

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE OVERVIEW

Defense Going On Offense After Tough 2011

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

A familiar face will run the 2012 Ohio State defense, but he will face a unique task.

For the first time since 2004, the Buckeyes enter a season coming off a campaign in which they were not first or second in the Big Ten in scoring defense. The sixth-place showing last season represents just one of several notable drops from a decade of dominance for a group that has been known as the Silver Bullets since the mid-1990s.

The 21.0 points per game the defense yielded last year were the most allowed since 1999 when Ohio State gave up 23.9 points per game, and not coincidentally, that was also the most recent year the Buckeyes failed to post a winning record before 2011.

The 323.5 yards allowed per game were also the most since 2004 (332.0), the last time the Buckeyes gave up more than 300 per contest.

That means the defense is in real need of improvement as opposed to the refinement that marked the annual task of Jim Heacock, who was not retained by new head coach Urban Meyer after 16 years in Columbus, including the last seven seasons as defensive coordinator.

Nobody had to tell Luke Fickell the 2011 Buckeye defense was not up to the standards of recent vintages, and the former interim head coach and current defensive coordinator took it upon himself to make sure his players were aware.

"We put those stats up in front of our guys the other day to say, 'This is what the expectation this year is at Ohio State,'" Fickell said. "You came here for a reason. Here's where we've been the last 10 years defensively. That's the standard you're held to."

Meyer also made it clear he expects more from the stop troops in his first year as head coach of the Buckeyes than he saw last season. The point was driven home to him when he happened to catch part of a rebroadcast of the 2011 Ohio State-Michigan game while in Chicago for the Big Ten's annual Media Days in late July.

As the Wolverines piled up 40 points and

444 total yards in a six-point victory, Meyer said he did not recognize the team in the silver helmets with the scarlet stripes down the middle.

"I watched it for about 45 minutes," he told reporters July 27. "Defensively that wasn't the Ohio State defense that I'm used to seeing. Ohio State for a decade had as good a defense as anybody in America. Last year was not that. We did not have a good defense last year."

Familiar Personnel

Experience is not a problem at the front or back of the unit.

Three starters return on the line – seniors John Simon and Garrett Goebel along with junior Johnathan Hankins – and new starter Michael Bennett got his feet wet last year as a true freshman who played in all 13 games as a reserve.

Behind them, a group of three sophomores and five freshmen spent preseason camp competing for playing time that is left over from the starters. They have plenty of ability – four are former five-star high school recruits and two were four-star prospects – but it remains to be seen how quickly they develop into contributors.

In the meantime, the coaching staff is hoping for the healthy return of one more senior – Nathan Williams.

A starter in 2010 at end, Williams was supposed to be a linchpin of the defense last season as a senior but was lost for the season to a knee injury in the season opener. He eventually underwent microfracture surgery and an aggressive rehab program while taking a medical redshirt season. Everyone believes he is on track to help the Buckeyes this year, but how much remains to be seen.

"I think if you want to make a strength stronger, it's Nathan Williams if he's able (to play)," Meyer said Aug. 12. "We're counting on him."

The defensive line as a whole has 68 starts to its credit, a figure that barely bests the 62 possessed by the members of the secondary. That group returns all four starters – cornerbacks Bradley Roby and Travis Howard and safeties C.J. Barnett and Christian Bryant – as well as top reserve Orhian Johnson at safety.



MATTHEW HAGER

PLENTY OF EXPERIENCE – The Ohio State football team's defense features several returning starters, including defensive linemen Johnathan Hankins (52) and Garrett Goebel (53).

That is not to say anyone is resting on prior accomplishments, however, in part because for once the Ohio State defense did not accomplish much in 2011.

"That's good and bad," Meyer said of returning a majority of starters. "If they were ranked No. 2 in America on defense, that's really good."

Linebacker is another story.

The slate is mostly clean for a group that includes no one with a full season as a starter

to his credit and only one player with more than sophomore eligibility. Expectations remain high for the linebackers, however, both as a result of the Ohio State legacy and recruiting rankings.

Etienne Sabino is a former five-star recruit and the only senior among the linebackers. He is scheduled to be joined in the starting lineup by sophomores Curtis Grant and Ryan Shazier, five- and four-star recruits, respectively. All six of the reserves on scholarship



conrads
college gifts
your number 1 stop buckeye shop

316 West Lane Ave Columbus, OH 43201 | 888-443-8678 | conrads.com

URBAN ERA
Originals

\$15.95 EACH

Get your URBAN MEYER gear at Conrads

B7-33: Urban Era Schedule Tshirt

MEMBER OF URBANATION

THE LEGEND IS BACK!

B7-25: Urbanation Legend Tshirt

f Like us.
facebook.com/conradscollegegifts

follow us.
twitter.com/conradsosu

watch us.
youtube.com/conradsosu

GREEK CORNER

1305 W. Lane Ave
Upper Arlington
(614) 456-1100
www.GreekCornerUS.com

\$5 OFF
order of \$25 or more
Valid with coupon. Not valid with other offers. Expires 12/31/12 BSB

\$10 OFF
order of \$50 or more
Valid with coupon. Not valid with other offers. Expires 12/31/12 BSB

Sunday Kids Eat FREE
with each adult meal

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE OVERVIEW

are freshmen, including four-star prospects Josh Perry, Camren Williams and David Perkins.

Meyer wants to see those players remind fans of what they saw from the likes of James Laurinaitis, A.J. Hawk, Brian Rolle, Ross Homan and Matt Wilhelm. All earned first-team All-Big Ten status during the previous decade with Laurinaitis, Hawk and Wilhelm also being named All-Americans. Laurinaitis and Hawk were also each named Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year.

"Who's played linebacker at Ohio State? I'd put that group against any group in America, maybe in college football history," Meyer said. "I didn't see that when I watched our guys play last year."

Coverage Tweak On Tap

How much the change in leadership within the defense will be reflected in scheme alterations remains to be seen.

Fickell and Heacock always stressed that the defensive game plans of the past few years were group efforts, and views of practice during spring football and preseason camp did not reveal much new despite the hiring of cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs and safeties coach/co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers. Mike Vrabel was retained from last season and has taken over coaching the defensive line after leading the linebackers last season.

"You know how we've always been here – it's been a collaborative group," Fickell said Aug. 21. "Coach Withers has brought a lot of really, really good things. We've done a lot of what he's done in the past. And Coach Coombs comes in and he brings in a lot of different things that he's done."

Withers came from North Carolina while Coombs made the move up Interstate 71 from the University of Cincinnati.

"The defense is similar to what we've done, but also it has its own touches," Fickell continued. "We want to be on the same page all together, so it's not any one man's defense. It's a group effort. We've kept the terms as close as possible for the guys."

The base set remains a 4-3 with the end spots being distinct from one another.

On one side, the team deploys a "Leo" end on the weak side who is generally a smaller

(245-270 pounds), more athletic player than the strongside end, who often checks in at 280 pounds or more.

Inside, a nose tackle is set to tie up the middle of the line while the other tackle – known as a 3-technique because he lines up between the offensive guard and tackle – is intended to be more of a playmaker.

The Buckeyes spent the spring and the preseason with the 6-2, 263-pound Simon playing the Leo and Bennett (6-3, 285) at strongside defensive end. Goebel returned to his 2011 role at nose tackle and Hankins did the same at 3-technique, but that is not the lineup the coaches prefer to see this fall.

The 6-3, 249-pound Williams is a wild card who could send Simon back to his more natural strong side – and Bennett to a reserve role in all likelihood – and give the front more speed overall if he is able to return to his 2010 form when he had five sacks and 12 tackles for loss. During mid-camp, Williams pronounced himself at "90 percent" health-wise, but he hadn't yet mixed it up in full-contact drills.

Meyer said the difference Williams would make could be the deciding factor in whether or not the line is merely good or something special.

"If he doesn't come back, I think we'll still be good," the head coach said, "but I just think Nathan brings that much sting to you and also experience."

Whatever the lineup and rotation winds up to be, Fickell and his players expect the front to be the bedrock of the team.

"We know that – it has to be," the coach said. "Those guys have some experience. We have a little bit of depth up there."

He also looks for it to play more aggressively this year than last, when it was stout against the run but did not put great pressure on opposing passers.

The return of Williams – or the emergence of young edge rushers such as sophomore Steve Miller or freshman Noah Spence – would aid the achievement of that goal, but the back seven is also expected to do its part via both scheme and execution.

One of the tweaks to the defense is expected to be an emphasis on "off man" coverage. Instead of dropping into zones or tightening up in classic bump-and-run

man coverage, the four defensive backs are expected to employ essentially a combination of both. Each reads a different potential offensive target, putting them in position to break on short passes in front of them or turn and run with a receiver or tight end running a vertical route.

The technique also makes run reads easier as the defensive backs already have an eye on the backfield and can react more quickly if no receiving threats present themselves.

"It's an aggressive style," Fickell said. "It's the ability to play off sometimes in the back end and still allow those guys to have great vision and play on the football."

Improving Through Growth

Players and coaches alike seemed to agree the greater factor with regard to how good the Ohio State defense will be this year will be execution as opposed to X's and O's.

Simply playing better should go farther than anything in creating better results. That means eliminating missed tackles and missed assignments while playing more as a team.

"We came into preseason with the whole mentality that we didn't play the (Silver Bullet) ball we needed to last season," Johnson said. "We let those guys down. I'm not saying we didn't play great ball or great defense, but it wasn't 'bullet ball' or anything like that, so we just wanted to come in here and work on it."

Fellow safety Barnett agreed, citing a lack of maturity and communication problems with some of the struggles.

"I think we've gotten better with our communication and our relationships and just knowing what each other are thinking out there," he said. "With youth and inexperience comes mistakes, and that was shown last year."

Fickell also lamented the lack of a defined leader to take control when things went wrong in 2011, something he talked about earlier in the month.

