

Meyer, Herman Bring New Attack To OSU

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

If you asked fans around college football what first pops into their head when the words "Urban Meyer" are uttered, some would likely mention his two national championships or his excellent records at Bowling Green, Utah and Florida.

But for many, the first words that come to mind are "spread offense." Meyer helped revolutionize the college game – and won 104 games in 10 seasons – with a unique offense that combined misdirection, option reads, old-school power football and, yes, spread formations that left unprepared defenses unsure exactly what had hit them.

For those who have watched the Ohio State football team for most of the past 11 years, seeing that type of attack coming to Columbus is akin to stumbling across a cooler full of frosty cold beverages in the desert.

While Jim Tressel's success in Columbus during a 10-year reign was nearly unprec-

edented, his offenses didn't often light up scoreboards. Ohio State posted just one national top-10 scoring offense under Tressel and placed an average of 43rd in the country during his tenure.

Meanwhile, Meyer led five top-10 offenses in his previous three stops before taking 2011 off, and his offenses never landed outside of the top 50 in Division I-A, averaging a 21st-place finish.

In other words, fans have a reason to be excited. But where did Meyer's offense come from? What are he and offensive coordinator Tom Herman trying to accomplish? What does the spread mean today in the sport of college football? And does Ohio State have the personnel to be effective running the offense in 2012?

Those questions and more will be answered throughout the 12 games the Buckeyes will play Sept. 1 through Nov. 24,

but BSB talked to Meyer, Herman and a host of analysts from across the country to find as many answers as possible before the ball goes in the air.



Tom Herman

Humble Beginnings

There's a now-famous story about Meyer, then the wide receivers coach at Notre Dame, seeing star wideout David Givens in tears after a loss and asking what was wrong. When the player replied that he hadn't touched the ball during the game and as a result felt like he hadn't helped the team win, Meyer was floored that the team's offensive plan had failed in that regard.

He swore that kind of thing would never happen again, so Meyer started kicking around in his head an offense that would be playmaker-friendly. "Plays are good because of guys" became his mantra, and in many ways, that was the seed of the spread offense.

The problem was it had to be constructed from its nascent stages. Rich Rodriguez was running a similar attack in stops at Temple and Clemson, Northwestern had a brilliant offensive mind named Kevin Wilson lighting up scoreboards, and Louisville offensive coordinator Scott Linehan was starting to spread the field while creating explosive offenses under John L. Smith.

But that was about it. On the other hand, Meyer had been raised under Earle Bruce at Ohio State and Bob Davie at Notre Dame, coaches who weren't exactly running schemes that broke the mold. When Meyer and Notre Dame graduate assistant Dan Mullen visited Louisville, they quickly realized they were seeing the ground floor of an offensive revolution.

"On a Monday we went down and we ended up staying four days," Meyer said. "We had to go buy a toothbrush because I was so enamored with the style of play."

"It was just a different philosophy. After that, both Dan and I just kind of attacked it. I started getting some phone calls about becoming a head coach, and I started thinking, 'What would I do offensively if I became a head coach?' A couple of years later, I did. That's when we installed the spread offense."

After trying to incorporate parts of the philosophy during his remaining time at Notre Dame, Meyer was all-in upon taking the Bowling Green job before the 2001 season. Meyer took Mullen with him to northwest Ohio as quarterbacks coach, hired Gregg Brandon as his offensive coordinator and tabbed another former Ohio State graduate assistant, Greg Studrawa, as the offensive line coach.

From there, the experiments began.

"We all sat in that old, nasty meeting room in Bowling Green, Ohio, where every time it rained the water would drip down on the table," Meyer said. "It was incredible. For the month of February and the month of March, every morning we'd come in for 10 hours and work from the huddle to the snap count because there was no other model."

"Northwestern was doing some of it at the time and Rich Rodriguez was doing some of it, so we kind of watched them a little bit as well, but we developed our own. That was one of the greatest experiences I've had because there was no model. It was just like go build something, and by the way there's

no book to go build it. We really enjoyed it. I had some great coaches."

But would it work? It took only one game to find out the answer. Bowling Green, which had been only 2-9 in 2000, started the season at Missouri and scored the game's final 13 points to upset the Tigers, 20-13. One week later, BG posted 35 points against Buffalo and then hung 42 on Temple. By the end of the season, the team had almost doubled its points-per-game average.

They were off to the races.

Starting A Revolution

The Falcons moved up to third in the nation in scoring in 2002, going 9-3 after winning their first eight games. Meyer moved on to Utah, where the Utes finished third in the nation in scoring in 2004 while going undefeated and winning the Fiesta Bowl. At Florida, his team won the national title in '06, finished third in scoring a year later and placed fourth in points per game in 2008 while winning another BCS crown.

The results have always been similar, but the sport of college football never stays static. With the success the spread was having, it was bound to explode across the sport, and its prevalence led to defenses starting to scheme against it.

Meyer is no stranger to this fact.

"We were lucky," he said. "We were kind of on the cutting edge. At Utah, people didn't know how to defend us. We were the novelty. We beat Missouri my first year at Bowling Green with 52 scholarship players. We traveled to Missouri and won that game. Fifty-two scholarship players and we won that game. I want to say 52, might be 55 or something, but below our limit. It was because Missouri had a hard time getting lined up."

"It's much more difficult now because it's not a novelty. There are eight teams in this conference that run a spread offense. When we did it in 2001, no one did – especially the way we did it. There was zero."

Obviously, that's not the fact anymore, and the proliferation of the spread has led to discussion that defenses have caught up. It can be argued that the spread doesn't create the mismatches for lesser-talented teams that it used to, that it has at least been neutralized to the point that teams with a fast, fundamentally sound defense can limit its effectiveness. Hybrid defenders with the speed to track down backs and receivers in space and the size to deliver blows when they get there have helped bridge the gap.

But Florida's success under Meyer, not to mention the battle between spread squads Oregon and Auburn in the 2010 title game or West Virginia's 70 points in the Orange Bowl last season, shows that a good spread can still keep a scoreboard operator busy.

"I don't think the spread is ever going to leave this game again," ABC/ESPN college football analyst Ed Cunningham told BSB. "The idea that the spread is just a fad is just old-school football guys with their head in the sand. It's not going to leave the game. It's going to be part of every level of the game. It's already starting to percolate up to the NFL, so this is here to stay because it is all about space."

Simply put, all 53½ yards of width on the field along with the length of the field is just too much for 11 guys on defense to cover. Cunningham said he learned that while playing in the NFL with the Arizona Cardinals.

"I cannot tell you how many times on the goal line we'd get in a formation and I would in my head say, 'It's gonna feel like there's

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: OFFENSIVE OVERVIEW

37 guys on defense on the next play because we're only 8 yards across as an offensive formation," he said. "It was so frustrating as an offensive lineman knowing that it doesn't matter if I get my block, there's three extra guys to make the tackle. Those days are just dead."

Of course, the word spread isn't quite detailed enough to describe what is happening these days. All spreads share some principles and differ on others.

The passing spread was introduced into the Big Ten by Purdue in the late 1990s, and Joe Tiller had a high level of success with it, reaching the Rose Bowl with the Boilermakers in 2000. Across the national landscape, Mike Leach pretty much disregarded the run at Texas Tech and turned the team into an annual bowl squad.

Then there are the teams that spread the field to run it while taking advantage of the lack of defenders crowding the middle. Michigan largely tried to do that under Rodriguez, but a leaky defense meant the team's occasionally unstoppable offense didn't translate into enough wins for team success.

The Ohio State brain trust doesn't expect Meyer's offense to turn the conference on its head as Purdue did. First of all, it seems like every type of spread has been used by some Big Ten team at some point. Additionally, the Buckeyes are looking for much more balance than Tiller had in West Lafayette.

"Purdue kind of changed the Big Ten a little bit, but that was much different," Meyer said. "That was throw-throw-throw. We want to be balanced, 50-50, and real physical. They were called 'basketball on grass.' I always tell our coaches you won't coach here very long if I ever hear that come out of your mouth – basketball on grass. It's power football from spread sets."

That's a mind-set that sits well with the old guard at Ohio State. Bruce, who has served as a mentor for Meyer over the years, has spoken about how he originally was taken aback by the offense but learned to like it once he realized how similar the power run sets were to his.

Chris Spielman, perhaps the Ohio State player most associated with smash-mouth football in the past three decades, also has given his stamp of approval.

"Spending all that time with Urban last year, I love the philosophy," Meyer's former ESPN broadcast partner told BSB. "I love what they're trying to do. Until they execute it, I can't give judgment on it, but conceptually and philosophically I like it. To me, it's the same blocking schemes (as Bruce's system). It's just out of a different look."

Setting A Plan

Going deeper, Ohio State will try to accomplish a few different things under Meyer and Herman. The ultimate goal is to score a lot of points, just as Meyer has at all of his previous stops, but the first step is to avoid being reckless.

In that way, the offense has similarities to some of Tressel's core principles. The former head coach often said that two of an offense's most important tasks were to hold on to the ball and avoid putting the defense in bad positions.

Meyer, meanwhile, has long held the philosophy that an offense's key goal is to earn two first downs so that the team's defense won't be put into a tough spot. Then when it comes to turnovers, Meyer hopes to avoid a major undoing of the spread era at Michigan, as Rodriguez's teams never finished above 99th in the country in turnover margin.

In the running game, Meyer preaches a method of holding the ball that is taught from the top down to every player in the program,

while his quarterbacks know not to play fast and loose with the ball.

"We're very anti-turnover," the head coach said. "If you go back and look at our quarterbacks, you don't throw picks. If you do, you're out. No turnovers is one (of our tenets), so we're probably not that much different (than the Tressel style)."

"The quarterback position is not the position to take chances. Some people I'll hear say, 'Oh, he's a gunslinger.' We don't have gunslingers or risky players at quarterback. I never have. We won't do that."

Ohio State will also undertake a strategy of running a hurry-up, no-huddle offense, one Herman employed in his previous stops at Rice and Iowa State. Practices have been fast-paced as the offense has worked into the kind of shape needed to move at whatever tempo the coaching staff desires during a game, and the Buckeye offense has noticed how it is able to move more efficiently in practice when the defense is tired.

