

Previewing The Spring: Offensive Line Rebuilds From Losses



Buckeye Sports Bulletin is previewing every position on Ohio State's roster leading into the beginning of spring practice, which is set to begin on March 7. Check back every week day for a new breakdown on how the spring might play out for the Buckeyes.

Ohio State offensive line coach Justin Frye enters his second season with the Buckeyes in a difficult position, as his starting tackles and center from last season declared for the NFL Draft during the offseason.

While the losses of tackles Paris Johnson Jr. and Dawand Jones were expected, center Luke Wypler's decision to declare for the draft came as a bit of a surprise to Buckeye fans. As several key losses have compiled on the offensive front, Frye is once again looking to find the best five linemen to lead the charge for the Ohio State offense.

"That tone is never going to change," Frye said. "It's the same thing every year. Whether you have returning guys that have started, not started, or played, we're going to play the five best (linemen). That's what the winter leads up to, and spring football gets into and through the summer, and then we get to the fall and by the time we tee it up in Bloomington we'll know who the five guys are."

Luckily for Frye, he at least has two of those holes filled in guards Matthew Jones and Donovan Jackson, who will slot back into the starting spots that held last season. There was a possibility that Matthew Jones would slide inside to tackle — due to his prior experience at the position — but head coach Ryan Day nipped that thought in the bud and said Jones would remain at guard.

"Matt just made a decision that he wanted to come back and get another year better and be ready for the next level," Frye said. "He's all in. He's trained really well and had a really good attitude going into the bowl game."

While some thought that Matthew Jones may slide over to center, there was also the feeling that Jackson could also make the move outside to tackle — which Day and Frye both refuted, while Frye pointed to Jackson's play inside last year as a reason for him to stay put.

"Donny played really well at guard (last season)," Frye said. "My biggest thing is from Year One of him

playing to Year Two, how far can he go there? We really want to keep that as much as we can for him and for us and for what we do offensively.

“Donny has the skill set to play all five positions,” he continued. “He’s athletic and talented enough. He could move in and play center, he’s athletic enough to play out on the perimeter.”

While Matthew Jones and Jackson remain at the guard spots, who will line up between them remains a mystery. Ohio State dipped into the transfer portal for depth at center, landing the services of Louisiana-Monroe tackle Victor Cutler with the intention of sliding him inside. Fourth-year Jacob James and second-year Carson Hinzman are also expected to compete for the position, but James will face a significant setback as he will be held out of the spring practice session due to an undisclosed injury.

While Cutler, James and Hinzman are the leading candidates to compete for the center spot, Frye said essentially everyone on the line has prepared to play the position if need be.

“That position in itself, it’s a lot of communication within the offense so that guy is going to be heady and smart,” Frye said. “Carson has done that. We brought in Victor, he’s played tackle and played some center so he can do that. You can slide Matt Jones in there, we talked to Josh (Fryar) in recruiting about sliding in and doing that. I’ve been talking to Enokk (Vimahi) about sliding in and putting the ball in his hand. You don’t ever want to be short on guys that can go in and snap the ball.”

Although experience is limited among tackles currently on Ohio State’s roster, fourth-year Josh Fryar has emerged as a leading candidate to start at one of the two tackle spots come September. Fryar started in one game last season while also appearing as an extra blocker in Ohio State’s short-yardage formations.

It’s more likely than not that Fryar will emerge as a starter at one of the tackle spots, barring any health concerns, but Frye said the Buckeyes hadn’t locked down which side of the line they’d place Fryar and that they’ll use spring practices to evaluate which side fits Fryar’s skill set better.

While Fryar will likely fill in one of the tackle spots, there are several young linemen vying for the position opposite of Fryar. Ohio State is eyeing the trio of third-year Zen Michalski and second-years Tegra Tshabola and George Fitzpatrick, but redshirt juniors Grant Toutant and Trey Leroux and freshman Miles Walker could potentially battle their way into the competition as well.

“It’s a good chance for all of those young guys,” Fryar said. “Josh has played a little bit, Zen was playing sparingly a little bit, and then you look at George and the new guys coming in, you get a chance to rely on these young guys to go operate at the tackle position and see what happens.”

While a majority of the offensive line remains unfilled entering the spring, Frye noted that it just makes his group more ready to get after each other and compete with several positions up for grabs.

“That makes us the hungriest, so I’m excited,” Frye said. “We had a great year (last season), we worked really well together. Moving into it now, that’s the coaching part of it. We’ve got some younger guys who are less than experienced guys, but they’re all hungry, they all want to be good. They all want to get coached. And so, as a coach, that’s the exciting part about coaching.”

| Position | # | Year | Name |
|----------|----|-------|------------|
| Tackle | 70 | R-Jr. | Josh Fryar |

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| Tackle | 65 | R-So. Zen Michalski |
| Tackle | 67 | R-Fr. Tegra Tshabola |
| Tackle | 68 | R-Fr. George Fitzpatrick |
| Guard | 74 | Jr. Donovan Jackson |
| Guard | 55 | Grad. Matthew Jones |
| Guard | 66 | R-Sr. Enokk Vimahi |
| Guard/Center | 75 | R-Fr. Carson Hinzman |
| Center | 78 | R-Jr. Jakob James |
| Center | N/A | R-Jr. Victor Cutler |