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Buckeyes Will Wait Until Fall To Make Decision Quarterback Issue Remains Undecided

By Mark Rea

Four months after Greg Frey took his last snap from center at Ohio State, head coach John Cooper said he didn't know who would succeed Frey as the Buckeyes' starting quarterback.

In fact, Cooper made it plain he probably wouldn't know for another four months whether it will be senior Kent Graham, junior Kirk Herbstreit or redshirt freshman Joe Pickens who leads the offensive charge in the 1991 season opener against Arizona Sept. 7 in Ohio Stadium.

After 15 days of spring practice, nothing was decided about the number one quarterback position, although there were plenty of hints, albeit none from Cooper.

"Even if I knew in my own mind right now who the quarterback was, I wouldn't tell you," the fourth-year head coach said. "I wouldn't tell them either. I think the best thing we can do is let those guys work hard the rest of the spring, stay here in the summertime and work in the conditioning program, and compete early next fall.

"In our situation of not having an experienced quarterback, I think that's the best thing that can happen to us. And it will happen because that's the way we have it planned."

For the record, the trio combined to complete 14 of 25 passes for 251 yards in the Scarlet and Gray Game, actually a controlled scrimmage that pitted offense against defense.

Graham connected on four of eight tries for 121 yards including a beautifully executed 54-yard bomb to wide receiver Allen DeGraffenreid. Pickens attempted 10 passes and completed six for 93 yards. And Herbstreit hit four of seven attempts for 37 yards.

Last Biweekly Issue of BSB

This is the final biweekly issue of *Buckeye Sports Bulletin. BSB* will go to its regular summer publishing schedule of monthly issues in June, July and August.

BSB will return to its weekly publishing schedule in September with the beginning of football season.

For updates on OSU sports throughout the summer, call the BSB Hotline at 1-900-896-0666. After the scrimmage, quarterbacks coach Ron Hudson confirmed what Cooper had said earlier — the number one spot had yet to be decided.

But Hudson's comments certainly seemed to have a Graham-tinged flavor to them.

"If you made the evaluation just off of the scrimmage, people would be very excited about what Kent accomplished," Hudson said. "But from the coaches' standpoint, he made some mistakes. He threw one particular ball way short that a receiver came back to catch. That ball should never have been thrown.

"If we can eliminate those kinds of errors and not turn the ball over and get out of Kent's mind that he always has to make the big play, then we'll be fine.

"It's when we turn the ball over, like we did against Michigan and Air Force, it's going to cost us games. If we can get the quarterback to understand that he cannot make bad decisions, then Kent will be fine."

When reporters asked if Hudson was leaning toward Graham more than Pickens or Herbstreit, the OSU assistant shook his head.

"It's still a battle and will continue to be," Hudson said. "Kirk is a guy who knows the offense and can execute it very well. He missed a few throws that we would have liked for him to hit, but he's exciting. He's made himself a force to be reckoned with because of his courage and determination and desire to be the Ohio State quarterback.

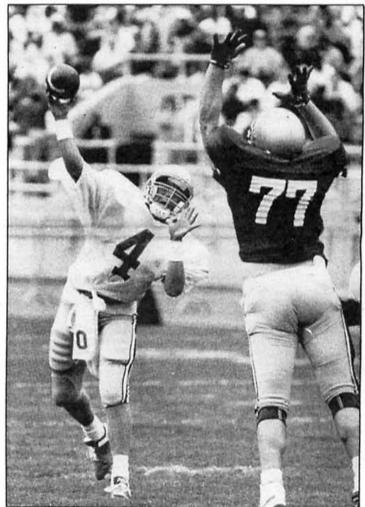
"Joe did some good things, too. He was a little nervous at times when a couple of guys were open and he didn't come off to them. But, of course, you're talking about a kid who's never been there. He's played in the stadium before, but not as a Buckeye. It makes quite a difference."

While Graham would appear to have the slightest of edges because of his experience as Frey's backup last season, Hudson warned that the decision regarding who would start at the position would be based on a lot more than simple appearances.