"You've got to have confidence in what you're doing," Fickell said. "Sometimes I think that was our biggest problem last year defensively. We just didn't have anybody who could get the thing set."

He looks for a linebacker to step up in that capacity this time around, preferably Grant because he will play the middle. Sabino is slated to start at the Sam (strong-side) linebacker while Shazier will man the Will position on the weak side.

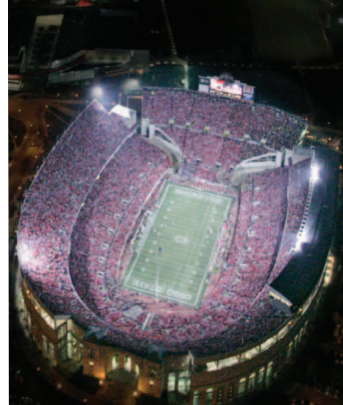
"You can have a John Simon in front of you or a C.J. Barnett behind you, but it's really hard for the defense to do what it needs to do because it really has to come from the core of your defense up the middle," Fickell said.

"We need that leadership and that ability to have some confidence there to be able to do what we need to do."

JOIN THE
OHIO STATE
BUCKEYE
CLUB
FUEL THE TRADITION

MEMBERS RECEIVE ACCESS TO
2013 SEASON TICKETS

AUG 31 Vanderbilt
SEPT 07 Florida A&M | 21 Buffalo
28 Wisconsin
OCT 19 Iowa | 26 Penn St.
NOV 23 Indiana



OhioStateBuckeyes.com/buckeyeclub
email: buckeyeclub@osu.edu
614.292.9908
Facebook.com/OSUBuckeyeClub

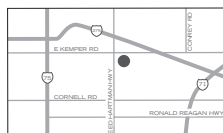
DoubleTree Suites by Hilton Cincinnati – Blue Ash

DoubleTree by Hilton is the hotel that turns travel into a human experience again. It all starts with a warm chocolate chip cookie, a small touch of warmth and care for each guest; we provide genuine comfort with our Sweet Dreams sleep experience and a highly-experienced staff who are dedicated to helping your stay be the very best. Come see us! We have a cookie with your name on it ready and waiting.

- All rooms are 2 room suites
- Two HD TVs per suite
- On demand movies and HBO
- Pull out sofa bed in each suite
- Microwave and mini-fridge
- Wolfgang Puck in-room coffee
- MP3 player/alarm clock
- Outdoor pool & Spa
- Full service restaurant & lounge
- Room service available
- Complimentary on-site parking
- Award winning food & service

Relax in our courtyard pool and sundeck, or let us pamper you with our all-day room service. Enjoy one of our Award Winning Signature Steaks.

DoubleTree by Hilton. Where the little things mean everything.™



HONORS
HILTON WORLDWIDE



DOUBLETREE SUITES
BY HILTON
CINCINNATI - BLUE ASH

16300 E. Kemper Road, Sharonville, OH 45241
T (513) 489 3636 F (513) 489 8231

CincinnatiBlueAshSuites.DoubleTree.com

Hilton HHonors membership, earning of Points & Miles and redemption of points are subject to HHonors Terms and Conditions. ©2011 Hilton Worldwide

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE LINE

D-Line Sports Abundance Of Talent, Depth

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Having won two national championships during a three-year span while at Florida, Urban Meyer is as qualified as anyone in college football in understanding how to build teams that will be remembered forever.

Meyer has yet to lead the Ohio State football team onto the Ohio Stadium field for a regular-season game, but the head coach can take solace in knowing this year's team – though filled with uncertainty – has the same foundation as both of his national title teams at Florida.

Isolated by Meyer as the unquestionable strength of his team, the defensive line boasts enough talent and depth to potentially be one of the premier units in college football. Given the importance the coach has always placed on that position, Ohio State could possess the formula for finding vast success in the coach's inaugural season.

"That is where it all starts," Meyer said of the defensive line. "If you want to have a bad football team, have a bad defensive line. You can be average in some other spots and hide them, but it's over if you have a bad defensive line. You have no chance."

Perhaps that makes for pressure on the group, but the defensive linemen have embraced that they will likely be a large determining factor in how successful the team is this season.

"We take it personally," sophomore defensive tackle Michael Bennett told BSB. "We love that people are going to lean on us and depend on us to carry this team. I think that's how it should be. It really caught me off-guard how many guys we have that can actually see the field and be productive."

The defensive line is led by All-America candidates John Simon and Johnathan Hankins, players universally regarded by national experts as two of the best players in the country at their positions. It certainly wasn't a surprise when Simon was selected as one of the team's five captains Aug. 19. Meyer hadn't been on campus for a month before he identified Simon as one of the most natural leaders he's ever coached, comparing

the senior to former Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow.

Hankins, a 6-3, 322-pound defensive tackle with immense lateral quickness for someone his size, is projected by many as a high first-round NFL draft pick if he opts to leave Ohio State early to pursue a professional career.

And the Buckeyes could add a third star to the starting lineup if senior end Nathan Williams is able to return from microfracture knee surgery. If Williams can somehow regain his form from two years ago, Meyer wasn't afraid to throw out some lofty comparisons for the defensive line.

"If we get Nathan Williams back, I'd say this is in that category," Meyer said, drawing parallels between OSU's defensive line and the units on Florida's national championship teams. "If he doesn't, I think we'll still be good. But I just think Nathan brings that much sting to you and that much experience."

Ohio State is quite familiar with the 2006 version of Florida's defensive front, as the Gators beat up the Buckeyes' offensive line in a 41-14 blowout in the national championship game that season.

"I think we know our potential and how good this team can be," Bennett said. "Obviously we want to be the best defensive line in the country, and at Ohio State that's always possible. It means a lot to us that Coach Meyer compared us to his Florida lines because we know he means it when he says something. But we still have to go out and do it. That's the hardest part."

Joining Hankins and Simon on the starting defensive line are Bennett and senior Garrett Goebel, completing a group of four that makes an argument to be the most impressive starting unit the Buckeyes have had in the last decade. The coming months will determine whether they live up to their potential.

It takes a special unit to replace a 10-game starter seemingly without a hitch, as the Buckeyes lost Adam Bellamy when he left the team early in fall camp for personal reasons. Perhaps the reason the Buckeyes were able to move onward was because of the backups, many of whom will play considerable roles on this year's team despite the



JOSH WINSLOW

STRONG LEADER – Senior John Simon (54) was one of two defensive linemen to be voted 2012 team captains, joining classmate Garrett Goebel.

immense talent that sits ahead of them on the depth chart.

The backups make up a youthful bunch, as sophomores Joel Hale and Steve Miller and true freshmen Noah Spence and Adolphus Washington have each played a considerable amount with the second team this fall. Also in the mix is redshirt freshman and converted offensive lineman Chris Carter as well as true freshmen SeVon Pittman and Tommy Schutt.

Defensive line coach Mike Vrabel – who takes over that group after coaching the team's linebackers a year ago – is encouraged with the potential of his charges despite not having Bellamy. The second-year coach, however, is far from satisfied with the unit.

"We need to be in better condition," said Vrabel, a three-time Super Bowl champion. "We're not ready to play a game. We're doing some things well, but where are we on the seventh or eighth play of a drive? I see us do things well early and then we get tired. That goes for most everybody in that group."

While the unit's conditioning doesn't seem to be in midseason shape just yet, Hankins has made huge strides with his body in his time at Ohio State. It has been a long two years since his first fall camp when the defensive tackle was struggling to play consecutive plays without becoming winded.

Though Hankins remains one of the largest players on the team, his conditioning has become a strength. Still just over 320 pounds, Hankins is one of the players who has benefitted the most from training under first-year strength and conditioning coach Mickey Marotti.

"Since (the new coaching staff) has been here, they've helped me so much," he said. "I thank Coach Mick so much. I actually feel so good. I wish I could have played at this weight my freshman year, but I'm OK with the weight I'm at now."

How Hankins will perform at a lower weight as a junior remains to be seen, but if practice is any indication of his capabilities, he could be on his way to a breakout season. Disruptive in the interior line, Hankins has also shown the ability to track down runners in the backfield because of his quick lateral movement, making for the ideal combination for any defensive tackle.

"He has really and truly caught my eye," co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers said. "I'm one of those guys, I look at the inside of the defense out. I think you have to be good inside. I look at a big guy that's athletic and explosive off the ball and I say, 'That's where you start on defense right there.'"

"I just think he's dominating. He's aggressive of the ball. He's hat-in-hand. He's tying up blocks inside. He's being a factor in the inside run game, and I think that's where it starts."

Goebel was somewhat lost in the shuffle because of the star power around him on the starting defensive line, but his progression as a reliable playmaker wasn't lost on the coaching staff. The 6-4, 290-pound senior joins Simon as one of the team's captains.

Not particularly flashy with his play, Goebel still had a productive junior season. In 13 games, he posted 33 tackles, a sack and recovered a fumble. Given the players he's starting alongside, the senior could be in line for a big season in his final year with the Buckeyes. With the honor of being named a captain, it's clear the coaching staff and his teammates have seen some big things out of the senior.

"I'm excited," Goebel said. "It is an honor that your teammates think that highly of you to name you a captain. I'm going to put everything I have into this responsibility."

One player who is finding himself with more responsibility than even he anticipated is Bennett. With the departure of Bellamy from the team, it looks as if the sophomore is the clear choice to slide into the final starting spot on the line.

The reason Bennett has been able to move into the first team is because he's versatile enough to feel comfortable playing inside at tackle or sliding out to end. Vrabel has said repeatedly that specializing at one position isn't advantageous, especially because the team will strive to put the four best defensive linemen on the field together.

Defensive coordinator Luke Fickell has seen enough from the 6-3, 285-pound sophomore to feel confident in what he brings to the table as a starter.

"Michael was probably with the first team throughout most of spring," Fickell said. "Michael has really shown a lot. He performed pretty well for us last year as a true freshman. He was one of those guys that's a very intelligent guy. He picks things up very quickly. He's going to have the ability for us to probably play more than one position. When you have versatility, we have a chance to use you a lot more."