That's not a surprise to Cunningham, who has seen the trend of no-huddle offense sweeping the country for a few obvious reasons.

"It puts stress on you," Cunningham said. "Forget any schematic advantage, the stress it puts on you cardiovascularly and mentally (is significant). There's an inability to get players in and out. Plus the other thing it makes a defense do is get more simple. It's difficult when you're trying to figure out what personnel are in for the offense, so what most defensive coaches do is they say, 'OK, we normally run five defensive sets, but let's cut it back to three.' It simplifies things for an offense."

Ohio State will also try to win the battle of big plays. Herman told the program's coaches' clinic in April that research indicates teams who win the turnover battle and have more explosive plays than the opposition win 98 percent of the time.

Herman is a Mensa member, and to his knowledge, that is the most statistically significant study about winning games in the sport, so he's going to stick to it.

"We are going to be fanatic about taking care of the football and then creating explosive plays," he said, noting that every play in the team's arsenal is drawn up to go the distance. "I'm not talking about throwing the ball 40 yards downfield every time we touch the football. Explosive plays are created by perimeter blocking, assignment football and the tenacity of the players playing to the echo of the whistle – four to six seconds of relentless effort by all 11 guys on the field."

When it comes to pass vs. run, Ohio State's balance remains to be seen for a variety of reasons, though Meyer skewed toward the run game at Florida. On an individual play level, the Buckeyes have a few maxims, with the team much more likely to run the ball when there are two high safeties.

In the run game, Herman calls the tight zone read the team's most reliable play. That has become one of the most popular in the sport, and the concept is simple.

One defensive lineman remains unblocked but is optioned as the quarterback either decides to keep it or hand it to the back.

"If we can call tight zone reads every single snap, we feel like we should get at least 4½ yards per carry," Herman said. "That is our bread and butter. That's what we go to when the game is on the line. We're going to call some form of tight zone. We want to be the best in America at it."

From there, Ohio State will add in counter plays, jet sweeps with flankers, and a variety of option plays including the speed option and

veer option. The blocking schemes haven't changed much, but the new base plays create the ability to make the defense wrong in more ways than one.

"Our run game is maybe not unique, but it is certainly something we believe in," Herman said. "We want to equate numbers for the defense. Getting under center and handing the ball off, that to us is single-option football. You have one option and that's to hand it to the dude that's carrying the football. You have then lost two blocks – the dude taking the snap and the guy carrying the ball. Those are simple numbers, so now you're playing 9 on 11."

"For some people, that works really well. We're going to equate numbers in the run game and we believe in double- and triple-option football."

It gets a lot more complicated from there, but there are some fundamental tenets, Herman said.

"All we do is run zone, power and counter (blocking schemes)," Herman said. "We create conflicts with the defensive ends and slow down linebackers. They should never know how or who that is blocking them. Defenses have gotten pretty good, so we have to be innovative in the way that we attack defenses. We try to stay ahead of the game as much as we can."

One thing that can be assured is that the Buckeyes will have run plays that have complementary pass plays and vice versa. That's something that has not been stressed extensively in recent years at Ohio State, but it has the potential to keep defenses more off-balance.

Herman ran a more pass-happy attack in 2007-08 at Rice but was at the head of a run-based offense the past three seasons at Iowa State. That shows he's a coach who is flexible based on personnel, and most observers see him as one of the best young offensive minds in the game.

"Meyer gives his assistant coaches, especially his coordinators, a lot of rope," Cunningham said. "Urban Meyer did not hire a schmo to run his offense. He didn't hire a yes man. He hired a guy who knows what he's doing and has the ability to take over and run an offense."

Personnel Matters

All of that leads up to one big question: Does Ohio State have the personnel this year to run what Meyer and Herman want?

Much of that will be sorted out as the season goes on, but it appears midway through fall camp that the answer is yes in some cases and no in others.

The biggest piece of the puzzle comes at quarterback, and Meyer has had some great ones, including explosive BG signal caller Josh Harris, No. 1 overall draft pick Alex Smith at Utah and Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow at Florida.

"The one thing about our offense is you can't have a bad quarterback," Meyer said. "There are some offenses where they take the snap, turn around and hand the ball off. We're going to do it a little bit this year. We've got some plays in, but there's a lot of times in a game (in our system) where the quarterback has to make a read every play, 80 snaps. I don't know if there's any other offense that does that."

With that in mind, the presence of Braxton Miller was a big reason Meyer chose to get back in the coaching game at Ohio State. Miller was a five-star, dual-threat quarterback coming out of high school, and his playing time last year showed that while he has some development to do in the passing game, he

has the skill-set to put up excellent production in the team's system.

"When I first got the phone call, I knew all about Braxton," Meyer said. "That's the first thing that popped in my head because you're dead in the water if you don't have a guy that can play. He can play. I think he fits into what we do very well."

Running the ball, Miller has a unique ability to make people miss in tight spaces, and he showed glimpses of being able to avoid traffic while still looking downfield last season. In addition, his arm strength and quick release are important in the offense.

Of course, there's still work to be done for Miller and the entire passing game, which famously struggled a season ago to the point the top receivers had only 14 catches apiece. The word through camp is that while things have improved, they haven't reached where they need to be. Herman said early in camp that on a scale of 1 to 10, the passing game had increased from a 2 to a 4 since spring.

"Braxton was part of a passing attack that was very bad," Meyer said about 2011. "It's not because of Braxton Miller. It's because the group of players didn't play very well. We addressed that. In the spring, we were better. I wouldn't say we were very good, and I'll be the first to tell you when I think we're good."

That hasn't happened yet, but the staff has seen development. Much of the success of the offense will depend on the growth at the receiver spot, where such players as Corey "Philly" Brown, Devin Smith and Jake Stoneburner have to step up – and have done so to varying degrees.

Ohio State will also begin the year without someone who is built to play the "H" position, the hybrid running back/wideout spot whose speed and versatility gave defenses fits at Florida. Senior Jordan Hall was set to fill that role, but he is expected to miss at least the first two games of the season with a foot injury.

In his stead, the Buckeyes will have to make do. Brown and receiver Chris Fields have been given a crack at the position but there simply isn't a player with the perfect combination of talents on the team with Hall out.

"It's probably going to be a lot different looking than it looked at the other place," Meyer said. "It's hard to find that guy. I'm finding out it's really hard to find a guy that can (work inside and outside). You have to put the brakes on sometimes and say we can't do that."

In the running game, the returns have been good even with Hall out. Meyer has continually praised Carlos Hyde, a big back who still has good speed and provides the physicality to run between the tackles. Younger backs such as Rod Smith, Bri'onte Dunn and Warren Ball provide some burst as well.

Then there's an offensive line that has improved immensely since the new coaching staff arrived. Though the Buckeyes are still working to find a right tackle between Reid Fragel and Taylor Decker, the other four spots on the line are filled with veterans who don't have the coaches worried about their ability to get the job done.

Add it all up and there are plenty of reasons to be positive and plenty of reasons to have pause. There will likely be some growing pains, but the success of Ohio State's season will likely come down to how well the offense develops as the games go by.

"The biggest challenge is going to be our offensive skill," Meyer said while addressing his team's potential. "Can we function well enough in the offensive backfield, receiver and running back, to complement what I think is a pretty good team? If we do that, I think we'll have a nice run. If we don't, we won't be very good."



Ed Cunningham

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

Miller, Guiton Give Meyer Optimism Under Center

By **MARCUS HARTMAN**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Urban Meyer knew he had one extraordinary quarterback when he took the head coaching job at Ohio State in November.

With August winding down, he sounded like a man starting to think he had a pair to rely on with a third perhaps on the way.

The first needs little introduction.

Ohio State fans – in particular those who follow recruiting closely – have known about Braxton Miller for a long time. He burst onto the scene as a high-schooler in the Dayton area during his freshman season of 2007 and was considered the Buckeyes' quarterback of the future by the time he began his senior season at Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne in 2010.

Despite some considerable growing pains, he did enough as a true freshman starter last season to be named Big Ten Freshman of the Year.

On the day he took the job, Meyer grinned like a schoolboy just turned loose for recess when asked about the scintillating sophomore-to-be, and Miller has since done plenty to prove why both on and off the field.

He hit the weight room and the classroom hard in the winter and then took charge of the team during spring drills, all to the delight of his new head coach.

Miller (6-2, 220) did not let them forget about the physical gifts that made him Scout.com's second-ranked quarterback in his high school recruiting class, either.

"Braxton Miller is dynamic," Meyer said. "He is the most dynamic athlete I've ever coached."

"His acceleration is kind of off the charts. I've had very few people who can accelerate, and I've had some (NFL) first-rounders all over the place. His acceleration from point A to point B ... our strength coach and I almost laugh about it. And he's strong – real strong."

New offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Tom Herman, who held the same positions last season at Iowa State, echoed those claims but was sure to add there is more to Miller than that.

"I think what gets lost – we didn't spend a lot of time studying last year (so) I don't know much about how he performed in games last year or what he did, but I do know this – the kid can throw the football," Herman said. "He has a quick, smooth release, and if he is really consistent with his footwork, he can do some dynamic things in the throwing game because he can avoid a lot of problems back there with his feet and extend plays, which is an incredible asset."

The spring set Miller up for a summer during which Meyer would heap more platitudes as well as additional expectations upon the signal caller. The coach explained in no uncertain terms that he expected the



SONNY BROCKWAY PHOTOS

GOOD PAIR – In sophomore starter Braxton Miller (5, above) and junior backup Kenny Guiton (13, right), Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer said he has two solid quarterbacks going into the 2012 season.

quarterbacks to take charge of offseason workouts, particularly when it came to developing a better rapport with wide receivers to improve a passing game that was among the worst in the country last season.

"The areas he needs to work on are leadership, and that's to be determined," Meyer said prior to the start of the preseason. "I'll tell you after the first week of practice if he's a good leader. Because if you throw the ball decent and the guys are catching it, that means he led them all summer. If they don't, then he's not where he needs to be."