"Throwing the ball and completing passes isn't all there is to it," Hudson said. "Also, the mental part of it isn't that much because the offense isn't that difficult.

"It is the mental discipline that's the toughest thing. If we don't make silly errors, we have a chance. Let the (opposing) defense play. If you don't like the throw, take it and run.

"Kent did that in the scrimmage when he tried to throw a slant, didn't like it, looked over to the side, tucked it in and ran. That's what we want. To have thrown it away would have been



Ohio State junior quarterback Kirk Herbstreit (4) prepares to launch a pass past defender Dave Monnot (77) during the annual spring game. Herbstreit, one of three quarterbacks in the race for a starting job, completed four of seven passes for 37 yards.

even better, but he did not force the ball and make a bad decision which sometimes results in interceptions."

Graham admitted that he sees that as his biggest deficiency and has spent long hours trying to correct it.

long hours trying to correct it. "Twe been really trying to work on not forcing the ball," he said. "I did a really good job this spring as far as that goes. I didn't throw many interceptions during the spring, so I felt really good about that."

All of the quarterbacks agreed that they have done about all they can do to win the job. Graham and Herbstreit did a little lobbying on their own, while Pickens was diplomatic.

"The coaches haven't told us anything throughout the whole spring practice," Graham said. "We've just gone out and tried to compete and improve each day. I think I've done that real well. I think I've proved it daily as well. It's obviously up to the coaches, but I think I've done a good job."

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PUBLISHER Frank L. Moskowitz

ASSISTANT PUBLISHER Karen Wachsman

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NON-REVENUE SPORTS EDITOR Mike Wachsman

PHOTOGRAPHY
Tim Carson
Liana Coutts
Kevin Dye

CONTRIBUTORS Andrea Ardito Melissa Booker Gail Bushman Dana Dunn Rich Exner Julia Grnbb Steve Helwagen Brent LaLonde Rich Leonardo Craig Merz Bob Rochm Steve Siegfried ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

Wendy Craver & Associates



Collegiate Sports Advertising Network

908 South Hull Street, Montgomery, AL 36104 (205) 834-8802 / FAX (205) 263-0407

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With another Ohio State spring foot ball game in the books, the race that everyone seems to be concerning themselves with is the quarterback derby.

All three potential starters jockeyed for the best position in the spring fling, and from here, it appeared that senior Kent Graham took a slight lead over redshirt freshman Joe Pickens. That's not to say junior Kirk Herbstreit didn't do well, but he had only 37 yards passing on four completions in the spring game, while Graham had 121 yards on four completions and Pickens had 93 yards on six completions.

The odd thing about the quarterback race is what head coach John Cooper is

saying. "I don't really think we need to have an established guy coming out of the spring," Cooper said. "Even if I knew who the number one guy was after today, I wouldn't tell you. It might hurt the competition if I told one guy it was his job. I would like, to be honest with you, to know who our quarterback is before we begin conference play.'

The problem with that logic is that, with a non-conference slate of Arizona, Louisville and Washington State, the Bucks could be 1-2 before Cooper "settles" on a quarterback. Arizona was a bowl participant last year, while Louisville was a big winner over Alabama in the Fiesta Bowl.

The simple solution would be to play Graham this year, since he has an edge in experience, and let Pickens mature, allowing him to be ready to play three seasons, much like Mike Tomczak was groomed under Earle Bruce.

While the Buckeyes sort things out at quarterback, it is apparent that OSU has no shortage of able tailbacks.

Robert Smith leaped out at the fans again, gaining 100 yards on 15 carries in the scrimmage, catching one pass for six yards, and even blocking an extra point, something he said was the highlight of his day.

"That was a special feeling for me," Smith said. "I got a piece of one earlier in the spring, but it went through. The running is what I was brought here for, so when I can do something for the team that I've really had to work harder for, that makes me feel much better about my performance."

Smith is also going to be the main punt returner this year, replacing Jeff Graham.