Bennett still doesn't sport the mind-set that he's a starter, especially because he refers to Simon, Hankins and Goebel as "for-sure starters," intentionally leaving himself off that list. However, he hopes to be worthy of helping to lead one of the deepest positions on the field.

"You always have guys coming for your spot, especially at the defensive line position," Bennett said. "It keeps you hungry. It makes you want to keep fighting every single snap to make sure your spot stays your spot. We have a really talented group, and I hope I can continue to be one of those guys that leads the position the right way."

Meyer may feel comfortable with the way his starting line looks as he paces the fall camp sidelines, but there's no question the head coach is keeping close tabs on Williams' recovery process.

S·U·M·E·N·O·S ITALIAN RESTAURANT

**Come Celebrate With Us
Before & After The Game!**

**Delicious Pizza, Pasta and
Salad Bar Buffet**

Lunch and Evening

791-0939
7400 Sawmill Road
(corner of Hard Road and Sawmill)

Mon. - Thurs. 11 am - 9 pm
Fri. & Sat. 11 am - 10 pm
Sunday 11:30 am - 8:30 pm

www.sumenos.com

Simon Takes Even Bigger Step As Leader

Lost since Ohio State's season opener a year ago, the senior end has gone from being one of the most impactful players on the defense to somewhat of an afterthought last year.

Meyer, however, has brought him back to the forefront of the conversation with repeated mentions of what kind of boost he can give this defense with a healthy return.

"I feel like last year I was lost in the mix," Williams said. "As one of the top returning players on the team coming back and getting hurt and then just vanishing off into nowhere (was tough)."

"When Coach Fickell would get asked questions about me, he'd just brush it off as if nothing had happened. It felt kind of weird. Having Coach Meyer come in here and really having my back through this whole entire process and making (the media) aware that I am here and working my butt off, it is really refreshing and it means a lot to me."

It still remains to be seen if Williams can make a full recovery in time to be the same player he was before his injury – one of the best pass rushers in the Big Ten – but the senior expects to be a main contributor yet again.

Whether that comes in the form of earning a spot as a starter or as a valuable member of the rotation remains to be seen. The only thing Williams doesn't plan to do is sit a second consecutive year.

"The first two weeks of camp before I got hurt, I felt like I was dominating every single day," Williams said, referring to last year's fall camp. "I really felt myself improving after a great offseason that I had. Hopefully I can get back to that level and come back mentally stronger and tougher knowing what I have to do to be great here."

The hunt to find a consistent – and relentless – pass rush isn't a difficult process for Meyer, even if Williams takes longer than anticipated to return. That's because the Buckeyes brought in a pair of five-star defensive end prospects whom most experts considered ready for college action right out of high school.

Spence and Washington have played a considerable amount of time with the second-team line during fall camp and should figure into the rotation as freshmen. Given the way both were rated coming out of high school, it isn't a surprise they'll be relied upon for production so early in their collegiate careers.

Rated the No. 2 defensive end in the 2012 class by Scout.com, Spence has immediately caught the attention of his teammates.

"He probably has more athletic ability than any of us on the defensive line," Simon said of the 6-3, 240-pounder. "He's very gifted and very determined."

Earning playing time in the defensive trenches as a freshman isn't an easy task, but Spence's combination of immense speed and a filled-out frame made him a perfect candidate to see the field early.

After posting 204 tackles and 35½ sacks over the course of his final two high school seasons, Spence hopes he'll be ready to contribute the same playmaking ability as part of the Buckeyes rotation.

"Right now, I probably haven't done much but learning the plays," he said. "I'll probably come in a little bit on passing downs to get in the backfield because I am pretty good at that. Right now I am just hoping to keep getting better."

Meanwhile, Washington is a tad more physically imposing than Spence. The 6-3, 289-pound freshman also plans to crack the rotation, but he'll do it from the interior after manning a defensive end position in high school. Washington's goal is to play just as effectively as the starters.

Perhaps the most daunting task for Urban Meyer when becoming Ohio State's new head coach was learning the existing roster as well as he would have had he recruited each player on his own.

If getting to know each individual were as easy for Meyer as it was to become familiar with senior defensive end John Simon, that task would have been a breeze.

Meyer knew what he was getting in Simon even before he took the lectern for his introductory press conference. A few weeks into the job and Meyer was already throwing out Simon's name in lofty comparisons to Tim Tebow, the Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback at Florida known for his unmatched charisma and leadership skills.

At first it was a surprise to hear Meyer refer to Simon as "Tebowish." That comment wasn't enough for Meyer, though, and he took it a step further.

"I used the term 'Tebowish' and I've got to be careful not to do that," Meyer said. "It should be 'Simonish.' He's a next-level type player – leader, character, toughness and commitment. He's elite elite."

When looking at his on-the-field production alone, Simon has already proved his merit. A three-year contributor, the 6-2, 263-pounder's most recent season was his best as he posted a team-leading 17 tackles for loss and seven sacks, more than twice as many as any other player on the OSU defense.

Meyer was impressed enough with what he saw early in spring with Simon to keep

the senior out of drills outside of the team's customary scrimmaging sessions. Simon was simply too disruptive most of the time for productive work to get accomplished while he participated.

Simon, who was held out of Ohio State's spring game because Meyer said he "didn't need to (prove anything)," became more involved in practice during fall camp as the team prepared for the 2012 regular season.

It wasn't a surprise when Simon was named one of the team's five captains Aug. 19, becoming only the seventh two-time captain in program history. It was the strides he made to help the team get better during the summer that are the latest testament to his value to the team.

Simon's perfectly sculpted body is a result of countless hours training and lifting, a habit that started before he reached the age of 10 and was passed down by his father, John Sr. The young Simon now sets his alarm for 4:30 a.m. each morning for a 6 a.m. workout at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, which only further feeds his insatiable appetite for lifting sessions.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons Meyer referred to Simon as an "A-1" example when he asked where the defensive linemen ranks in his coaching career for hard workers. It was that work habit that Meyer said was imperative for this year's team to adopt.

The "John Simon Rule" was therefore created, not allowing the senior to work out at the weight room alone. He's still first to arrive – he just has company now.

The two stand next to each other. Simon has taken notice to the strides the sophomore made in the summer.

"Steve may have had the best offseason of anyone on our team," the OSU co-captain said. "I love Steve. Working with him every day and seeing his dedication, he never complains. We're always working out together. He's going to have a big season."

Hale also worked diligently to improve his physique during the offseason, and the 6-4, 295-pounder backs up Goebel to provide depth at a crucial position for the Buckeyes. Meyer was pleased with Hale's growth.

"On defense, the guy who's caught me is a guy named Hale," Meyer said. "Joel Hale has done a very good job. I can't say he's an All-Big Ten player yet, but from where he was in the spring to now, he came out and worked."

Hale made an immediate impression as a freshman when he took Simon on in a circle drill and outmuscled the upperclassman in front of the watching media. The sophomore shrugged the drill aside as just a positive rep, but he does hope he can contribute regularly during the season.

"It's always nice to hear the coach say your name as somebody who has played well," Hale said. "I just use it as motivation, though. I want to get better and I want to make plays and help this team win games. That's what I am really after."

Carter has found new life with the Buckeyes after switching to the defensive line late in the spring.

"I knew I wasn't really progressing as an offensive lineman," he said. "I felt it myself. I was heavy and the first half of spring practice was really hard for me. I wasn't progressing and getting better like I needed to."

The big-bodied lineman wasn't the only one who felt that was the case, which is likely why Meyer gave into Fickell's desire to move Carter to the defensive side of the ball. Sporting a big body like Hankins, Carter fit

During the summer, Simon regularly brought players such as fellow defensive linemen Noah Spence and Steve Miller as well as linebackers Ryan Shazier and Curtis Grant to the weight room. Zach Boren, a fellow captain who lost 25 pounds this summer while partaking in the dawn workouts, was also a regular.

Those sessions have made a tangible difference in Meyer's eyes.

"Here's a true freshman learning from the best," said Meyer, referring specifically to working with Spence. "(Simon) is giving something back to the team. Him lifting (alone) at 6 a.m. does nothing for our team. It does something for him. But this is not an individual sport."

Given that Ohio State won't be permitted to partake in the postseason this year due to NCAA sanctions, Simon could have viewed the NFL as a viable option after his junior season. However, he said he never gave leaving early a second thought, adding he could never envision leaving his teammates and brothers behind.

Perhaps Simon is primed to give a whole new definition to leadership, as he'll lead perhaps the deepest – and one of the youngest – position group on the team.

"I take that very seriously," he said. "Leadership is very important to our success, and I take it personally to make the people around me better. I am excited to help the team any way I can, but hopefully that will also come out in some of the plays my teammates make around me."

– Ari Wasserman

the mold for a player Fickell thought would make an excellent gap-filler and run-stopper.

Having been a shade less than 400 pounds during his freshman season, Carter struggled to find a place on the offensive line. He moved around from tackle to guard but never arrived at a place that felt right.

"My first thought process when I moved was more of relief," Carter said. "After the change I felt, just being a D-lineman, that I learned the concepts pretty well and I felt better as a football player having a new position. I feel myself getting better now."

Add in a summer of conditioning under Marotti, and Carter has drastically changed his body. Though he's still one of the most physically imposing players on the team, the 6-3 Carter is down to roughly 340 pounds – about 60 pounds lighter than when he arrived at Ohio State.

"I think I can contribute this year," he said. "I am technically young – I am a redshirt freshman – but I think I'll be able to contribute on goal-line situations and short yardage more than regular play because we have a lot of guys in front of me who have more experience in the defensive line, so I expect them to be ahead of me."

Both Pittman and Schutt are guys who also hope to earn their way into the mix, but the rotation on the defensive front won't be quite as active as it was in the past under defensive coordinator Jim Heacock.