When the team reconvened in August, Meyer saw what he was hoping he would and gave credit where credit was due.

"It's still early, but I'm pleased with Braxton so far," Meyer said Aug. 6. "It's too early to give him (a thumbs up), but both of them – he and the other guy behind him (junior Kenny Guiton) – did a really good job."

"Braxton had a really good day and he feels good about it. He made the comment to me that he knows what he's doing, and I said he doesn't know yet, there's still a lot



more to go. I winked at him and said, 'Yeah, right, pal.'"

The development continued into the third week of preseason, when Miller dazzled onlookers with 350 yards passing during an Aug. 18 scrimmage.

Though it came mostly with the first team facing the second-team defense, the performance represented another milestone for the Buckeyes' starter.

"It was the first time really that I felt like he looked comfortable with what we were doing and wasn't thinking but rather playing," Herman said three days later. "I think with Braxton the biggest thing is repetition, repetition, repetition. Coach Meyer's phrase is competitive excellence – doing something so many times over and over again against so many different looks that a defense can present to you that eventually the game slows down and it starts to become second-nature to you."

At the same time, the OSU assistant shared with reporters that a milestone and a corner turned might not be exactly the same thing.

"I felt like for a lot of the (Aug. 18) scrimmage he finally looked that way," Herman said. "Today (three days later) was a different story. The defense always comes up with new and exciting things on offense and we've

got to adjust. At some point, he'll have taken so many reps in our base things that there is nothing a defense can throw at him."

Miller credited Herman with helping him learn about reading defensive fronts, something he must be able to do in the new offense. One of the basic tenets of Meyer's attack is not to run to a side where the offense is outnumbered. If the defense has more players than the offense can block, it's up to the quarterback to adjust by going the other way or checking at the line of scrimmage to a pass play.

"That helps a lot," Miller said. "I never knew that coming in as a freshman. He came in and taught me that ASAP. It's like I know what I'm doing now, so coming with that aspect brings some leadership, too. I'm calling out the protections and the plays and making the commands."

The quarterback embraces the challenges from the coaching staff and said he feels more comfortable taking charge this year as a sophomore.

"It's just so different coming in as a freshman playing," Miller said. "I didn't really feel that comfortable with the seniors and everybody like that, and I didn't really speak up that much. In high school, I was just all out there vocal-wise."

"I feel comfortable doing it this year. I talk to the coaches about that stuff, too, so I'm getting better at it."

Backup Accepts Challenge

The old saying that a coach's job security is only as good as his backup quarterback might not quite apply to a newly hired mentor with the championship résumé of Meyer, but he acknowledged the need to have an option aside from Miller upon which he can rely.

Meyer's offense is admittedly quarterback-centric, and Miller has had a history of getting banged up since high school, and that flashed itself again last season when he was unable to complete the Nebraska game because of a sprained ankle.

The head coach surprised some when he identified Guiton (6-3, 210) as someone he was not too fond of in the beginning of his tenure. The junior QB has always come across as an easygoing, pleasant presence in the interview room, and his teammates have always spoken highly of him.

Meyer, though, was not impressed with the Guiton he discovered in January.

"He was a guy that was kind of on the border in everything, whether it be behavior, academics, respecting authority and his lifestyle," the coach said. "That's completely changed. He's now kind of a leader kids gravitate to."

As he has with many aspects of the program already, Meyer credited director of strength and conditioning Mickey Marotti with helping get to the bottom of what Guiton needed to do to reinvent himself.

"This is why it's so important to have a strength coach that I trust," Meyer said. "You break a team down in a weight room, you can find out who they migrate to. In a team meeting situation? I can't do that."

"I really like Kenny Guiton. He's got a good life ahead of him. Just the way he handles himself. Not that he's accepting the role as a backup because I don't want him to. I want him to go deep. I want him to make Braxton better, but we're talking more than a two or three-year period of his life. I'm talking about the next 40 years. I see some really good stuff that I didn't see in January."

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

Miller Set For Second Year At QB For OSU

Plenty of people have thrust plenty of expectations on Braxton Miller, but if any of them bother Ohio State's sophomore quarterback, he isn't letting on.

They are nothing new, of course.

Miller became a starter as a high school freshman at Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne and had an Ohio State scholarship offer by the end of his sophomore year. A five-star prospect, he ascended to starter status four games into his college career and went on to be named Big Ten Freshman of the Year.

Urban Meyer joined the party of applause even before he took over in January as the 24th head coach of the Buckeyes.

First, he gushed about the youngster in Miller's college debut, a 42-0 win over Akron in the 2011 season opener for which Meyer provided color commentary as a member of the ESPN broadcast crew. Then the coach reaffirmed his interest in mentoring Miller when his hiring was announced in November.

"To tell you I'm excited to coach him, I'm not using the correct adjectives," Meyer said with a noticeable grin. "And because there's mixed company around, I'm not going to use the correct adjectives – that's how excited I am. So I think you get it, right? Really excited."

The praise continued through spring and into summer, when Meyer called Miller the most dynamic quarterback he has coached in a career that includes sending Alex Smith and Tim Tebow to the NFL as first-round selections from Utah and Florida, respectively.

"What I just said, people should go, 'Whoa,' but he is," Meyer said. "He is – really by far. That's how good an athlete he is."

Guiton was smiling again by the time he met reporters in late summer, and he made no effort to deny or obscure Meyer's complaints about him.

"Last year I was just, I don't know," he said, trailing off between phrases. "I was into football and everything. I just saw Braxton come in and he did a great job during the season, so I don't know. Maybe I was a little down and (Coach Meyer) saw it. Maybe I didn't even know."

"It was good having him come in. I feel like he got the best out of me, especially in the spring, and then telling me what I needed to work on over the summer. I took all that in and did it. He said I made a 180."

The Houston Eisenhower product also developed a fan in Herman, who first became familiar with him on the recruiting trail when Herman was an assistant coach at Rice and Guiton was a two-star recruit in the class of 2009.

"I love Kenny Guiton," Herman said. "Kenny is a guy that can survive a lot on mental reps. He's a really sharp guy that

Meyer, though, likes more than Miller's skills. He appreciates the youngster's mentality as well.

"He has a virtue that is relatively non-existent nowadays, especially for a quarterback in a top-10 program – that's humility," the coach said. "He's a very humble guy. It's refreshing to see that. It's good for football. It's good for my son to see."

That does not mean that Meyer is content to see Miller do everything the way he might naturally be inclined to. He challenged the sophomore to be more than just one of the guys, to step forward and take charge of the team.

"I hate to stereotype a guy who is a really good high school player, but I got the sense when I first got here that he's kind of a 'cool guy' who was just going to go lift weights and take care of his business," said Meyer, who then explained what he expects from his quarterbacks on top of making first downs and scoring touchdowns while protecting the ball.

"I told him, 'You're going to finish first in every drill. You're going to be the first one in the office. You're going to do extra work here. You're going to come in and ask for cut-ups (of film) of spring practice. You're going to really push yourself to be the best,' and he's doing that now."

Miller, who remains generally soft-spoken in front of reporters, embraced such expectations from his coach.

"They feel like I've got to do everything right, so that's what I'm going to do," he said. "If I mess up, we can watch it on film."

"I love the pressure. It's made me go a little bit harder."

He also showed off that humility the first time he spoke to reporters during preseason camp. Miller first laughed off a comparison a teammate made between him

understands the offense and understands the tempo. He lacks, obviously, some of the physical tools that Braxton has but makes up for it in the way that he plays mentally."

Herman has seen Guiton add velocity to his throw and improve his arm speed through better mechanics, and the QB confirmed that was one of his summer projects, another to which Marotti contributed.

"It's more putting your legs into it," Guiton said. "I've been trying to work on that a lot, keeping my leg under myself and not getting outside of my frame."

His development has led to some speculation he could earn time as part of the regular offense this fall, perhaps in a package that includes two quarterbacks on the field at the same time.

"I wouldn't mind coming up with a little package where they're both on the field at the same time," Meyer said Aug. 12. "Braxton doesn't know it yet, and neither does Kenny, but I have it on a piece of paper. We'll have that chat probably pretty soon. I just want to see if they keep developing. If

and Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Mike Vick, and then did little more than shrug when told of Meyer's comments about his unmatched dynamism.

"He said that to you?" Miller said of the latter description. "I'm cool with it. I'm learning each and every day. No pressure."

"When he says stuff like that to me, I just soak it in. The sky's the limit, so I just keep working at my craft. I just want to be the best I can be."

To that end, he spent the offseason working on his throwing accuracy and developing a better working relationship with the team's receivers.

Miller threw for 13 touchdowns and 1,159 yards against only four interceptions in 2011, but a 54.1 completion percentage (85 for 157) was not satisfactory. He had a tendency to misfire at times, whether that meant overthrowing receivers deep or letting go the occasional wobblor over the middle when he had someone open.

"When I was watching myself, I (noticed that I) get anxious," Miller said. "I know what I'm doing at the moment and I get anxious and my feet get jittery. Don't rush things. Just be good momentum-wise and get things done like that."

This year, he not only looks to cut out his own mistakes but eliminate them from the offense completely. Asked if he really takes responsibility when someone else on the team misses an assignment or drops a pass, he answered in the affirmative.

"Shoot, everything that's coming out of my hand is going to him, so I'll take anything that happens bad on offense in my hands," Miller said.

Sounds like the kind of thing Meyer expects from his new quarterback.

– Marcus Hartman

thing I'm trying to work on and let him recognize maybe I can do that."

He said the pair have a positive relationship despite competing for playing time.

"Braxton and I are cool," Guiton said. "We're always talking and everything, so I help him out as much as I can and he helps me out."

"I understand my role. Every day I'm coming to work. I'm coming to get a starting job. That's one thing I'm always going to push for because the reason I came here was to play. I'm comfortable with everything and I understand it also."

Jones Trying To Keep Up

With all of the talk about Miller's development and Guiton's maturation, the third scholarship quarterback on the roster was an afterthought for much of preseason camp.