USA Today began its hyping of the 1991 Heisman Trophy race, and Smith was listed as one of the players "Who Could Emerge."

However, if you believe Smith, he is not one to seek the individual fame and glory, opting instead to go about his business in football and get some study-

"I don't pay any attention to that Heisman stuff," he said. "It will be a cold day in hell before I let those things concern me. I don't even like the pub-licity, although it's something I'll have to get used to.

"I don't try to get recognized by people. It's not like I'm sitting under a tree waiting for people to see me. We have little time for studying the way it is, so when football is done, I try to get as much studying done as possible."

Smith also says he tries to diffuse as much attention as he can from himself to his running mates, and it was nice to see Butler Býnoté and Carlos Snow running well in the spring game.

Spring Notes with Mike Wachsman

Býnoté showed good acceleration through the holes and accounted for 81 yards, while Snow looked a little like the Snow of old, rambling through holes and being a shifty, moving target. He carried the ball six times for 25 yards and got one of the biggest ovations of the day when he entered the game.

Scottie Graham gained just nine yards, but the coaches also used him almost exclusively as a goal-line runner. He did score two touchdowns in the game, equaling his season total from last year.

Raymont Harris did not suit up for the game as he is battling academic problems, something "that should be taken care of before the fall," according to running backs coach Gene Huey, and shouldn't pose a problem to Harris' competing for playing time.

The receiving corps is not what it was last year, and that could pose some problems.

Brian Stablein and Bernard Edwards, the leading returnees at the receiving slots, are solid players, but neither is the game breaker that Jeff Graham or Bobby Olive was.

Walk-ons Jesse Prewitt and Allan DeGraffenreid showed promise, Prewitt latching on to a 44-yard strike from Pickens and DeGraffenreid getting loose on a 54-yarder from Graham. The Graham-to-DeGraffenreid hookup was, perhaps, the prettiest offensive play of the day.

It may help the Buckeyes that Dante Lee has been moved to receiver to "bet-ter utilize his speed," according to Cooper. Lee was an underused commodity last season and should be able to showcase his fine open field running ability as a receiver.

The offensive line play during the scrimmage seemed at times to be very good and at other times to be ragged.

It would appear that incumbents Alan Kline and Len Hartman would be in the lead for one tackle and guard position, respectively, but that leaves three spots up in the air.

All spring, Cooper and the coaches have said that Rod Smith is a guard. However, there are only two centers with a real shot at playing time, Jack Thrush and Paul Long. According to offensive line coach Joe Hollis, Long was "probably the nicest surprise of the spring. He caught on real well and played solid football for us."

However, most people know that Smith was a prep All-American center at Cleveland St. Joseph, and he appears to be the best center on the squad. He did get a few reps at center during the spring, but did the bulk of his work at guard

Although Cooper said there are no plans to move Smith to center, if he did there would not be a big dropoff at guard, because Roy Nichols, while he was a tackle, played a lot last year, and Mark Bean is waiting in the wings.

The tight end race is probably the tightest on the squad, with senior Jeff Ellis, battling sophomore Cedric Saunders for starting honors. There was a noticeable difference in Ellis, who has gotten down to 255 pounds from last year's 281 (or thereabouts), and he is running with more authority.

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Saunders cannot be counted out, though. He has shown the knack for making good catches and leading extremely well on blocking for the sweep. Both players should get extensive action this season, and both are worthy of all-star consideration.

Saunders was involved in one of the few highlights of the spring game

He was running over the middle for a pass, and Graham threw a strike into his arms. As Saunders turned, he was crushed by Sarasota (Fla.) High School teammate Chico Nelson with a blow so hard it knocked Saunders' mouthpiece out and deposited it five yards away.

When asked if Nelson did that a lot in high school, Saunders said, "He got me a couple times, but I got him a lot more. That hit probably counted for about five of mine, but he's still way behind. He'll have to get about 50 more hits on me to catch up."

Defensively, there was a definite im-provement by OSU, including the aforementioned savage hit and some other nice sticks by Nelson, as well.