Varbel intends on keeping the most efficient players on the field, which should go a long way in keeping the competition level high in practice.

"We're going to play the best players," he said. "If I think I've got four really good guys and they don't get tired, they'll play the whole game. That's what I'm used to, the game I came from. The best players played. If you don't get tired, you'll play the whole game. So if we have guys that get tired, we'll rest guys, but the best guys will be out there."

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: LINEBACKERS

Fickell's Return Should Help OSU's Linebackers

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Last year, Luke Fickell simply moved down the hall of the Woody Hayes Athletic Center from the linebackers room to the head coach's office, but the two spots might as well have been worlds apart.

Fickell had developed a reputation as one of the best linebackers coaches in the country while mentoring numerous stars in his seven years in the spot, but his shotgun move to the top job in the wake of Jim Tressel's dismissal resulted in a 6-7 campaign.

Now, what's old is new again. Fickell has returned to his more comfortable position room. The space is smaller and the paycheck isn't as big, but the coach who always professed to love the details of coaching more than the glory is pleased to be back in charge of the linebackers.

"It's more like previous years," Fickell said. "It's just a different feel, a different perspective, I guess, as a coach out there, but you can look back and all the years have been exciting, all the years have been fun. It's been different challenges at different times, but this is definitely an exciting time and I think you can see it in our guys' eyes as well."

Fickell inherits a group in which only one scholarship player – senior Etienne Sabino – actually remembers what it was like to have the former OSU defensive lineman as a position coach. That speaks to just how young the Buckeyes are at linebacker, but Sabino

is happy to have Fickell back in his natural surroundings.

"It's good because we know each other," Sabino said. "At this point, we've known each other for 4½ years, so we know what to expect from each other. We're usually on the same page as far as what he expects on a play or in the classroom or just in general."

Sabino's presence will undoubtedly help Fickell in his return to coach linebackers since five of the nine scholarship players at the position are true freshmen and another is a redshirt freshman. That means Fickell, who is also now the team's defensive coordinator, will have to get his hands dirty as he molds a group that has lots of talent but little in the way of experience.

That's just the way the coach likes it.

"It's getting back into the things you love to do," he said. "If you worry about too many things outside of what you have control over, it's very difficult. Whatever your job is, that's where your focus is. The ability to stay on task and do that is probably the key."

Rebuilding A Unit

While Sabino brings four years in the program into the 2012 campaign, even he is young by playing time standards. He has started only five games in his career, and Ryan Shazier's three starts at the end of the 2011 season are the only other ones possessed by anyone in the linebackers room.



Luke Fickell

With that in mind, the Buckeyes need to work to replace the departed Andrew Sweat (graduation) and Storm Klein (dismissal) as well as Tyler Moeller, once a linebacker who played at the hybrid star position last season in his sixth year in the program. On top of that, the production wasn't quite at the level expected at Ohio State – and that observation comes from the top.

"You look at the last decade and you can arguably say that the greatest set of linebackers in recent history played here at Ohio State," said head coach Urban Meyer. "That's kind of what I'd expect, and I didn't see that necessarily last year."

It is assumed that starting roles will fall to Sabino, who will play the strong side in the base defense and also play in the middle in the nickel; Shazier, who is tabbed as a potential breakout star at weakside linebacker; and new middle man Curtis Grant. But Fickell cautioned early in camp that assumptions about his starting spots were just that.

"You know what? We don't know if we truly have three starters yet let alone have depth," he said. "That's my biggest concern. Yes, we have to develop depth, and I'm looking for those six guys that you can lay your head on the pillow at night saying, 'Hey, they're going to give you everything they've got.'"

"I'm not saying they're the greatest players yet or they're going to be A.J. Hawk or James Laurinaitis, but they're going to

give you every single thing they've got and they're going to find a way to be successful."

Fickell seems to have the talent to fill out that two-deep, though, and all indications are that Sabino, Shazier and Grant will be starting when the Sept. 1 opener against Miami (Ohio) arrives.

Sabino seems ready to play his best football, and the Miami Dr. Krop product will admit he didn't play quite to the level he expected a year ago in his first extensive time on the field. The 6-3, 237-pounder dropped a few pounds in an effort to add some speed to his game and has clearly become one of Meyer's most trusted players.

Last year, Sabino finished with 62 tackles and delivered some of the biggest hits on the squad, but the one-time five-star prospect feels his group continued to need to improve.

"I think we all feel like we have something to prove," he said. "This is Ohio State. We're linebackers at Ohio State and we feel we have a certain standard we have to uphold. As a group, we're disappointed in our play last year. We feel like we have something to prove and we owe it to our team to play better."

One thing that should help is the maturation of Shazier, who earned plenty of time on the field last year as a true freshman. He played at 100 mph and showcased breath-taking big-play ability – he had five tackles for loss, three sacks, two forced fumbles, a number of big hits and a blocked punt in the Wisconsin win – that earned him a starting role late in the campaign, but Shazier too often was out of position or overran plays.

THE BUCKEYE ROOM OHIO STATE 2012 FOOTBALL SEASON

OSU WHITE NIKE LEADERSHIP COACHES HAT \$21.95

OSU RED NIKE LEADERSHIP COACHES HAT \$21.95

RED NIKE REPLICA OS JERSEY \$59.95

RED NIKE TWIN OS JERSEY \$74.95

LADIES OSU FOOTBALL REPLICA TEE \$34.95

LADIES OSU FOOTBALL REPLICA TEE \$34.95

LADIES OSU GRIDIRON GRAY TEE \$24.95

OSU RED MY SCHOOL LOCAL TEE \$24.95

OSU WHITE MY SCHOOL LOCAL TEE \$24.95

OSU BLACK MY SCHOOL LOCAL TEE \$24.95

OSU NIKE TRIBLEND LOGO TEE \$27.95

OSU GREY LEGEND MAX OUT ORIFIT TEE \$27.95

OSU BLACK DRIFT OFFICIAL PRACTICE TEE \$27.95

WHITE NIKE OSU COACHES SIDELINE POLO \$64.95

RED NIKE OSU COACHES SIDELINE POLO \$64.95

BLACK NIKE OSU COACHES SIDELINE POLO \$64.95

ANTIGUA ITEMS

STOIC OSU FORMAL DRESS SHIRT \$49.95

FOCUS OSU FORMAL DRESS SHIRT \$44.95

WOMEN'S LONG-SLEEVE HUDDLE \$44.95

WHISPER EXTRA-LITE OSU POLO \$49.95

ELITE OSU POLO \$54.95

DIPLOMA FRAMES OSU

MAHOGANY AERIAL VIEW DIPLOMA FRAME \$129.95

STADIUM PANORAMIC DIPLOMA FRAME \$84.95

OSU AERIAL VIEW BLACK DIPLOMA FRAME \$84.95

AERIAL VIEW GOLD EMBOSSED DIPLOMA FRAME \$129.95

OSU COLLEGE DIPLOMA FRAME \$84.95

MAHOGANY WITH TASSEL DIPLOMA FRAME \$129.95

URBAN MEYER AUTOGRAPHED FOOTBALL \$124.95

URBAN MEYER AUTOGRAPHED MINI HELMET \$124.95

24oz Tervis Tumbler with lid \$19.95

6oz Tervis Tumbler with lid \$16.95

THE BUCKEYE ROOM

Redeemable at all Buckeye Room Locations and at buckeyeroom.com

SHOP ONLINE OR IN OUR STORES

20% OFF

FOR ONLINE ORDERS USE COUPON CODE: **BUCKS2012**

MUST PRESENT THIS COUPON FOR DISCOUNT

EXPIRES 11/30/12

buckeyeroom.com

www.facebook.com/officialbuckeyeroom

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: LINEBACKERS

As a result, this was a big offseason for the Plantation, Fla., native. Shazier, who finished last year with 57 stops, added nearly 25 pounds to get up to 6-2, 230, and dedicated himself to fixing the flaws in his game.

"Sometimes when the ball was going to me, I would go too fast or I just had to be more patient and read the blockers better," he said. "I can see a lot of the mistakes I made. When I was watching the Florida and the Penn State games, I saw a lot of gaps that I should have filled and a lot of tackles that I missed.

"I want to be in there as many plays as possible to help the team succeed, and I just want to make as many plays as the defense calls for me to make. Every opportunity I want to take advantage of."

One thing that isn't questioned is Shazier's dedication and work ethic.

"He's still the same person," Fickell said. "He was a leader from the day he came in. He has that natural ability to do that. He's going to be in a situation where he's asked to do it a lot more. We're going to push him to do that."

The third projected starter is Grant, who entered Ohio State last year as a five-star prospect from Richmond (Va.) Hermitage but struggled to learn the defense.

"He wasn't ready (last year)," Meyer said. "He's the first guy to come in here and say, 'I was not ready.' So Luke was torn apart last year being the head coach, but him being able to spend full time with Curtis Grant, it's really helped Curtis."

Grant (6-3, 235) played mostly on special teams, finishing the season with two tackles and recovering the punt Shazier blocked against Wisconsin. This offseason, his focus has been on playing faster – both by losing about 15 pounds to help him get to the ball quicker and by studying the defense so he can play through reaction instead of overthinking.

The sophomore will also be in charge of setting OSU's defense from his middle linebacker spot, putting the onus on Grant – who has admitted he considered quitting during last year's rough campaign – to be ready.

"He has to continue to do what he's done and continue to show us," Fickell said. "He's one of those guys that I'll lay my head on the pillow knowing he's going to give us everything he's got. He'd die for this game and he loves this game. He studies it. If he works at it, he's got a chance to be a great player."

Ohio State also has senior walk-ons Stewart Smith and Ross Oltorik in the linebackers room. The 6-3, 230-pound Smith plays on the strong side and saw spot duty in two games last year, while Oltorik (6-1, 225) has taken a circuitous route to his position. He started his career as an Ohio State quarterback in 2008, played baseball at OSU the next spring and then transferred to Arizona where he played football before his return to Columbus.