Meyer scarcely spoke a word about him until Aug. 20, when the head coach triumphantly identified Cardale Jones as one of the newest true freshmen to have the black stripe removed from his helmet. That is a rite of passage signifying a player has demonstrated he deserves to be considered a full member of the team.

The head coach called Jones, "a guy who has really made as much progress as anybody" after being "a nonfactor really for about five or six months."

Herman confirmed the 6-5, 235-pound product of Cleveland Glenville has the physical tools to be a contributor down the line but indicated he still has much work to do.

"I've told him to his face that when he's good, his good is really good. When he's bad, it's really bad," Herman said. "He's got to work on being more consistent and getting those good reps more frequently and continue to mature."

Jones checks in as the biggest of the Buckeye signal callers on the current roster, but he has the skills to be a threat as a runner and a passer – essential in Meyer's offense.

"He runs pretty well," Herman said. "We haven't seen him a whole lot in a bunch of live situations, but he runs plenty good enough to do the things that we want to do with our quarterback with our feet."

Filling out the quarterback roster sheet are a pair of walk-ons – senior Justin Siems (6-2, 215) and freshman Levi Radliff (6-3, 195), who prepped at Portsmouth (Ohio) West.

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: RUNNING BACKS

Rushers Set To Make Mark In Spread Offense

By CRAIG MERZ
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The spread offense.

Those words could be as disconcerting to a running back as someone telling Michael Phelps to stay out of the water before Olympic swimming events.

Certainly, negative thoughts had to run through the minds of the Ohio State ball carriers in the immediate aftermath of Urban Meyer being named head coach of the Buckeyes on Nov. 28.

Out with the old "hand 'em off and run behind the tackle" plays and in with Air Urban as the attack-minded philosophy favors a wide-open game over pounding the ball up the gut with the aid of beefy linemen.

But the Ohio-born and Midwestern-bred Meyer understands Big Ten football is still power football, and he's not about to abandon a winning formula.

Revise, revamp and rejuvenate? Yes.

"I thought he was mainly going to be about passing, but once he got here he explained what it was going to be," sophomore tailback Rod Smith said. "We run the ball a lot. If you expect just the pass, you've got a lot of problems."

The spread is just like it sounds. Instead of bunching in the middle, the non-linemen spread out wide and there are multiple formations that defenses have to contend with.

Sophomore quarterback Braxton Miller will be the ringleader, but the running backs are expected to carry a heavy workload as well.

Their job could be a little easier because opponents won't be able to stack the line because the Buckeyes will be presenting varied looks.

"I'm excited because I'll be out in the open, just one on one more," junior tailback Carlos Hyde said. "I won't have to worry about two or three guys chasing me. I can be one on one, make that guy miss and be off to the races. And this offense is quick. Hike the ball and go quick. By the time the defense reacts, I'm already with the ball in my hands and making moves."

No wonder he's eager to see what the season will bring.

"A lot of points. Way more," Hyde said. "Just a lot more points and more excitement. Big plays, long plays. Just those big plays that people want to see. Those plays you see on ESPN's top 10 – those big plays. Expect that. I'm happy that I'm a part of that. My coach wants to score a lot of points, and I'm all for it."

So the fears of the backs that their position would go the way of fullbacks who carry the ball and tight ends who catch it at Ohio State were unfounded.

Running backs coach Stan Drayton said the talent at his disposal in the backfield will improve last year's ranking of 107 of 120 schools for total offense per game (318.1 yards), including the No. 27 rushing attack (191.1 yards).

"It's even better when you've got a quarterback who's a 4.3 40-guy who can stretch the defense and put all kinds of different pressure on the defense," Drayton said. "Now you've got a group of running backs where the pressure was all on them sometimes in the run game. Well, now you have to defend our quarterback as well, and our running backs appreciate that."

"They feel like there are a lot less free hitters out there. They're enjoying it."

Of course, all the schemes and formations won't pan out for Drayton unless he has reliable horses in the stable.

That should be no problem beginning with senior Jordan Hall, although he will likely miss at least the opening three games as he recovers from June surgery for a cut tendon in his foot.

Hall (5-9, 194 pounds) is expected to be a vital cog of the spread offense upon his return. He should get time as the hybrid back, a mix of a receiver/slash runner who can line up in numerous spots to maximize his speed.

"He's a very smart football player," Drayton said. "He's a guy who can make a middle-of-the-stream adjustment on the run. He's a veteran who understands the offensive plays. Anytime you have a guy who can think like that and react like that and play fast the way he does, it's an asset to your team."



FILE PHOTO

WAITING – Senior Jordan Hall (7) will miss at least the first three games of the 2012 season as he continues to recover from June foot surgery to repair a severed tendon.

Hall, who was suspended the first two games of 2011 for receiving improper benefits, rushed 99 times for 405 yards (4.1-yard average) in 10 games while also totaling 114 yards on 12 receptions.

"Jordan Hall is a guy who's experienced and been in game situations," Drayton said. "When there are 107,000 fans out there, he's not going to flinch. He's ready to go."

In his career, Hall has 817 yards and five touchdowns rushing and 21 receptions for 202 yards and four scores. Add his duties on the kick return teams and he's 26th all-time at Ohio State in all-purpose yards at 2,513.

Though Hall missed preseason camp, Drayton is convinced it won't take long for him to regain form.

"Jordan really proved himself in the spring so we're really just trying to get him back," the OSU assistant coach said. "There wasn't a whole lot that he needed to come

out here this fall camp to prove. He's going to be an integral part of this offense."

Without Hall in the backfield the onus has fallen to Hyde, who is hoping to shirk the inconsistency that has plagued him his first two seasons. At 6-0 and 232 pounds, Hyde is capable of bulling his way through a hole or showing some speed to get outside.

"It's time for Carlos Hyde to step up and take the baton and go as hard as he can," Meyer said during media day on Aug. 12.

Hyde is ready for the challenge.

"I'm really looking forward to it," he said. "It's kind of bad Jordan's out, but he'll be back soon. I'm looking forward to it just like last year. I came in and had to step up."

"I feel like my time is now. This year, I feel like I just need to get out there and play my game. I can't wait to get out there the first game."

Smith (6-3, 228) and freshmen Bri'onte Dunn (6-1, 210) and Warren Ball (6-1, 215) may also compete with Hyde for carries, especially with Hall out during the early part of the nonconference schedule.

The problem for Drayton and the other coaches in getting proper evaluations of the backups is their limitations with the play-book right now. He said only Hall and Hyde are among the backs to have an understanding of what is going on.

"You've got Bri'onte Dunn, who's really had a good, physical camp. With the ball in his hands he's really good," Drayton said. "It's the other things he needs to get honed – like the protection."

"Warren Ball – just got off the boat. He's hearing this stuff for the first time. He's getting a feel for the intensity for the first time. Rod Smith is just learning the offense."

Smith had a big first game against Akron in 2011 by getting the handoff 18 times for 74 yards and his lone touchdown of the year. However, he had two fumbles early in the season and he dropped quickly down the depth chart. He got only 11 more carries for 42 yards the rest of the way and even was switched to linebacker for a period of time.

There was talk that he considered transferring after the season, but he recently shot down the rumors.


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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: RUNNING BACKS

Hyde Emerges Stronger, As Starter At RB

It was said of Carlos Hyde that he had "jelly fat" and was "lazy."

And those comments came from within the Ohio State football team.

If the junior running back from Naples, Fla., can handle those hits, then getting hit by would-be tacklers should be no problem.

Hyde is expected to handle the workload until senior Jordan Hall returns from offseason foot surgery for the second or third game.

If that's the case, Hyde hopes this season progresses better than 2011 when he filled in for suspended Dan "Boom" Herron for the first six games but saw limited action after Herron returned against Illinois.

Hyde (6-0, 232) gained 566 yards on 106 carries and scored six times for the season. He rushed for 104 yards and two touchdowns, including a 63-yarder, against Nebraska in game six and notched a career-high 105 yards and a TD vs. Indiana in the ninth game.

"Last year was like a roller coaster," Hyde said. "Sometimes I'm out there and had good games, then the next game I don't get in at all. I got down about it like in the Illinois game, but a couple of older guys

told me to be patient, saying, 'Your time is going to come soon.' I just sat back and was just patient.

"Then I had another opportunity against Indiana, and I had a good game against them. I was just being patient the rest of the year after that, just waiting for my turn."

He feels that time is now with Hall out of the lineup. Hyde shed about eight pounds in the offseason, and quarterback Braxton Miller famously said he lost his "jelly fat."

Hyde's new physique and better attitude were noticed by running backs coach Stan Drayton, who kept an eye on him last year when he was coaching the wide receivers.

"I thought he was a little lazy as a football player, quite honestly," Drayton said. "I'm sure he'll tell you the same thing. One thing he's improved on is his approach to the game. His passion and energy level are through the roof right now. He's really escalated his value to this football team."

In his first season as the Buckeyes' head coach, Urban Meyer is also expecting big things from Hyde.

"He's got the tools," Meyer said. "He's a big, strong, fast player. This is the defining moment of Carlos Hyde's career. It's either yes or no. There can't be any more gray area."

Drayton likes the way Hyde has asserted himself in the running backs room in the absence of Hall.

"Carlos Hyde is the one who's really stepped his game up," Drayton said. "He really has. He's answered the bell. He's trying to become the leader of that group with Jordan out."

"He's really brought a physical component to his game right now that we all enjoy. He's really set the bar for some of these younger backs like a Bri'onte Dunn and a Warren Ball and a Rod Smith."

Before Hyde could take charge he had to make sure he knew what he doing. Meyer's spread offense is different from what Ohio State was used to, and Hyde's first look at the playbook was daunting.

"I was confused," Hyde said. "I was like, 'What is this?' Coming from the offense that we ran last year to this, I was like, 'Oh, I don't know how I'm going to learn this.' I had to, though, and in the spring I caught on pretty quick. It worked out pretty well."