Greg Smith and Corey Pargo shined on the defensive line, getting by the blockers on numerous occasions.

The linebacker position may be the strongest it has been since the good old days of Chris Spielman, Pepper Johnson and Eric Kumerow.

A healthy John Kacherski will be a Steve Tovar, provided his foot heals properly, will only get better. That should be a scary thought for the rest of the Big Ten, because Tovar is already one of the top backers in the league after just two seasons.

Andy Gurd looked good from his outside position, and Mark Williams made some nice plays as well. Sophomore Jason Simmons picked up where he left off last season, making 11 tackles in the spring scrimmage.

The best performance turned in by a linebacker in the spring game was by redshirt freshman Alex Rodriguez. He tallied 11 stops and showed a good nose for the ball. If he continues to develop in that fashion, the coaches will be hardpressed to keep him out of the lineup.

In the secondary, the quartet of Foster Paulk, Bryan Cook, Roger Harper and Nelson proved that they can really put pops on receivers. Con-sistency seems to be the unit's biggest weakness at this point.

According to Cooper, the DBs had a tendency to "play the run, play the run, and then get beaten with a long pass. That's something we need to work on a little more, getting more consistency on every down.

Looking at things from a best case scenario, the improvement the Buck-eyes made on defense is highly encouraging, and the offensive performances, especially at running back, give much cause for optimism.

ONE OF the more interesting incentives this spring was an idea the coaching staff came up with.

After spring practice was completed, Cooper and the assistants handed out T-shirts that said "Ohio State Spring Football 1991 - No Excuses."

Each player who participated in every practice received one of the Tshirts.

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Buckeye Sports Bulletin

B Candidates Will Have Big Shoes To Fill

Continued From Page 1

Asked if he would prefer to know exactly how things stood going into the summer, the 6-5, 220-pound senior replied, "That's kind of irrelevant to what's going on because that's not going to happen. I just have to be happy with what's going on and live with it. Ob-viously, I would like it if I was named number one coming out of the spring,

but that's not going to be the case. "But I think I've done a good job out there and that's all I can do. Coming into the fall, my goal is to be number one and that's what I'm shooting for."

Herbstreit, who has spent the last three years trying to achieve his lifelong dream of becoming the starting quarterback at Ohio State, forced his way into the battle after an excellent spring. That was pretty good for a guy who was literally bumped off the quarterback depth chart at one point last season. "I think I've surprised a lot of

people," said the 6-2, 212-pounder who is now a junior. "I don't think people gave me a shot. But I just went out and tried to relax and not worry about what people thought. Hopefully, that will be enough.

"I think the coaches, in the backs of their minds, have a good feeling of what they're going to do, but they're not going to come out and say anything. I just think we're all about equal. It's not for me to judge, but I think it's a good battle right now."

Pickens, a 6-4, 215-pound redshirt freshman who is likely the quarterback of the future for the Buckeyes, was pragmatic about his first spring practice as a collegian.

"I certainly don't feel like I've won the (starting) job," he said. "That's really not for me to say anyway. You'd have to ask the coaches.

"I thought Kent played great in the scrimmage and Kirk did really well, too. I thought I had some good plays and some bad ones that hurt me a little bit. I have to admit I was a little jittery to begin with, but that went away after a while."

Whichever quarterback wins the

starting job will have some sizable shoes to fill. Although Frey took more than his share of criticism from Ohio State fans, he remains as the only quarterback in school history ever to throw for 2,000 yards or more in three consecutive seasons.

Still, for all of his statistics, Hudson said Frey will be missed more because of the intangibles he lent to the team.

"As a person sitting in the stands, if you looked at Greg Frey vs. Kent Graham last year, just physically throwing the ball, people would all want Kent," the OSU quarterbacks coach said. "But Greg had some things that I couldn't coach - the mental toughness I've been talking about - that we're trying to get out of Kent this year.

"If we can get to that point with him, I think we've got a chance to be awful good at that position this year."