Exciting Future

Behind that group, Ohio State has six scholarship freshmen, some of whom will be in the two-deep and get a chance to play special teams given the lack of experience in front of them.

That could be a scary thought, but the vibe around the program is that those players will bring something to the table in 2012.

"I definitely have a lot of confidence in the guys in that room," Sabino said. "They definitely have a lot of ability. They may be young, but they have heart. In this sport if you have heart, it can take you a lot farther than if you don't."

For their part, the young linebackers are

Sabino Eager To Make Most Of Final Season

Though Etienne Sabino wears No. 6, he can't seem to avoid the No. 5.

When he first arrived at Ohio State, he was a five-star, can't-miss linebacker prospect.

Now, he's a fifth-year senior who has been humbled by football at the college level, but he's not upset that his career didn't take off immediately.

"My career has not been by the books as most people would say," Sabino said. "But that's in the past for me. I'm excited to be where I am. I would never change. If I could do it all over again, I'd still come to Ohio State. I love it here. It's been fun."

For one thing, Sabino is happy to still be in Columbus because it has allowed him to develop. Though it hasn't been the rapid rise projected when he was the No. 2 middle linebacker in the country and the No. 39 overall player in the class of 2008 out of Miami Dr. Krop, Sabino said he has picked up plenty from the large group of talented players who have occupied the room with him in his time.

"I've played behind a lot of great guys like James Laurinaitis, and I think that's cool because I can pick little things up from everybody that I've seen whether it's Brian Rolle, Ross Homan, James Laurinaitis or Austin Spitler," Sabino said.

"Everybody does something a little different, and it's cool to see how different aspects of different people's games can work for them."

aware of the potential they bring to the group and don't seem shy in expressing it.

"We have a lot of talent, a lot of skills, and Coach Fickell is one of the best linebackers coaches in the country," Camren Williams said. "I'm interested to see what he can do with us. It's exciting to see what the future holds for us."

Williams is one of two freshmen battling Grant for the middle linebacker spot. He is joined by redshirt freshman Conner Crowell, who missed all of last season with a leg injury but quickly moved into the two-deep upon his return. The three-star prospect from Waldorf (Md.) North Point is just happy to be back on the field after last year's tough first campaign.

"It was probably one of the hardest years of my life," the 6-1, 235-pounder said. "It's just tough watching everybody else compete and go through the grind and you're just sitting back and watching. After my return, it took a while to get adjusted. Spring ball was definitely a big jump for me, but I've improved a lot since spring ball."

Williams (6-1, 225) said he looks up to Crowell, but his hope is to push him on the depth chart. The four-star prospect from West Roxbury (Mass.) Catholic Memorial made 119 tackles last year in high school and says he's a do-it-all player who wants to be a fixture in the middle for years to come.

"When I was getting recruited, they noticed that I was a smart football player," Williams said. "They said one of their biggest problems last year was they didn't really have a quarterback of the defense. I'm starting to get the playbook more and more, and I feel like I've always been really good at getting the team together and being the quarterback of the defense."

"I feel like I'm athletic and physical at the same time, so I have a good balance. I feel like I'm a pretty good player."

That confidence continues over to the weakside spot in David Perkins. Another four-star prospect, the South Bend (Ind.)

Washington product has earned praise for his aggressive nature.

"The guy that has really taken a notice is David Perkins from South Bend. He had a heck of a scrimmage yesterday," Meyer said at the team's Aug. 12 media day. "He's a fly-and-hit guy, which is what we want. He'll play this year. How much? He's still working on that."

Perkins checks in at 6-2, 220, and made 103 tackles last year while playing both sides of the ball. While focusing exclusively on linebacker now, Perkins is refining his game and isn't shying away from his confident nature.

"I fly to the ball," he said. "I bring some power. I see ball, get ball, and I come hard. I bring the wood. My goal was to come in here and play, and that's what I'm trying to do."

He's battling at the backup weakside spot with Luke Roberts, who earned only three stars in the recruiting cycle but found himself in the two-deep this spring after enrolling early. The 6-1, 226-pounder also wrestled in high school at Lancaster, Ohio, and brings toughness and intelligence to the position in the words of his teammates.

Moving to the strong side, Ohio State has two attractive options battling for playing time – early enrollee Joshua Perry and another true freshman, Jamal Marcus.

Perry, a four-star recruit from Lewis Center (Ohio) Olentangy and the No. 9 outside linebacker in the country, immediately stands out because of his size at 6-4, 238 pounds. He is also a tremendous athlete who starred in basketball and track, which he hopes allows him to bring a total package to OSU.

"At the linebacker position, I have length, so I can get in the passing lanes and get reroutes without getting caught up with the scrum," Perry said. "Taking on blocks, I am able to get extension so linemen can't get into me. I think those are all tools you can't teach, so I can use it to my advantage."

That talented roster is one reason Sabino didn't immediately find playing time upon arrival as a 6-3, 240-pound, 17-year-old specimen who could also run a 4.6-second 40-yard dash.

He also had some well-publicized troubles when it came to playing fast in Ohio State's complicated defensive playbook. Coaches routinely said Sabino was thinking too much rather than reacting, a condition that kept him to six tackles apiece while playing mostly on special teams in 2008 and '09.

Sabino finished with zero tackles in 2010, but that's because he took a redshirt for a variety of reasons, including a desire to learn the middle linebacker position to take over for Rolle upon his impending graduation.

That ended up being for naught when Sabino moved into the strongside linebacker role last fall upon his return, but he did have an impact a season ago, finishing with 62 tackles and seven tackles for loss while starting five games. He was also the MVP of Ohio State's Gator Bowl loss to Florida.

First-year head coach Urban Meyer hopes to see even more improvement from Sabino in 2012.

"He has to be one of those guys," Meyer said. "He's a nice guy and he hasn't played

to his potential yet. He's doing everything he can, and I trust that he will."

A big year out of Sabino is a function of necessity as well. He is the only scholarship upperclassman in Luke Fickell's room, pushing him into a role in which he will need to excel both on the field and as a leader.

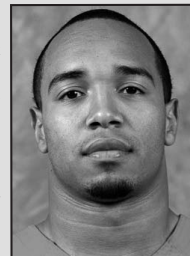
He's already started to fill the latter role. Meyer has noted Sabino is one of the players whose opinion he respects most – intimidating at one point that Sabino is on his exclusive leadership committee – and the coach tabbed him as one of the three players to represent OSU at the Big Ten Media Days in Chicago.

With those credentials and his advanced experience level, there's no doubt he's the elder statesman of the linebackers room – a status that leads to some interesting situations.

"I kind of feel like the grandpa in the room, but it's cool," the team co-captain said. "I look around sometimes and I'm like, 'Wow, I didn't come in with any of these guys in here.' But I love being around them. They're a fun bunch."

"Maybe I'm just old, but they do something and I just die laughing sometimes. I guess you could say it keeps me young, even though I'm not that old. It's a fun time."

– Jeff Svoboda



Etienne Sabino

Another player who has turned heads this fall is Marcus, who immediately earned the praise of the coaching staff for flying to the football even if he didn't necessarily know where he was supposed to be on each play.

"When you ask what is very important and what Coach Meyer has as a core value, it's going from point A to point B very, very fast," Fickell said. "Jamal Marcus does that. At times, now, you have to control yourself as you go from point A to point B, but I can assure you that I'd rather teach a guy how to control himself than try to teach him how to go really hard."

Marcus was a three-star defensive end coming out of Durham (N.C.) Hillside so he's still learning his position, but the 6-2, 225-pounder thinks he's coming along.

"I played like a standup defensive end in high school," Marcus said. "Now I moved to a 4-3, so I'm learning to play the linebacker position. It's a little different but they still have me coming off the edge a lot. Each play, I'm going to give it my all. I'm going to go as fast as I can to get to the ball by any means necessary."

In the eyes of Sabino, each player in the new group brings something different.

"It's hard to say one jumps out at me," the OSU senior said. "I think they all bring something to the table. Josh is a big, athletic kid who has through-the-roof potential. Luke Roberts is another kid who is a very smart player, a student of the game. He studies film like no other. David Perkins can run like a gazelle. He's a great athlete. Jamal is the same way. I think the potential in that room may be better than it's ever been."

Ohio State also has two true freshmen who are walk-ons. Cincinnati La Salle product Joe Burger has been lining up at middle linebacker, and the 6-1, 225-pounder was a first-team all-state choice his senior year after making 103 tackles. Craig Fada (6-0, 225) played at Columbus Bishop Watterson, making 45 tackles while playing both ways as a senior.

Secondary Wants Big Bounce Back This Year

By MATTHEW HAGER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Average. Underachieving. Worthy of a C, maybe C-plus.

Those are just three ways returning members of Ohio State's defensive backfield described the play of the unit last season. As the Buckeyes sputtered to a 6-7 record in 2011, the team's cornerbacks and safeties failed to be the playmakers Ohio State desperately needed – especially when key cog Nathan Williams was lost for the season after only one week on the defensive line, which put more pressure on the secondary to make an impression.

That feeling is one of the reasons those same players feel excited and hungry coming into the upcoming season. All of the secondary's projected starters saw ample playing time last season, and they each have the motivation to atone for last season's difficulties.

"I think we got a lot of experience," said senior safety Orhian Johnson, who started four games last season but will begin this season as a backup. "We learned a lot during the season. Last year, we're not going to hide it. It wasn't our best year. But I think that's what made us go into this off-season real hungry. We want to make plays when we get a chance to."

The group has two new coaches guiding it in Kerry Coombs and Everett Withers, who will lead the cornerbacks and safeties, respectively. While neither was in Columbus last season, Coombs said he knows how eager his players are to improve on their 2011 results.

"You don't have to talk about it," Coombs said. "They feel it. You don't have to bring it up. They know, they know."