"This offense is actually pretty easy as a running back than what you might think it is. It's not bad at all. They tell you which way to go, tell you where to go. Just do it."

— Craig Merz

Dunn, an AP first-team Division I all-stater his last two seasons at Canton (Ohio) GlenOak who ran for 5,479 yards in his career, has speed and power.

"He brings a lot of value to this team," Drayton said of Dunn. "No. 1, he's going to be an integral part of our special teams. He's earned the right to be a part of this team. He has the capability to be a big-time back. Is he there yet, though? Absolutely not."

That's because the underclassmen lack the experience that sets Hyde apart.

"I kind of have a little more weight on my shoulders since Jordan's out," Hyde said. "But we have Rod and Bri'onte Dunn and Warren Ball. I'm sure those guys are going to step up. We'll be fine. We have to get out there and execute this fall."

"All the running backs, except for Jordan, we all came out and did drills almost every day (this summer). Working on jump cuts and stuff, pass blocking. Getting ready."

Drayton loves that he has three players vying to back up Hyde.

"If they're competing for that spot, I know they're all getting better," he said.

But it sounds as if Smith is not willing to concede that Hyde will be the first choice at the start of the season.

"There's no starting role given out yet," the OSU sophomore said. "Whoever gets the hot foot, that's who's going to be in the game. When it's your time, you have to go out there and give it your best. I've never been afraid to compete."

Hyde said despite the competition all of the running backs have a common objective.

"Our goal is to go 12-0," he said. "Even though we can't go to a bowl game, we still have to get out there and play. We're going to go out there and play and have a chip on our shoulders because we can't go to a bowl game. Let the world know who the Buckeyes are this year."

"I came to Ohio State for one reason," Smith said. "We're the best. That's what we do. We play football. Hopefully we're getting back on top soon."

He does admit that transitioning into Meyer's new system has been daunting.

"It's harder than last season because since I've been here we had a different type of offense," Smith said. "It's different but you've got to go with it and learn a lot of stuff."

Drayton hopes the talented back catches on soon.

"We still haven't seen Rod Smith's full capability because he's still learning the offense," the OSU assistant said. "Some guys learn it quick. Some guys it takes a little longer. He's an extremely talented young man, but you're not seeing all of his abilities come out because he doesn't have a firm grasp of the offense."

It may take awhile for the freshmen as well, but Smith is willing to lend a hand wherever possible.

"It's good to see the young people come up," he said. "You've just got to

be there, help them out with what they need. At the same time, you're competing against the old guys and the young guys. It's all about competition. We've got good chemistry in the meeting room. Everything's fine."

Ball is from Columbus DeSales and, in the summer of 2010, became the second commitment to this year's freshman class at Ohio State. He rushed for 1,232 yards and 29 touchdowns as a senior and was named first-team Division III all-state by The Associated Press.

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: WIDE RECEIVERS

Receivers Have Much To Prove This Season

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Stressing that he didn't spend much time analyzing last season's on-the-field results, Urban Meyer knew the statistics were more than enough to tell the story of Ohio State's passing attack a year ago.

So naturally it didn't take the Buckeyes' head coach long to identify areas of vast concern once the first practices of the spring commenced. Already known for his honest, blunt evaluations, Meyer didn't hold back on the wide receivers.

Whether it was the head coach's spring comment referring to the passing attack as a "clown show" or directly saying the wide receivers were the rawest position players he's coached in his career, it is clear that identifying offensive playmakers has been an ongoing priority for the coaching staff.

"My gosh, do we need a guy like that to step up to do something," Meyer said, describing the team's lack of proven playmaking ability at the wide receiver position.

Ohio State's statistical output from 2011 hasn't been forgotten. The team had three players tie for the reception lead, each of whom caught only 14 passes the entire season. Meyer didn't find it necessary to hide how stunned he was about the output from the receivers – or lack thereof – in his first meetings with the media.

Now as the wideouts progress through

fall camp fighting to play the position to Meyer's liking – which has yet to be accomplished – that statistic has become a stigma. Brought up intentionally or just in the process of regular conversation, the number 14 has become equal parts motivation and embarrassment.

Either way, wide receivers coach Zach Smith knows if that number isn't shattered this year, Ohio State's offense won't be a pretty thing to watch. The receivers' readiness for the Sept. 1 season opener against Miami (Ohio) is a must.

"There's definitely pressure," Smith said. "Obviously it has been world-renowned from the head coach to me to anyone that talks about it. There's pressure on the group. It gives them an opportunity, and you kind of see who thrives under that pressure and who doesn't. A lot of them have embraced that as an opportunity."

The Buckeyes are most certainly counting on sophomore quarterback Braxton Miller to take a big step in his second year as a starter, but the wide receivers will go a long way in determining if the team can pass the ball effectively and consistently.

In Meyer's new spread offense, the Buckeyes will rely on the run game as much as Ohio State teams of the past – it just will look different. However, the team will depend on the passing attack to have regular big-play ability to open up all phases of the diverse offense.



JOSH WINSLOW

IN THE SPOTLIGHT – More will be expected from sophomore Evan Spencer (16) and the rest of the Ohio State wide receivers group in 2012.

Smith is still in the process of identifying which players in his position room are the ones most ready to take the lead in making those plays. The pressure for wide receivers to perform could be at an all-time high at Ohio State.

"It is a very positive thing for the group and some individual kids," Smith said. "They see it as an opportunity to be more of a focal point of the offense and catch footballs and actually touch the ball more than 14 times in a season."

"They have a chance to do things they wanted to do and every receiver is the same. They want to touch the ball every single play. You tell a kid, 'Hey, if you do what you're supposed to do and you're a great player, you're going to touch the ball a lot this year.' That's pressure, but if you don't play receiver for that pressure, then you're at the wrong place."

Smith identified junior Corey "Philly" Brown and sophomore Devin Smith as the two players who have stood out the most this fall. Generally assumed to be the team's top two options, the duo understands that anyone who can prove to be a consistent playmaking threat will jump ahead on the depth chart.

Whether it is senior Jake Stoneburner – who just made the move from tight end to wide receiver – or such others as junior Chris Fields, sophomores Evan Spencer, Verlon Reed and Tyrone Williams, and freshmen Michael Thomas, Riquan Southward and Frank Epitropoulos, everyone knows spots are up for grabs and competition has been keen.

"Really, the group as a whole has taken the right steps," Zach Smith said. "I would never say it is comfortable, but I feel good about the guys we have and where we're going to be."

Looking For Playmakers

Experience isn't a strength of any in the group, but Brown returns as one of the position's elders. One of the three players who caught 14 passes a year ago, the 6-0, 186-pound receiver has made strides that imply that he's a leading candidate to catch many more this season.

Brown suffered through minor injuries during spring football and was able to perform at only roughly 80 percent. Now fully healthy in the fall, he has shown glimpses of the playmaker the coaching staff is working diligently to identify.

"He has done an unbelievable job and is

a different player really than he was in the spring," Zach Smith said. "Philly Brown has come back from an injury, and now all of a sudden you're seeing what I hoped to see in the spring when he was about 80 percent. He has the ability to do some big things for us."

Brown racked up only 205 receiving yards a year ago and hasn't been shy about things he needs to work on. Lack of physicality – or not having the killer instinct to go up and grab a pass out of the realm of defenders – is the key thing he feels he's improved on during the offseason.

Now that Brown has grasped the impact he'll have on a unit starving for a playmaker – and a leader – the junior is confident his time to take the next step in his career has finally come.

"It is big for our offense," he said. "We have to have a passing game and we have to have some wideouts step up. We can run the ball 30 times if (Coach Meyer) wants to, but that's not the ideal offense he wants to run."

"You can see it coming out here day after day. You can see the improvement on our weaknesses. Every day we did get better in the summer and it is showing. Our whole group has improved majorly. It is going to be good if we keep going in the right direction. I feel like I am ready to make plays for this team this year."

Devin Smith, one of the team's biggest playmakers from a year ago, will certainly have the chance to build on the success he had in limited action as a freshman.

Another one of the wide receivers who hauled in 14 catches, Smith led the team in yardage (294) and had four touchdown receptions. The 6-1, 200-pound sophomore likely made the biggest play of Ohio State's season a year ago when he caught a 40-yard touchdown pass from Miller in the final minute of the Wisconsin game to help lift the Buckeyes to a big home win over the Badgers.

Smith hopes his freshman season is just a starting point to what will eventually be a storied Ohio State career.

"I made sure that I worked hard every single day to get better and every opportunity that I could, I tried to do something," he said of his offseason. "Fortunately, some things happened for me last year, which I'm very grateful for. I think the whole experience for me is great. Me getting in the game and all the plays that I've had, I think it's prepared me for this season."

While Zach Smith has expressed confi-

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: WIDE RECEIVERS

dence in his top two options at wide receiver, the coaching staff brought in some reinforcement at the position with Stoneburner. Though he's spent the majority of his career as a tight end, Stoneburner's best qualities have shone through when he's made plays as a receiver.

Though Stoneburner's role as a wide receiver is still being determined, it looks as if the coaching staff will line up the 6-5, 245-pound senior all over the field. It's the mismatches Stoneburner presents to the defense – specifically because of his size and pass-catching ability – the coaching staff plans to exploit.

Exploring Their Options

Meyer has always emphasized the importance of the "hybrid" position in his offense, most often known for the role running back/wide receiver Percy Harvin played at Florida from 2006-08.

Also known as the H-back, the position was figured to be filled by senior running back Jordan Hall, but he was out for pre-season camp – and could miss up to four games – as he recovers from foot surgery.

"As we start, we don't have that hybrid No. 3," Meyer said. "I call it the No. 3 (because) he's the guy that – one, two, three receivers to the right from the left hash. They can do it all. We don't have that guy right now."

Brown, Devin Smith and Stoneburner have all been mentioned as replacements to be the team's top playmaker at that hybrid position, but running backs coach Stan Drayton said they're the only receivers being considered for that spot.

Brown was figured to be a guy who could play that role given his immense speed, but offensive coordinator Tom Herman said he's limited in his ability to run between the tackles, which could leave the Buckeyes continuing to look for answers at that position.