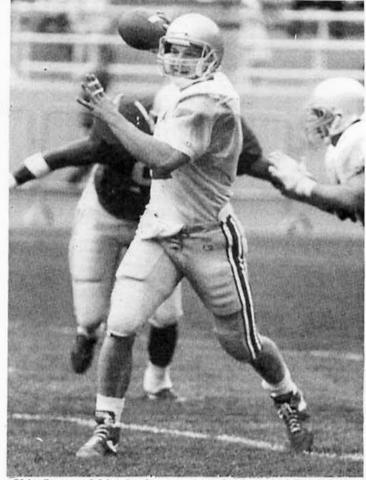
Then, when he perhaps caught himself placing most of his emphasis on Graham, Hudson smiled and quickly added, "Of course, we want that kind of thing from all of our quarterbacks. As you might have heard, we don't have a number one yet."

The one who becomes number one will bring an impressive resume with him.

Graham played in 17 games in 1987 and 1988 as the number two quarter-back at Notre Dame. He later transferred to Ohio State and completed 15 of 26 passes for three touchdowns last season as Frey's number two man. He has also endeared himself to the OSU coaching staff by losing over 25 pounds since last season.

Herbstreit has always had the tag of being an option quarterback since he rushed for 576 yards and 16 TDs as a senior at Centerville (Ohio) High School. Most people forget, however, that he also threw for 1,298 yards and 10 touchdowns that season. The son of former OSU captain and assistant coach Jim Herbstreit, he has the most experi-

ence of the trio in the Buckeyes' system. Pickens was a prep All-American at Cleveland St. Ignatius after leading his team to consecutive state championships. He threw for 5,140 yards and 40



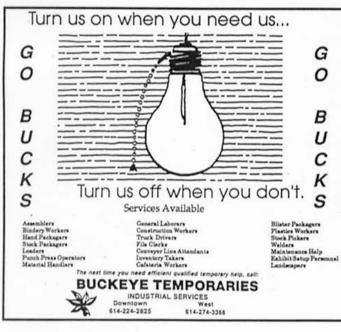
Ohio State redshirt freshman quarterback Joe Pickens eludes pressure from the defense to throw on the run during the spring game. Locked in a race with teammates Kent Graham and Kirk Herbstreit, Pickens completed six of 10 passes for 93 yards.

TDs as a prepster and gave the OSU throwing a perfect timing pass to wide crowd in attendance at the spring scrimmage a glimpse at his ability,

receiver Jessie Prewitt that covered 44 yards.

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Graham Appears To Have Inside Track At QB Position

Obviously, when you talk about Ohio State's spring football practice, you have to start by talking about the quarterback situation.

After seeing the spring game, I'm inclined to think Kent Graham is the leader in the quarterback race.

When you talk about Graham, you have to first talk about his arm. It's the strongest I remember at Ohio State, and I started covering the Buckeyes when Rod Gerald was at the helm.

Graham's 54-yard strike to Allen DeGraffenreid in the spring game was a tight spiral thrown on a line and definitely caught the attention of the estimated 35,000 in attendance at the scrimmage.

But Graham also appeared more relaxed under center than either Joe

Pickens or Kirk Herbstreit, no doubt be-cause he is the most experienced of the three.

The coaching staff says the battle for the starting slot will continue to be waged between Graham, Herbstreit and Pickens, but I'm not sure that John Cooper and his staff aren't just being coy with the media.

The upcoming season is one of the most critical in a long time for Ohio State and at some point you've got to choose a starting quarterback and start preparing in earnest for a very tough schedule. I feel a fast start is imperative for the Buckeyes this year and given Graham's experience and fine spring play, you almost have to go with him out of the gate.

If Graham falters, the Bucks could

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then go to one of the other two quarter-backs, who will have had the benefit of that much more practice, something that would help Pickens in particular.

The big winner in spring practice might have been Herbstreit, but he might also end up being the odd man out again. Few took him very seriously as a contender at quarterback at the start of practice, but he turned in a solid spring.

However, the Bucks might elect to go with Graham for this season and then try and play Pickens for three years, leaving Herbstreit in a reserve role.

