, 2012, issue of BSB. "He first pumped his left hand in the air in exultation then followed with a wild right. Then he threw both arms in the air as the crowd went crazy in response."

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