"Everywhere you go, I think the mark of quality offenses is you don't try to fit square pegs in round holes," Herman said. "You deal with what you have and then you recruit to a philosophy."

"I think the biggest challenge we have as an offensive staff is evaluating what we have honestly – sometimes brutal honesty – in saying 'this is what we have, this is who we are and this is what we can be' without straying from our core tenets of being a spread, no-huddle, up-tempo offense."

In order to play the hybrid position to its full potential, versatility is a must. That player could be asked to carry the ball on a sweep, make a crucial block, run a deep route, or catch a swing pass in the flats. The coaching staff is looking at wide receivers and running backs to find the perfect player.

Hall was the ideal candidate, but Stoneburner could be one of the players who fits the mold early in the season while Hall is recovering. Regardless of where Stoneburner lines up, the senior said he's waited his entire collegiate career for the opportunities he's about to embark on.

"Let's be real – 14 catches isn't going to open many eyes in the NFL with the draft and how they think you can play," Stoneburner told BSB. "I want to touch the ball as much as possible."

Stoneburner still hasn't become the player he envisioned he'd become at Ohio State. A standout wide receiver from Dublin (Ohio) Coffman, Stoneburner thought the move to tight end was a way to mold him into a dynamic pass-catching playmaker.

Three years of playing time later – and only 37 career receptions to show for it – Stoneburner has one final shot to prove he can make plays in the passing game. Meyer, who when he was hired quickly singled

Smith Wants More 'Wow' As Sophomore

Even if Urban Meyer spent his entire summer wondering which wide receiver would step up in the fall – and given the multitude of comments he made about the subject, he probably did – Devin Smith didn't waste much time helping ease the coach's worries about the position group's potential.

It was the Buckeyes' first fall practice and Smith quickly darted up the field on a crisp route. If only for a minute, Meyer's apprehensions were gone as he was left simply saying, "Wow."

"Ran a nine-route," Meyer said of Smith. "It was ridiculous."

It is those types of plays Meyer said he wants to see as the norm rather than the unusual, though he admits that has yet to happen for the Buckeyes' wide receivers. But Smith's route served as hope that Ohio State's passing attack will far exceed last year's that ranked a lowly 115th in the nation.

Now a sophomore, Smith is aiming to leave packed Ohio Stadium crowds with the same feeling he gave Meyer, only on a more consistent basis.

"I do want to be that 'wow guy,'" Smith said. "To be that guy that everybody looks at and looks forward to watching play on Saturdays. I've worked extremely hard this offseason and summer especially, and I've had a good week of camp and I look forward

to keep rolling and progressing and getting better every day."

Ohio State's coaching staff is still in the progress of sorting through which players can be counted on at wide receiver, but position coach Zach Smith isolated Smith and junior Corey "Philly" Brown as the players who have come on this fall.

Though Devin Smith doesn't quite have the experience that Brown claims, the wide receiver showed in his freshman season that he has the ability to be special. Limited in his playing time a year ago, Smith tied for the team's reception lead with 14 catches and had a team-high 294 receiving yards.

Perhaps more so than anyone else, Smith seemingly has an innate big-play ability that coach Stan Drayton pointed out the second the 2011 recruiting class was introduced to the media.

Despite being limited in his catches, the 6-1, 200-pound receiver had four touchdowns. Smith also made perhaps the biggest play of the season last year when he hauled in a last-minute 40-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Braxton Miller to help Ohio State knock off Wisconsin, 33-29, in Ohio Stadium.

Smith hopes his sophomore season is filled with similar highlights.

"I'm used to 14 catches in one game," he said, scoffing at the team-leading reception total he enjoyed last year. "But I knew coming in playing in college was going to

be a totally different thing than in high school."

Miller and Smith sported chemistry last season that seemed natural, leaving many onlookers with the expectation that subsequent seasons will make quite the stage for the duo.

But Miller wasn't shy about pointing out things Smith could have done better a year ago and promises the sophomore wide receiver has turned over a new leaf since the end of last season.

"Sometimes he got antsy, got lazy, but now he's determined to get better and wants to be the best he can be," Miller said of Smith. "He talks about it every day."

Smith competed with the Ohio State track team in the spring, polishing what is sure to be his most significant attribute – speed. Since the commencement of fall camp, the coaching staff has noticed he's taken the next step in positioning himself as one of Ohio State's go-to offensive weapons.

"Devin is a very talented player," Zach Smith said. "He has everything you want. Is he game ready or ready to be the go-to guy? Probably not yet, but he's almost there. It is obviously my job to get him there."

"He's a guy that has everything you want. He has every talent and skill that you could look for. We have to make sure he is at competitive excellence and ready to go make every play come Sept. 1."

– Ari Wasserman

Stoneburner out as one of the best offensive weapons the Buckeyes possess, is giving him that opportunity with the move to full-time receiver.

"Finally," Stoneburner responded when asked what he felt when Meyer was hired. "I love Luke Fickell and I love Jim Tressel – that's why I came here. But I have one more shot at this and (Coach Meyer) is going to use me in every way possible and he is going to get every ounce of talent I have out of me. I have a few more months here, so now I am going to live it up and see what Coach Meyer can do with me."

Plenty Of Depth

Ohio State's top options at wide receiver have seemed to establish themselves, but if there's any position on the team that is continually up for grabs, it is wideout. Reed, one of the team's top performers in fall camp a year ago, feels he can go from overlooked to being a big contributor to this year's offense.

After all, he has been in this position before. A quarterback at Columbus Marion Franklin, the 6-0, 205-pound Reed was somewhat overlooked as he tried to make the transition to wide receiver. In Tressel's final spring practice as head coach, he referred to Reed as a dark horse to be a big playmaker at the position last season.

Tressel's comments proved to have merit, as Reed continued to grow last fall before eventually earning a spot as a starter.

Through five games last year as a starter, Reed caught nine passes for 132 yards, which put him on pace to become OSU's leader in receptions. However, he tore his ACL late in the Buckeyes' 10-7 loss to Michigan State, and his dreams of having a breakout season as a redshirt freshman came to an end.

"It was definitely a tough deal and I had to make a lot of adjustments," Reed said. "Your world changes after an injury like that with your knee. There's a good possibility you'll never play again."

But Reed has made a complete recovery,

and Zach Smith said he's running well enough to not notice the drastic injury he suffered a year ago. Reed, however, is back where he was 12 months ago, as an overlooked player on the depth chart.

"It is just motivation," Reed said. "I have been here before and I don't mind fighting again to get back on the field. We have a lot of really good wide receivers, but I still feel like I can be someone who makes plays for this team. It is just about getting my body right and being ready to get better every day."

The son of former Ohio State running back Tim Spencer, Evan Spencer (6-2, 205) is a player who has seemingly been on the cusp of breaking into the regular rotation. Injuries, however, have slowed Spencer. He was sidelined for most of the spring with a broken bone in his right shoulder and has missed some time this fall with a minor knee issue.

Williams is an intriguing player, though he came to OSU raw talent-wise. The coaches, however, feel his 6-6, 229-pound frame could exploit opposing defenses. Williams struggled with ball-catching skills last season, but Zach Smith said the growth he's seen out of the sophomore in a short time is remarkable.

"Tyrone Williams, this spring, was about as average of a player that you could have had – not because of talent level, just because of how he practiced," Zach Smith said. "He was a guy that was raw – very raw."

"What he has done the last five practices, that kid is a completely different player than what I've seen. He has really, really impressed everyone – the head coach, me, the staff. He still has a way to go, but he is a kid that is kind of drinking the Kool-Aid right now. He's bought in and he's doing things he did not do the first six months we were here and it is encouraging."

If Williams continues to progress, the coaching staff could see using him in special situations. Many envision his tall body as the perfect mismatch against smaller cornerbacks in the red zone.

"There are not many physically gifted

receivers at any program or level that are as gifted as that kid," Zach Smith said. "You talk about a guy that has ability – he has it. He's been catching the ball. I have heard a lot about his ball skill issues, but he's doing well. Really well."

Thomas wasn't around last year when Ohio State struggled, but the freshman is confident he has what it takes to make sure the receivers don't have a relapse. Having enrolled early, Thomas grabbed the attention of Buckeye fans when he grabbed 12 receptions in the team's spring game.

"I was kind of doing that in high school, the same type of numbers, so it wasn't really a big deal to me," Thomas said. "It was just the spring game. I'm ready to play these next 12 games and do the same thing."

Freshmen typically don't have an easy time getting on the field at any position at Ohio State, but Thomas joins the Buckeyes in a unique year. The nephew of former NFL wide receiver Keyshawn Johnson, the 6-2, 198-pound receiver could figure into the plans this year.

"He is in our plans, absolutely," Zach Smith said of Thomas. "We're (close to) game day and right now we have a couple of guys that are close, and he's a guy that needs a little more but hopefully he'll be there and he should be."

It's clear Ohio State has options at the position, but it is just a matter of which players are going to step up. With the season steadily approaching, the coaching staff is patiently waiting to see who will.

"Potential," Herman said when asked what he sees out of the receivers. "We all know in this game that just means you haven't done it yet. At least we have some glimmers of hope at that position, which is encouraging."

"Now it is up to those guys to really pull out that potential and turn that into performance on the field. When you see glimmers of that, it gives you a little bit of hope at night that hopefully potential will turn into performance."

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: TIGHT ENDS/FULLBACKS

New Grouping Hoping For Big 2012 Results

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Pardon the Ohio State tight ends and fullbacks for being a little shell-shocked about their newfound roles under Urban Meyer and his coaching staff. No longer will the two positions be used only as glorified blockers.

It has been a vast change, no doubt – but a welcome one.

"I'd have a hard time referring to how the positions were used in the past, but I know this: Now they're involved in everything," said Tim Hinton, the first-year OSU assistant who oversees both position groups. "They're involved in the run game, the pass game, the screen game. They are there in absolutely every phase of the game and in protections. I love that every second they have to be that involved."