Three Down, One To Go

Coombs neared the end of preseason training camp in August with most of what he wanted to accomplish completed. A pair of returning starters in senior Travis Howard and sophomore Bradley Roby provided a foundation to build upon, and Coombs also had the benefit of the emergence of Doran Grant in the spring. Grant,

a sophomore, played well in the spring and was listed as a co-starter with Howard on the post-spring depth chart. His progress continued in August, with Coombs saying Grant would join Howard and Roby in getting ample playing time this fall.

But Coombs wasn't completely happy. "We have three guys that are game ready," he said. "We don't have enough. We have to get more, so we're continuing to work on our depth. We're trying to stay healthy, trying to stay hydrated and trying to stay rested. But I am very, very pleased with Travis, Bradley and Doran Grant. They're playing great ball."

Howard (6-1, 196) is the elder statesman of the group. The fifth-year senior out of Miami Dr. Krop started 11 games last season and has played in 31 career games as a Buckeye. He made 41 tackles last fall and picked off two passes – both coming in the fourth quarter in tight games vs. Illinois and Indiana. Still, Howard was viewed before last season as a potential breakout player, and that did not happen.

Coombs called Howard a future NFL player with a tremendous upside who can have a big season for the Buckeyes. How big will be up to Howard, and the senior knows the time is now to put last season's disappointment – for both himself and the team – in the past.

"Words can't explain how hungry I am after last year," Howard said. "It was a big disaster. I feel like coming into this year we have to do some new things. I feel like this year has been more of a grind, and I've had to get after it and focus on the football aspect. Last season left a bad taste in my mouth. Sometimes when you get a bad taste in your mouth, it just makes you hungrier for what's to come."

Howard's co-returning starter is Roby (5-11, 190). Like Howard a year earlier, Roby is tabbed by some of his teammates as a potential star-in-the-making this season. After taking a redshirt season in 2010, Roby started all 13 games last season and tied for the team lead in interceptions with three.

"I've seen him grow from a freshman to a grown man," Howard said. "He's come a

long way. You can see his work ethic now. You see him mature as a player. The person he has become has been amazing to me. I learn so much from him every day, and we learn from each other. It's a wonderful bond we have."

Coombs called Roby a potential first-round NFL pick, and Roby's teammates have long known the Georgia native had plenty of talent.

"We all knew Roby had it in him," junior starting safety C.J. Barnett said. "Coming in as a freshman, we knew that Roby was going to be a great corner. He's living up to that. He can always improve and get better, but for where he is right now, he's in pretty good shape."

Roby is not a player who lacks for confidence. He said he doesn't read what people write about him, but he has high expectations for himself all the same.

"That's my goal. That's why I came here – to be one of the best," he said. "Whatever they're saying, that's exactly what I believe. I was the first one to believe that. Now you're all just seeing it."

Unlike Howard, Roby isn't unhappy with his performance last year, but he does want to see improvement this fall.

"I feel like I did what I was supposed to do," Roby said. "I came in and had a decent year. I'm just really trying to build on that. I'm not really thinking about last year now, though. I'm thinking about this year and what I'm going to do."

Grant (5-11, 188) might not start games this season, but Coombs said the sophomore will play a lot. The Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary product made six tackles last season and played in all 13 games. He really came on in the spring, gaining praise from head coach Urban Meyer and Coombs.

Grant may be battling Howard and Roby for time on the field, but he credits his older counterparts with helping his development.

"Ever since I came here as a freshman I've looked up to those guys and watched

how they play," Grant said. "They've been here. They know how it goes. I feel like we're going to be a pretty good group this year at the cornerback position. We have experience and we're hungry."

"We want to make plays and be better than last year. We want to be the best in America – BIA."

Coombs downplayed the battle for a starting spot between Howard and Grant.

"I don't see any of it as a battle," Coombs said. "I hope you can appreciate the fact that if you're going to play at the highest level you're going to have to have more than two cornerbacks because corners can't play 75 snaps a game. You really need four, and they've got to be out there and be fresh, be rested and be ready to go."

"We have three, and we're going to roll those kids through. They're all going to play and they're all going to play a significant amount, and I'm very well pleased with that. What we've got to do is get that fourth one."

As for who that will be, time will tell. A likely option – to at least start the season at that spot – is sophomore Adam Griffin. The third-year player from Columbus DeSales was listed as the primary backup behind Roby after spring and prior to the start of training camp.

"I'm always excited about the opportunity to play because I have a level of confidence where if I go in the game I know I can get the job done," said Griffin, the son of two-time Heisman Trophy winner Archie Griffin. "It's nice to be in the two-deep."

Coombs said on Aug. 17 that Griffin had suffered a minor injury, however. That could open the door for one of three members of Ohio State's 2012 recruiting class to try to grab the No. 4 spot – Najee Murray (5-9, 178), Tyvis Powell (6-3, 196) or Armani Reeves (5-10, 194). Coombs called the freshmen a special group, but time will tell if any see significant playing time this fall.

"We're competing, but it's not up to us," Murray said. "The coaches will decide who plays. We'll see how things go when camp ends."

As for the battle for the fourth cornerback spot, Coombs knows what he is looking for.

"They have to have great speed," he said. "They have to have great sense of direction. The main thing is the ball cannot get over their head. They've got to keep the ball inside and in front of the defense. They've got to understand how to play."

Adding extra depth to the cornerbacks is redshirt freshman walk-on Nik Sarac (5-9, 180) from Cleveland St. Ignatius.

Safeties Eager To Improve

Unlike the cornerbacks, Ohio State's safeties appear to have a set top four. The likely starters are juniors Christian Bryant and Barnett, with veterans Johnson and junior Corey Brown next up when called upon.

All four saw playing time last season, with Barnett (13), Bryant (nine) and Johnson (four) starting several games last season. The presumed top four safeties this season combined for 180 tackles and five interceptions. Even so, much like the



Adam Griffin

BUNDLE YOUR EXPERIENCE!

THE LITTLE BROWN JUG® (9/20) € OSU FOOTBALL (9/22)

THE GREAT AMERICAN HARNESS RACE
AT THE DELAWARE COUNTY FAIR 9/15-9/22

€

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL TEAM V.S. UAB

Don't miss the best sports weekend of the year!

9/19 The Jugette
9/20 The Little Brown Jug®
9/22 OSU vs UAB

Email coupons@littlebrownjug.com for great unpublished discounts & rates
Call Sheraton Suites (614.436.0004) & ask for the Little Brown Jug® rate.

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE BACKS

cornerbacks, the safeties were not pleased with their 2011 performances.

"We had multiple opportunities and we just didn't capitalize on them," Bryant said.

Added Barnett: "We were kind of young (last year). That's not an excuse, but we were young. This year, we have some playing experience together, so I look forward to having that experience pay off and us being a better defense."

Barnett (6-1, 202) returns after leading the Buckeyes in tackles last season with 75. He also intercepted two passes and broke up six others. He was one of several players complimented by Meyer in the spring, describing him as a player who "does not accept being average."

The Clayton (Ohio) Northmont product also earned praise from Withers, his new position coach.

"C.J.'s one of the guys back there and on our football team that's really worked himself into being one of the leaders of this football team because of the way he works, the way he attacks practices, the way he attacks meetings," Withers said.

Barnett has been called one of Ohio State's most studious players in the film room. He's also one of the hardest hitters in the secondary, which is why he earned a starting spot in 2010. That season was cut short after two games because of an injury, but following a healthy 2011 he's ready to continue his upward trajectory.

"My biggest attribute at safety is my confidence and my knowledge," Barnett said. "I've studied the game a lot. I'm not the most gifted athlete. There are some freaks out there like Bradley Roby. He runs a 4.31 (40-yard dash) and he's pretty strong. But being smart and knowing what's going on helps me a lot."

Barnett's counterpart in the presumed starting lineup is Bryant (5-10, 190), a product of Cleveland Glenville who has played in 19 games with 10 starts in his three years at Ohio State. His 78 career tackles is the fifth best on the team, and his 68 stops last season is behind only Barnett among returning players.

Despite being one of the most physical defenders on the team and tying for third in the Big Ten last year with eight pass breakups, Bryant has never intercepted a pass. A lack of turnovers was something he laments and hopes that the entire secondary can improve on this season.

"The ball is the key," Bryant said. "That's what the coaches tell us every single day. The ball is the key. As long as we get turnovers, we'll be one of the best defensive backfields in the country."

Withers called Bryant a worker and a guy who wants to improve.

"He's always working hard on the things that he thinks he needs to improve on – tackling in space and covering areas of the field, those types of things he continues to work on every day," Withers said. "That's what you like about him. He's a guy who will work on his weaknesses and rely on his strengths."

The third returning safety with experience is Johnson (6-3, 210). Johnson tied for the team lead with Roby in interceptions last season and is one of the most veteran players in the secondary, having played in 37 games – including all 13 games in 2010 and 2011.

Johnson will see the field this fall and, perhaps more importantly, has been a guiding influence for the younger members of his group. He was the mentor for freshman safety Devan Bogard in Meyer's black-stripe program, and the duo worked well together. Bogard was the first player to

Expectations High For Sophomore CB

One goal down, plenty more to go for Bradley Roby.

Roby will have a new look this fall. Not only does he say he is in the best shape of his life after working with Mickey Marotti, Ohio State's new assistant athletic director for football sports performance, during the offseason, but the sophomore cornerback has a new uniform number. He'll don No. 1 for the Buckeyes after wearing No. 25 last season.

The Suwanee (Ga.) Peachtree Ridge product was not given his new number; he had to earn it. New Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer and his coaching staff made Roby work for it during the offseason, and shortly before OSU's preseason training camp began in August, Roby got the call he was waiting for from Meyer.

"He called me and he just said, 'I'm giving you No. 1 like you asked,'" Roby said. "You showed me the things you told me you were going to do. You showed me the things I see in you. I see greatness in you, so here it goes. Make sure you don't slip up."