After seeing him play this spring, however, I won't count Herbstreit out of the race this season or next.

One area of concern for me on offense that I think Buckeye fans should keep an eye on is the receiving corps. Guys such as Bernard Edwards and Brian Stablein were solid backups to Jeff Graham and Bobby Olive last season, but it remains to be seen whether they, or some of the younger receivers, will be solid starters. This will be especially imperative given the quarterback situation.

With uncertainty at the wide receiver spots, don't be surprised if the Bucks look to the slimmed down Jeff Ellis and Cedric Saunders at tight end more this season. Last year, tight ends caught only 24 passes for the Bucks. Ellis alone caught 40 as a sophomore in 1988

You can also bet that the Buckeyes will try and move the ball on the ground as much as possible. The spring game made quite clear something virtually everyone knew — the Bucks have no shortage of running backs. Ohio State's biggest problem in the backfield would appear to be how to keep the likes of Robert Smith, Butler Býnoté, Carlos Snow, Scottie Graham, Raymont Harris and the rest happy. That's a problem most coaches would love to have.

The Buckeyes have an interesting mix of experience and youth on the offensive line, and this is another area that Buckeye fans should keep tabs on. As has happened so often in the past few seasons, the line may start slow this season and get better as the year progresses.

The OSU defense is shaping up to be one of the best in years. The big story coming out of the spring game would have to be Chico Nelson, who is really gaining a reputation for hard hits. He's certainly become a favorite of mine.

Hard hitting used to be a way of life in the OSU defensive backfield, and it's nice to see bone crunching making a comeback.

Nelson and backfield mates Roger Harper, Bryan Cook and Foster Paulk have Buckeye fans recalling the back-field of William and Terry White, Greg Rogan and Sonny Gordon. Those four helped OSU to the Rose Bowl following the 1984 season, an impressive win over top-ranked Iowa in 1985, and a big win over Texas A&M in the Cotton Bowl following the 1986 campaign.

The thing to note is that this year's backfield will be much bigger than that great unit from the mid-80s. Gordon was the biggest of those backs at 6-0, 192. Of the previously mentioned current defensive backs, only Paulk, listed at 5-11, 180, is smaller than Gordon and Harper is a solid 6-4, 224. Throw in Brent Johnson (6-1, 218), who has been working with the defensive backs, and you have a big secondary.

The other players who stood out for me during the scrimmage were Alex Rodriguez and Corey Pargo.

You can bet that Rodriguez, who moved over from the crowded offensive backfield, will see plenty of action at inside linebacker, even after Steve Tovar returns. Rodriguez showed a real nose for the football and an ability to get to it in a hurry as he registered 11 stops, second highest for the scrimmage.

Although Pargo's performance was not as flashy as Rodriguez's or Nelson's, it was good to see the 6-3, 280-pound (so the roster said) senior in the thick of things, registering six stops. Pargo came to OSU as a highly touted prep player and so far, his career has been pretty much of a waste. This is Big Daddy's last chance to make a solid contribution at OSU and he looks like he might be up to the task.

The thing that struck me most about the defense was the overall depth. Other than in the defensive backfield, there appears to be plenty of talented players at every position. Competition makes all players better and over the course of a rugged season, depth could prove very beneficial. MANY OF you called our BSB Hot-

Infort of you caned our BSB hol-line for daily reports during spring practice and we hope those reports proved informative. We will continue to file updates at noon, seven days a week until May 31.

Starting June 1, we will be filing reports daily, Monday through Friday. For those of you who wish to limit your calls to the hotline, the Monday report will include a recap of the weekend's news and events, and Friday's report will include a wrap-up of the previous week's events.

There will continue to be daily updates Tuesday, Wednesday and Thurs-day for those of you who miss calling on either Monday or Friday.

We will resume filing reports seven days a week with the start of football practice in the fall.

The cost of the hotline, which can be reached by dialing 1-900-896-0666, remains \$2 for the first minute and \$1 for each additional minute.