During the course of the past decade, tight end and fullback were two vastly different positions for the Buckeyes, though their main goals were often one and the same.

The tight ends typically took their stance on the line of scrimmage and were used as extra offensive linemen. The fullbacks lined up in the backfield and carried out chief assignments that usually involved being a lead blocker or pass protecting. Playmaking ability – at least with the ball in their hands – wasn't at a premium.

With Meyer's offensive face-lift to the new spread philosophy, things couldn't be more different. The fullbacks and tight ends do a lot of the same things and are often used interchangeably. Playmaking ability now is one of the biggest qualities that could be the determining factor in earning considerable playing time. And the two positions could line up in a variety of different areas and might be used interchangeably.

"So many things can happen with us on the field," sophomore tight end Jeff Heuerman told BSB. "It is exciting. It is a lot more exciting than just going out and blocking power all day long."

"That's the biggest thing about Coach Meyer's offense. There are so many different things you can do with it and so many different ways you can run stuff. The tight end is

the center of a lot of that, so we get to do a lot of stuff."

Like everything that has happened with the program over the last 20 months, Heuerman and the rest of the roster couldn't have predicted how incredibly different their responsibilities would be when contrasted to what they were recruited for.

As a result, the typical tight ends and fullbacks Ohio State's previous staff recruited could be a dying breed. Luckily for Meyer, players such as senior fullback Zach Boren, Heuerman and redshirt freshman tight end Nick Vannett are versatile enough to carry out the head coach's vision of what should be brought to their positions.

Vannett and Heuerman, who came to OSU in the same recruiting class, both have the opportunity to play more than was expected maybe a month ago because the coaching staff recently moved senior Jake Stoneburner to wide receiver. Stoneburner has spent the previous three years at Ohio State as a tight end, and with the exception of a few games here and there, much of his dynamic pass-catching ability was lost in the process.

Stoneburner, still one of the team's leading receivers last year, will focus solely on that part of his game, and his move has opened the door for Heuerman and Vannett to get on the field quicker.

"It is an awesome opportunity," Heuerman said. "Jake and I are great friends, but it will be nice to know that I may have a bigger role in playing this year. It makes it a lot more fun knowing things can really open up for us."

Given Heuerman's size at 6-5 and 250 pounds, he came to Ohio State as the ideal option at tight end. Coordinated enough to catch the occasional pass, Heuerman's strength at the position was making and completing point-of-contact blocks.

Though Heuerman still is a step ahead of Vannett in making those crucial blocks, the sophomore said he has felt tremendous growth in his ability to make plays in the passing game. Heuerman understands it's a must if he's going to play the position to Meyer's liking.

"Coach Meyer has taught me a ton of stuff about the whole pass game that I never even



JOSH WINSLOW

NEW THREAT? – Senior fullback Zach Boren (44) could be a bigger part of the Ohio State offense this season.

knew existed," Heuerman said. "Coming from a run offense in high school and coming here my first year, we didn't do a lot of throwing the ball or stuff. The whole thing, Coach Meyer, he knows the offense inside and out, and stuff he teaches us I don't think many other people teach it that in-depth."

While completing a redshirt year last season, Vannett worked diligently on improving his ability to block. The 6-6, 255-pounder came to Ohio State as a more proficient receiver than Heuerman.

Isolated by Meyer as a player who has made some of the biggest strides of any player since spring football, Vannett could be on the verge of obtaining a rather large role in this offense in his redshirt freshman season.

"Nick Vannett is one of the most improved players," Meyer said. "He's going to be right in the middle of this thing, and I didn't see

that at all in the spring. If you noticed, I didn't even bring his name up because he really was not a very functional guy in the spring. I love giving credit where credit is due."

Though Heuerman and Vannett are still very different players, Hinton feels as if the two complement each other quite well. That should lead to roles for both players.

"The thing about Jeff and Nick is each of them – really in reality each of them do one part of their phase better than the other, but it is a nice complement," Hinton said. "The things that Jeff doesn't do as well as Nick, he does better on the parts that Nick doesn't do as well."

Perhaps the biggest changes in store will be for Boren, who spent his first three years with the Buckeyes making the majority of his plays as a lead blocker. Boren, however, is deceptively athletic and someone the coaching staff has raved about when describing his playmaking ability.

No longer will the Buckeyes be utilizing an offensive scheme primarily out of the I-formation where isolation runs – the bread and butter of the offense during most of the Jim Tressel/Jim Bollman era – were typically executed with Boren leading the way.

Boren hasn't had much opportunity to prove that he's a skilled athlete who can handle more than just hitting people. He carried the ball only once in his career, though he does have 20 career catches in three years.

Meyer and offensive coordinator Tom Herman both have track records for getting creative with ball handlers, and there seems to be no question Boren will eclipse his career rushing totals early in the Buckeyes' season.

"I am really excited," Boren said. "I have been working with the tailbacks all summer because I am trying to get back into that. It's been a long time since I carried the ball. I was a tailback in high school, but it has been three years. I am excited, though."

Boren said he's touched the ball in practice every day, a far cry from the routine he had become accustomed to in his first three years. Now that he is also one of the team's five co-captains, the 6-1, 245-pound senior is eager to prove that he's more than just a ferocious blocker.

Those selfless yet tough plays Boren has continually made as a lead blocker and a pass protector are the foundation for which the fullback's legacy stands. In his final season with the Buckeyes, his responsibilities will change but not his overall approach to the game.

"I am not going to lose my personality," Boren said. "I am still a tough guy and I still love contact, but I just may be used in different ways than I have become used to in the past few years."

Boren played at 265 pounds last year, but strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marotti has worked with the fullback all summer to make him a more agile player. In the process, Boren dropped about 20 pounds and has become a streamlined version of his old self.

"It is kind of nice for me," Boren said. "I have three years of film of a normal I-formation fullback experience with opening up holes and stuff like that, and I feel like I was kind of successful doing that. Now this year, I will have some film out in open space doing a couple of more things, having the ball in my hands."

"I can do multiple things instead of just putting my head down and going through a hole, which maybe is the persona that I had. I am excited about it. I can't wait to see the things I am going to be doing when the season starts."

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: OFFENSIVE LINE

Line Progressing For Buckeyes

By **MARCUS HARTMAN**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Perhaps no Ohio State unit has undergone more evolution since the final snap of last season than the offensive line. There might not be another position group about which fans are more curious to see the Urban Meyer effect, either.

Often the subject of criticism and frustration from fans during the past decade, the unit has undergone an overhaul under the watch of new head coach Meyer and first-year position coach Ed Warinner.

From the sounds of things, Meyer saw some of the reasons Ohio State fans often wondered what was going on up front with their favorite team for much of the tenure of head coach Jim Tressel and offensive line coach Jim Bollman.

While the standard set by the "three yards and a cloud of dust" days of Woody Hayes was undeniably high, so was the validity of the cries of those who wanted to see more consistency in the holes opened by Bollman's troops in Tressel's power-based, pro-style offense.

Meyer has had few but respectful words for his predecessors on the coaching staff, but he criticized the shape and attitude of the linemen as a group when he arrived on campus in the middle of last winter. He reportedly had some choice words for a handful of individuals in particular, too, but that has remained a guarded house secret.

At any rate, Meyer was singing a different tune by the end of April, saying he felt good about the direction the line had moved in his first four months on the job. Progress from winter workouts carried over into spring practice, and the head coach headed into the summer feeling confident about his starting unit, if not yet the reserves.

While juniors Jack Mewhort (6-6, 312),

Andrew Norwell (6-6, 310), Corey Linsley (6-3, 295) and Marcus Hall (6-5, 315) form the starting lineup from left tackle to right guard, one spot remained open through fall camp leading into the Sept. 1 opener against Miami (Ohio).

That was at right tackle, where senior Reid Fragel (6-8, 310) was listed as the starter following spring practice but could not rest easy thanks to a push from true freshman Taylor Decker (6-7, 313).

The other four starters each had secure jobs, but only one found himself in the same spot he was at the end of the 2011 campaign.

Mewhort moves from right guard, where he started the last eight games after starting the first five at left guard. Norwell began the 2011 season at left tackle but moved to left guard in week six and wound up spending the last eight games there. Hall started the first five games at right guard but was suspended for the Oct. 8 contest at Nebraska for an NCAA rules violation and never returned to the starting lineup. Meanwhile, Linsley enters the starting lineup for the first time in his college career, and neither player battling for the right tackle spot has a start there to his credit.

Warinner, who spent the past two seasons at Notre Dame and is a 29-year veteran of the coaching profession, was happy to see his new charges report to camp looking in shape physically and sharp mentally.

"What a difference there is in this mentality of hitting it in there, being physical and attacking," he said Aug. 10. "I like where we're headed in that direction. Competing, wanting to win, not waiting around looking to see who else is going to make the block. Guys are having fun doing it."

Warinner was particularly happy in August with Hall and Norwell, whose

spring he felt lagged behind Mewhort and Linsley.

"I think Norwell and Marcus Hall have closed the gap to where all four of them are about the same level," the OSU assistant said. "Are they where they need to be? We've got a lot more practices to get them there, but there's not a big disparity between the starters."

Righty Not Tidy

The competition at right tackle still looked too close to call as BSB was going to press with about a week remaining before the season opener.

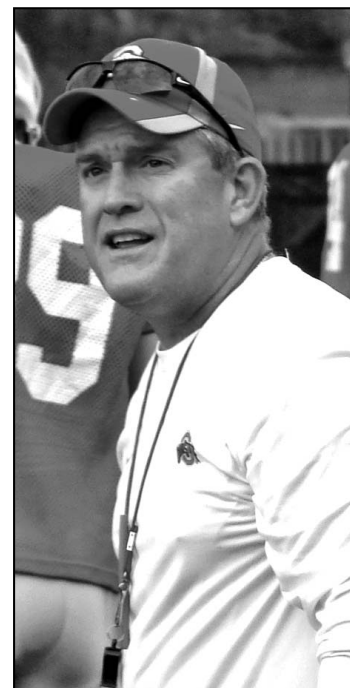
Perhaps adding difficulty to Warinner's decision was the fact the skills and deficiencies displayed by both Fragel and Decker were not easily compared and contrasted.