Roby did more than just look out for No. 1 this offseason. He, like many of his teammates, transformed his body. He gained weight during the offseason, moving up to 191 pounds after playing at 185 in 2011. Despite that added weight, Roby also returns to the field after making headlines during the summer when it was leaked that he ran a blistering 4.31-second 40-yard dash.

He confirmed that time in August, saying it bested his previous best of 4.40. Roby called the workouts the hardest he's ever done, but they produced results.

lose his black stripe, becoming a full-fledged member of the Buckeyes.

"He should get a lot of credit because we talk all the time," Bogard said of Johnson. "We go over the playbook because I'm not familiar with the playbook because I'm a freshman. But I'm getting used to it and I'm getting into the flow. We communicate a lot."

Johnson said he's taking his leadership position to heart.

"Any way possible I can help Devan or any of the other younger guys on the team I try to (do)," Johnson said. "Whether it be me coming in to talk to them or whether it's me showing them something in the weight room or in the field. It's a real brotherhood and we treat it like that. Everybody's on the same playing level once we go out there. When we put on those pads, we're fighting together."

Brown (6-1, 197), not to be confused with the same-named wide receiver who goes by the nickname "Philly," is the least experienced member of the two-deep at safety. Brown, a junior, has played in 21 games and is a two-year letter winner. He played in all 13 contests last season and has nine career tackles.

Behind the top quartet is a trio of returning players in Zach Domicone, Ron Tanner and Jamie Wood.

Domicone (6-2, 216) is a fifth-year senior who is coming off a knee injury that kept him out of the Gator Bowl and required surgery. Unfortunately for the Beavercreek, Ohio, product, Domicone tweeted Aug. 17 that he was going to undergo another knee surgery. Meyer told reporters on Aug. 20 that Domicone would miss two weeks.

Tanner (6-0, 192) enters his second season after taking a redshirt in 2011.

"I ran it twice, actually," Roby said. "So it wasn't a fluke. That's just a result of the workouts we've been doing. Coach Mick knows what he's doing. He's the best strength coach in America."

Roby is hoping for a big season after breaking through as a starter last season as a redshirt freshman. He recorded three interceptions – tying for the team high – with 47 tackles, 3½ tackles for loss, six pass breakups and a forced fumble. Despite solid personal numbers, Roby watched as Ohio State struggled to a 6-7 season.

He said he learned last season. "Don't underestimate anybody," said Roby of his biggest lesson. "I had some good games, and sometimes I messed up a little bit vs. Indiana or Purdue. It's just because I really underestimated them. That's one thing I learned. You have to treat every opponent the same."

Meyer indicated during training camp that Roby needs to be challenged in order to succeed. When asked if Roby jumps out at him on film, the coach said no – at least not at first.

"His first spring practice was no," Meyer said. "His first couple of days of training camp, no. His last two (practices)? Absolutely, yes. He jumped all over the place."

The practices Meyer is referring to happened near the end of the first week of training camp, and one included a team scrimmage.

So why did Roby improve in the eyes of his new head coach?

"I think he gets bored," Meyer said. "I think he's really talented, and we at positions aren't great, but we've gotten

a lot better. So there's a little bit of a challenge out there. There was no challenge (before). In the spring, he didn't get challenged and we didn't have time to challenge him because we were either getting sacked or we weren't very good on offense."

"So right now we're seeing him challenged and he's answered it. The last two days, the day before the scrimmage and the scrimmage, he looked like the way he's supposed to look."

If Roby can keep that up, that should concern Ohio State's opponents. A confident sophomore, Roby's ability has never been questioned.

"He competes a lot more," sophomore wide receiver Devin Smith said. "He loves the game, and you can tell that when he's out there playing. He's really worked hard on his footwork playing the corner position. If he continues the path that he's on, there's no doubt in my mind that he can be the best corner in the nation."

Before Roby entered his quest to become a top cornerback, he was a verbal commit to play wide receiver at Vanderbilt. Though the defensive backfield is his home, he let his confident nature shine through when asked if he could still play on the offensive side of the ball.

"I always tell the coaches that I could play receiver," said Roby, who is one of Ohio State's top options to return kickoffs this season. "One of these days they're going to put me on the other side."

For now at least, Roby will have to settle for being No. 1 in the program and a starter in the secondary.

– Matthew Hager

He was a safety/quarterback at Columbus Eastmoor who earned all-city, all-central district and all-metro honors. Wood (6-1, 207) is another central Ohio product, a teammate of Zach Boren at Pickerington Central, and a junior who took a redshirt in 2009. Wood has won two letters and has played primarily as a special teams player in 26 games as a Buckeye.

In addition to his work at safety, Bogard (6-0, 197) has seen time at Ohio State's star position – the Buckeyes' nickel-back spot. OSU did not employ the nickel much in August, but players said Bryant, Bogard and Brown had all seen time there.

Bogard said he expects to see the field this fall, especially after being the first freshman to lose his black stripe. A linebacker at Cleveland Glenville, the freshman said his transition to safety has been slow but sure.

"Every freshman comes here expecting to play," Bogard said. "You wouldn't be here if you were not expecting to play. That's what Coach Meyer says."

Adding depth to the safeties is walk-on Vincent Petrella. Petrella (5-11, 173) is a fifth-year senior from Columbus Bishop Hartley. He is in his third year at Ohio State, initially joining the team in 2010.

New Coaches Make Grade

The members of the secondary watched both of their coaches leave for Arkansas in the offseason.

Former safeties coach Paul Hayes left in December to become the Razorbacks' defensive coordinator. One month later, Haynes was joined by former OSU cornerbacks coach Taver Johnson. Johnson served as the interim head coach during spring practice when Bobby Petrino was dismissed and is now the assistant head coach/linebackers coach under John L. Smith.

That could have created a difficult situation for the Buckeye cornerbacks and safeties, especially the upperclassmen who had worked with Haynes and Johnson. Fortunately for the Buckeyes, Coombs and Withers have made a great impression on their new charges.

"They're very smart coaches," Roby said. "They've been around the game for a long time. They've implanted in me the whole thinking aspect while you're playing. They've helped me a lot. That's where I feel I've grown the most."

Several of the players raved about how much the new coaches had taught them in the first few months of the Meyer era.

"This coaching staff is pretty remarkable," Orhian Johnson said. "I really can't picture any other coaching staff that can match up with ours. Those guys are great. Coach Withers has experience in the NFL. Coach Coombs has had some head coaching jobs and coaching jobs at other colleges. I think those guys bring an enthusiasm and knowledge to help us out a whole lot."



Kerry Coombs



Everett Withers

TICKETS Galore



Tickets Galore Inc. is THE source for the hard to find Tickets! We are also a trusted source for selling your tickets confidentially. Tickets Galore is a family owned and operated company that has been serving Buckeye Fans since 1991. We are members of the Central Ohio Better Business Bureau, the Dublin Chamber of Commerce, and The National Association of Ticket Brokers. Call us for courteous and professional service, every time.

Ohio State FOOTBALL TICKETS All Games Available



call us for:
**Buckeyes - Browns
Bengals - Steelers - All NFL
All NBA and NHL Games
MLB Playoffs/World Series
Golf - Concerts**

We are online at- **USaseats.com**

**A+ Rated with BBB
614-889-2989
1-800-829-8457**

**58 S. High St. Ste A Serving Buckeye
in Historic Dublin, OH Fans Since 1991**

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: SPECIAL TEAMS

Specialist Still Special Despite Staff Changes

By CRAIG MERZ
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Kicker Drew Basil knows he and punter Ben Buchanan are fortunate to have the resources to make them successful.

"We're spoiled to have two great long snappers, and the offensive line they're going to be putting out there to block - it's unreal," Basil said.

"I'm going from a school where my long snapper my senior year was a 5-5, 130-pound guy to having them about 210 and 225 and having guys to each side of them three deep who are all over 300."

It just gets better for Basil, et al.

If he thought that the special teams would take a backseat to the highly publicized spread offense under new head coach Urban Meyer, he was wrong. Meyer is coaching the units himself.

"He brings a whole new motivation to this program," long snapper George Makridis said of Meyer. "When you're around him, you feed off his energy every day. He's made me a lot better. My snaps are so much better since the spring. He told me that the other day. It's true I can see it watching film. He's had a positive effect on me."

Makridis, a 6-2, 230-pound junior, starts his second season as the starting long snapper over redshirt freshman Bryce Haynes (6-4, 220), who was given a scholarship by then head coach Jim Tressel in 2011.

Of course, it was Tressel who famously said he regarded the punt as the most important play in football. After Luke Fickell replaced Tressel in a caretaker role for the 2011 season Tressel's brother Dick handled the special teams and also emphasized the kicking game.

Meyer is cut from the same cloth, although with a slightly different weave. As such, he hasn't told Buchanan the punt is the most important play, but the message has been delivered.

"He hasn't said those exact words, but he'll make the comment that the punt's run by the head duck and he means him," Buchanan said. "He knows it's of great importance. He made the comment that every time a punt is blocked, 90 percent of the time you're going to lose that game."

Meyer's teams at his previous stop, Florida, were always strong and ranked among the top 15 nationally in net punting all six years he was in Gainesville.

The Buckeyes got a roundabout taste of Meyer's methods during the Jan. 2 Gator Bowl against his former team. Although he was one season removed from the Gators, they must have learned their lessons well because Florida blocked a punt and returned it for a touchdown and also got a kickoff return against Ohio State for a quick six.

Not surprisingly, OSU lost a 24-17 decision.

"(Meyer) brought a lot of intensity to the program," Buchanan said. "We had a very successful punt team last year, and he takes great pride in his punt teams he's had in the past."

"That combination of being able to build off last year with a great reputation of Coach Meyer is going to add up to a good punt team and a lot of good special teams. I'm very excited."

The Buckeyes were good in some areas and not as shining in others in 2011.

Buchanan, a senior from Westerville (Ohio) Central, was 46th nationally when he averaged 41.3 yards per kick. The net punting average of 37.4 was ranked 37th.