"They both have growing pains or things that they're working on there that are relative to the newness of the position or the newness to college football," Warinner said. "They're even in terms of who should be first team and who shouldn't be first team, but they're not even in terms of what their strengths and weaknesses are. There are certain things Taylor needs to work on, certain things Reid needs to work on, so we're just going to focus on those and see who comes quickest in their needs."

Fragel spent three seasons as a tight end before Ohio State's switch to a spread offense prompted him to think he might be better off moving closer to the center. Decker, meanwhile, was still in high school this time a year ago.

As such, both have plenty to learn, as Meyer pointed out Aug. 12.

"It's not a battle of All-Big Tens yet," the head coach said. "It's guys that are still learning. One guy is learning how to play it, one guy is a freshman. They're trying hard. They're talented guys, great people, but our production at right tackle is not where it needs to be right now."



MATTHEW HAGER

NEW LEADER – Offensive line coach Ed Warinner said he was happy with his unit's progress during preseason training camp.

They both bring good size but continue to refine their skills.

Fragel said he feels he has an advantage physically thanks to three extra years in a college weight room, but he admitted that learning pass blocking has proved no easy task.

Decker has been furiously adding weight to his frame for more than a year but said he is still developing strength to go along with his athleticism.

"When I was younger in high school,

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: OFFENSIVE LINE

Linsley's Turnaround Ends With Starting Role

I was a real thin guy who didn't lift a lot of weights, so just letting my body fill out more should help me as far as physically competing," Decker said.

He is also learning a new style of offense and pass blocking techniques that are new to him while getting acclimated to college life.

"I try to come off the ball well, study hard and know everything," said Decker, who identified the offense he played in at Vandalia (Ohio) Butler as a double tight end, power attack. "Reid does those things well also. I just need to work on building upper-body strength. And as I said before, I'm really new in my technique especially in pass blocking because I've never done kick steps before coming to Ohio State."

Pass protection is also somewhat new for Fragel, who proved to be a powerful run blocker during his days as a tight end but rarely had to drop back to protect the quarterback when the Buckeyes chose to go to the air earlier in his career.

"That's been my biggest focus – every day getting better in pass protection," Fragel said. "So far, I think I've done a good job with that and getting better every day."

Feeling comfortable with his body, Fragel said the adjustment upstairs is No. 1 for him.

"Right now for me, it's all mental," he said. "I know in my mind physically I can block anybody. It's just learning new footwork for pass protection. Our offense is different in the aspect of where the tackles have to know just as much as the quarterback does, so not only learning a new offense your first year at tackle and the responsibilities that come with that adds some challenge to it, but we're jelling right now and I feel great right now."

Part of his education has come via fellow senior John Simon, an All-America candidate at defensive end who possesses a formidable combination of strength and quickness. He is a relentless rusher who does not take any repetition in practice for granted.

"That's the way you want it," Fragel said. "As bad as it sounds, you've got to block the best guy in the country (but) that's just great practice there. You're not going to get many guys better than Johnny Simon or Michael Bennett. They're going to give you their best, and in turn you're going to give them your best. You've got to react to the best, so it's just kind of helping us all around in the end."

Fragel looks for the competition from the other side of the ball and from within his position meeting room to push him as he enters his last year in scarlet and gray.

"I personally respond well to pressure," he said. "(Decker is) a really great athlete, a great kid. I respect him. It is a battle. Every day I'm trying to get better and better to try to make it less of a battle. At the end of the day, I think the better man will win, and that will be your starting right tackle for Ohio State."

Backups Busy As Well

August saw plenty of competition for spots on the depth chart behind the starters with one player standing out in the eyes of Warinner early in camp.

That was Antonio Underwood, a 6-2, 306-pound sophomore who took over as the No. 2 center with projected backup Jacoby Boren (6-2, 287), a true freshman, still recovering from spring shoulder surgery.

Warinner identified Underwood as his top choice to back up all three interior line

In a year of significant change for the Ohio State offense, at least one constant remains – the center is still among the most important positions on the field.

The new coaching staff has turned to Corey Linsley to man the role, one the junior from Youngstown (Ohio) Boardman would not be able to handle without undergoing a significant change himself.

A starting gig at Ohio State has been a long time in the making for the 6-3, 295-pounder, and the way he tells it, the chance almost never came.

Linsley came to Columbus as a four-star prospect in Ohio State's top-ranked 2009 recruiting class. Scout.com rated him the eighth-best offensive guard in the country, but he took a redshirt during his first year on campus.

With veteran starters back at center and both guard spots in 2010, he played in six games in 2010 as a reserve. His shot to win a starting role for the 2011 campaign was undermined by a two-game suspension for violation of team rules, but he played 10 games as a reserve guard.

When the 2011 season came to an end, he found himself at a personal crossroads just as the program was about to undergo a major shift in philosophy with the hiring of Urban Meyer, six new full-time assistants and a new training staff.

Fast-forward to August, and Linsley both looks and talks like a new man, but the journey was not an easy one.

positions while the loser of the right tackle competition would be the first man off the bench on the outside.

A relatively high overall number of scholarship linemen – 14 despite the departure of five players from the position group in the offseason – assured there would be plenty of competition, but none of Warinner's options has much experience.

Aside from the six players still in the running to start, Ohio State has eight scholarship offensive linemen, and all are sophomores or freshmen.

Two of those players are in year one on their current side of the ball. Sophomore Darryl Baldwin (6-5, 300-pound) and redshirt freshman Chase Farris (6-4, 290) spent the beginning of their careers on defense.

Meyer suggested Baldwin make the switch during spring while Farris took his first snaps on offense at the start of preseason camp. Baldwin is a tackle while Farris plays guard, but they have been able to talk about their experiences making similar moves.

"They needed more people on the offensive line, bigger more lean tackles who could move, so they brought it up to me when they got here," Baldwin said. "I told (Farris) just give it a good chance. You'll like it eventually. It's hard at first, but it's not a bad transition at all."

Also in the mix at guard were redshirt freshman Tommy Brown (6-4, 315) and true freshman Pat Elflein (6-3, 290). A three-star recruit from Pickerington (Ohio) North, Elflein missed the start of camp recovering from a surgery to remove a cyst.

Boren, who prepped across town from Elflein at Pickerington Central and enrolled in January, also hoped to get enough work in during preseason camp to reclaim his status as the No. 2 center. That was something that remained on track when he talked to BSB on Aug. 12.

"I just wasn't happy with where I was," he said. "Last year I felt like it was my year and it didn't happen. Then I started to look at why and I started to see I really needed to apply myself."

"My back was really against the wall, I felt like."

Linsley made the decision to pull himself out of his doldrums even before the new staff took over in January, but he quickly realized there would be no turning back thanks to the demanding program of strength and conditioning director Mickey Marotti. That carried over into spring practice with the first chance to practice with Meyer and Ed Warinner, the Buckeyes' fiery new offensive line coach.

"Coach Meyer has always said the center has to be the guy on the offense," Linsley said. "You've got to get up to the line and call out the calls. We basically tell everybody what they're doing in the offensive line."

"One day in the spring, I wasn't feeling it. I wasn't doing as well as I should have and Coach Meyer was like, 'Our centers don't slouch over. Our centers aren't quiet. If you want to play here, you've got to do this.' That's what really changed it for me."

Warinner did not coach Linsley last season, but he is well aware the junior went through a personal metamorphosis over the past year.

"Absolutely. He's totally committed to this team, totally committed to what the philosophy of the program is," Warinner

said. "He's worked extremely hard. We love how he practices, we love how he works. He's on our leadership committee. He's brought a lot to the table. He is the apex of the offense, and he's accepted that role. All of his behaviors – you just love what he's doing on and off the field."

Warinner called Linsley – along with classmate Jack Mewhort – one of the top two linemen on the team during spring practice, and Linsley picked up where he left off when preseason camp began.

He also added mentor to his title, taking true freshman lineman Joey O'Connor under his wing as part of Meyer's "Big Brother" program connecting veterans and younger players.

Linsley used examples from his own experiences to help O'Connor, a Colorado native, who was being groomed as a future center before knee surgery ended his season prematurely in mid-August.

"Corey's a great guy," O'Connor said. "If I need a ride at 2 in the morning, he will come get me. He's like an older brother to me already before we even had the mentoring program. He teaches me the plays and we hang out outside of football. We just really have bonded together."

Though O'Connor's time will have to wait, it appears to have arrived for Linsley. His next chance to show off his progress will come Sept. 1 when the Buckeyes open the season with Miami (Ohio).

– Marcus Hartman

program and how we practice – it would come. I like where we're headed."

More than learning new plays or a new scheme, the line has been challenged to keep up with the relentless tempo Meyer and offensive coordinator Tom Herman want to establish.

That required a redoubling of conditioning efforts, one everyone seemed to agree has paid off already.

"I feel like it's the same principles," Linsley said. "We're still coming off the ball, doing everything hard-nosed. We're trying to do it as best we can, but it was just a new style, new tempo, of course. That was a huge deal because we never used to do that."

"Coach Warinner is just pushing the heck out of us, and I think that's a testament to why it doesn't matter what position we play. I think that's why we're going to be really good."

Warinner gave credit to the strength and conditioning staff as well as new team nutritionist Sarah Wick.

"We've lost body fat, we've gained muscle, and we've improved their cardiovascular conditioning so we have a team that can go no huddle," the OL coach said. "We can go fast-paced for two hours and have no trouble maintaining a good tempo. I really like that. Our guys are lean. We don't have guys that have their bellies hanging over their belts. We don't want that."

Personal appearance aside, Warinner has already heard that fans want to see a line that not only makes holes but does so with some authority. He is optimistic he will be able to deliver that this fall.

"Time will tell," he said. "The pieces are there. If they continue to do what they're doing, keep improving, stay humble, work hard, continue with that great attitude of being coachable and just go out there and compete, then they can definitely be a line that we'll be proud of and a very strong unit."