However, his 70 punts were the most at OSU in seven years as the offense struggled and he was forced to become more involved than the team had hoped.

"The punt is a huge play," Buchanan said. "You think of how much is covered on one play - 40, 45, 50 yards compared to a 7-run yard or a 12-yard pass. There's always pressure to do well on that one play."

"Our offense is going to come along this year. I don't know how often we'll be backed up. It could be more pooch punting because I feel our offense is going to be able to move the ball."

A big change for Buchanan (5-11, 190) and his likely backup, Basil, is that Meyer is drastically changing the coverage by going to directional and/or situational punting.

"Since (Buchanan) got here, he pretty much punted down the field and whatever happens, happens," Makridis said. "Now we're doing a little bit of directional punting. It's really the first time Ben's done it in his career. He struggled a little bit at first, but he's gotten a lot better. He's hit some bombs."

Gone are the days of punting downfield and hoping the tacklers are there. It worked to a degree thanks to Buchanan's efforts last year - 25 of his punts were fair caught, and he ranked sixth nationally with 27 punts downed inside the 20 and was third nationally with 13 punts downed inside the 10. But he has been asked to do more this year.

"It is different," Buchanan said. "The directional punting aspect is what we're going to bring to the table this year. I did that a little bit in high school but not really under Coach Tressel or Coach Fickell."

"I'm thankful I was able to work on that a bit in the spring - get the schemes down. I know we're going to have great athletes with great effort covering the ball. As long as I can do my job with a great get-off and great hang time, I know they're going to get down there and cover well."

Buchanan explains the new approach as follows: "If we're on the right hash, we'd like to keep it between the hashes and the numbers so we can strategically have our guys run and have a good punt placement."

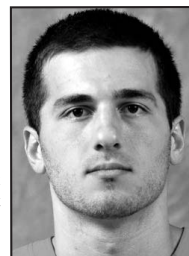
"We can kick it across the field, too, if there's a big crosswind. Ideally we're pinning them in one corner of the field so our guys can surround them and be able to force a fair catch. If not, I know my guys are going to be able to make tackles."

Buchanan is also facing another change as he will be the holder for field goals and extra points for the first time.

"Coach Meyer asked me as a senior veteran to take over the spot, and I was happy to do that," he said.

Being a former placekicker in high school, Buchanan is well aware that he has to develop chemistry with Basil.

"First, we were both kickers and punters," he said. "I can understand what he's going



George Makridis

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: SPECIAL TEAMS

through and he can understand what I'm going through in certain parts of the game.

"Now, to be able to work on the field-goal unit together is pretty cool. Anytime we're scoring points for the Scarlet and Gray is pretty exciting. Drew had a great year last year. I'm sure he's looking to have a great one this year, and I'm looking to help him accomplish that."

Neither can do their job without a good long snapper, and they have the utmost faith in Makridis and Haynes.

"It starts with the snap," Basil said. "All the blocking up front, the hold and then I've got to put it through. If we don't put it through, it's a failure."

Basil (6-1, 210) led the Big Ten in field-goal percentage last season when he connected on 16 of 19 (84.2 percent). He opened his career in 2010 by missing his only two attempts and then missed his first two last season.

He made all but one the rest of the season, and his streak of 12 converted kicks at one point was the third longest in school history. Basil made four from 40 or more yards and also hit 36 of 37 extra points.

Having Meyer around will make him better, the Chillicothe, Ohio, native said.

"It's nice to know he is teaching us what goes through his head and teaching us what we're doing and why we're doing it," Basil said. "It's taken us to the next level."

Seeking Better Returns

One area where improvement is needed is kickoff return defense after the Buckeyes placed 33rd nationally last season as opponents averaged 20.2 yards when they got the ball. Basil had 14 touchbacks.

"I've think I've gotten stronger with all the strength and conditioning we've done this year," Basil said.

As far as the return units, the loss of senior co-captain Jordan Hall (5-9, 198) for as many as two games could lead to a bevy of potential replacements. Hall (17th nationally in kickoff returns with a 26.3 average and 41st in punt returns at 5.8) underwent surgery in June after he cut a tendon in his foot.

Junior wide receiver Chris Fields (6-0, 197) shared the load with Hall last season. He had

Basil, Buchanan Ready For Anything

Pressure? What pressure?

Drew Basil has already been put through the ringer by new Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer, who also happens to take a keen interest in the special teams as their supervisor.

During a spring practice indoors at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, Meyer had the 3,000 or so fans crowd around the junior kicker as he attempted a field goal.

Talk about up close and personal. Even though they were screaming and waving their arms at Meyer's behest, Basil was successful.

"Just another kick," Basil said. "The O-line, snapper and holder all did great to give me a chance to put it through."

Basil also was tested the following week at the spring game in Ohio Stadium when Meyer made him attempt several long-range kicks out of the normal flow of the scrimmage. He wanted all the attention of 80,000 people on Basil, and the junior responded with a series of makes and a few misses.

Those clutch situations were nothing compared to what Meyer did during the preseason camp, however.

"No, he hasn't put everybody around me," Basil said, "but the most pressure I've had so far is Coach Meyer standing literally right behind the holder on the kick. Sometimes I'm afraid I'm going to kick him with how close he is."

That holder happens to be senior punter Ben Buchanan, who is assuming the role for the first time.

"He's doing real well," Basil said. "He's gotten a lot better at it. The thing is you've got to hit the spot (where the ball needs to be placed) every time."

Another thing Basil likes about Buchanan is he knows the holder is going to grab the occasional errant snap.

"Being the punter, you have to have the best hands on the team," Buchanan said. "If you drop a punt snap, all eyes are on you."

And, yes, the punt is still considered a critical part of the Buckeyes' success by Meyer.

"Oh, yeah. That's why he personally coaches the punt team," long snapper George Makridis said. "That's his philosophy. The punt is the No.1 thing around here."

Even so, Makridis said it may not appear to the rest of the team that there is a lot of work that goes into kicking.

"During the season we'll get our fair share of - I don't know what to call it, jealousy? - from the team because we can only practice so much," he said. "You can punt only so many balls and snap so many balls during the day while they're bashing each other in."

"They clearly have the tougher job, but during the offseason we do everything the

same. We do all the workouts with the team."

Meyer has changed how the punt team operates this season by implementing directional punting that puts more emphasis on kicking to a spot rather than raw yardage to give the cover unit the best opportunity to limit runbacks.

By doing so, Buchanan may sacrifice his distance.

"I don't know," he said. "That's an executive decision from Coach Meyer and I'm a team player first and foremost. Individual stats are great, too, but I'd rather go 12-0."

"Last year we were able to lead the Big Ten in punts inside the 10, inside the 20. We had a good net average as well. My favorite thing is pinning them deep and putting my team in good field position. Whatever Coach calls for, I'm going to execute to the best of my ability."

That could include a bit of trickery along the way by Meyer.

"I think there's a good chance, I really do," Buchanan said. "Fake punt. Fake field goal. I know he has some tricks up his sleeve."

"I am an ex-baseball player so the dream would be to throw a nice little 40-yard touchdown pass to (Jake) Stoneburner or something like that."

- Craig Merz

five punt returns for 88 yards and a 17.6 per return average, including a critical 69-yard punt return for a touchdown in the win against Toledo.

But there is plenty of competition.

Sophomore cornerback Bradley Roby (5-11, 190) has been pining for a chance to return kicks.

"I've been trying to tell them to put me back there," he said. "I was back there in the spring, and I had a couple of good returns."

When asked what makes a good return

man, Roby said, "You can't be scared. You just have to run. When you see a hole, you have to hit it and just make a play."

Confidence also helps. Roby knows he may not be the first choice for punt returns but that he will not let the team down if given a chance.

"Hopefully I can get first string on that, too, and make a whole bunch of plays," he said.

There will be others vying for opportunities. Junior running back Carlos Hyde (6-0, 235) and freshman backfield mate Brionte Dunn (6-1,

214) have been mentioned along with junior wide receiver Corey "Philly" Brown (5-11, 186).

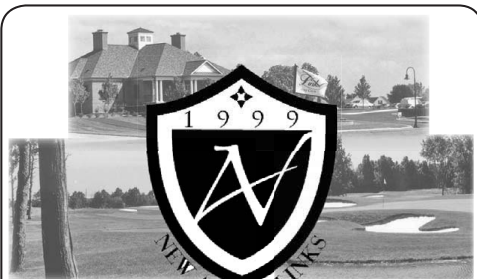
Whether they are kicking or receiving, it's a new era for the Buckeyes' specialty units under the watchful eye of Meyer.

"He has core values for the team and the first one is honesty," Makridis said. "It's about being real to each other."

"He makes it pretty clear to everyone if you're not doing your job right, he'll find someone else who will do it. I have to make sure I'm doing things right. That's the motivation."

Ohio

Golf



7100 New Albany Links Dr. • New Albany, OH
(614) 855-8532
www.newalbanylinks.com

Buy 1 Get 1 Greens Fee

Valid only Monday through Thursday
or Weekends & Holidays after 12:00.

Expires on 8/31/12



BLACKHAWK

GOLF CLUB

Award-winning
public
golf
course

8830 Dustin Road • Galena, Ohio • 43021
(740) 965-1042

GolfBlackhawk.com

Play
One
of the
Best



Wacky Wednesday Seniors 60+ \$22 each
Foursome Special Mon-Fri, 7-9 am \$25 each
Weekend Special Sat & Sun, 7-9 am \$35 each

GROUP LODGING STAY & PLAY PACKAGES

Weekdays (Mon-Thurs) \$94.75 per person
includes unlimited golf
Weekends (Fri, Sat & Sun) \$115.79 per person
includes unlimited golf

7500 Township Road 103 • Millersburg, OH
Contact us at (330) 674-6110
or toll free at (866) 674-6110.
blackdiamondgolfcourse.com