

Spring Answer Man Makes Triumphant Return

What that small percentage contained was awfully appealing, though. It featured a ball-control passing attack that allowed receivers to hit defensive creases and showcase their athletic ability after the catch. It also showcased multiple formations, option reads, misdirection plays, moving pockets and even an end around. Imagining what the other 70 percent of the offense will feature simply adds to the anticipation that this isn't going to be your grandfather's Ohio State offense.

Following a nearly nonexistent winter in central Ohio, cold and rainy conditions should have conspired to keep attendance low at this year's annual spring football game at Ohio State.

Yet the brisk weather was almost a metaphor for the breath of fresh air pumped into the OSU program by new head coach Urban Meyer, and more than 81,000 fans packed the Horseshoe on April 21 to get a firsthand look at the refurbished Buckeyes.

This time last year, the team was coming off a 12-1 record that included a Sugar Bowl victory and record-tying sixth consecutive Big Ten championship. But then the bottom fell out as an NCAA investigation ultimately claimed head coach Jim Tressel, three-year starting quarterback Terrelle Pryor and much of the dignity of the program.

The Buckeyes left to pick up the pieces – including interim head coach Luke Fickell – fought on gamely and were 6-3 in early November with a chance to play in the inaugural Big Ten Championship Game.

But the team blew a certain victory at Purdue, and the subsequent overtime loss to the Boilermakers began a downward spiral that didn't end until the Buckeyes had finished the season with the program's first four-game losing streak since 1943 and first seven-loss season since 1897.

Enter Meyer in late November and it was almost like the preceding 12 months had never happened. But it's not simply the dazzling glare of two national championship rings the coach won at Florida that has members of Buckeye Nation so starry-eyed. It is the enthusiasm of Meyer, who truly seems rejuvenated after taking a year away from the game to reconnect with his family and recharge his inner battery.

Meyer's enthusiasm turned out to be infectious and helped transform what had become a stodgy four-week exercise under Tressel into one of the most interesting and refreshing springs surrounding Ohio State football in recent memory.

Even with the buzz that surrounds Meyer, however, there is some unfinished business that remains not to mention a couple of important position battles that will continue into the fall. Therefore, the Spring Answer Man returns for his 18th annual visit to BSB with an attempt to separate hype from reality.

Q. Everyone knows Braxton Miller is a game-breaker with his running ability. Did he improve his throwing this spring?

A. In a word, yes. Still, the sophomore-to-be has a long way to go before he will be considered as lethal with his arm as he is with his feet. Accuracy and decision-making continue to be problem areas, but the same could be said for the majority of quarterbacks with Miller's level of experience.

The good news is that Miller continues to get better. We saw that last year as a tentative quarterback in early October became more and more confident by late November. Miller is a supremely gifted athlete, and under the guidance of Meyer and innovative offensive coordinator Tom Herman, the young QB should be afforded ample opportunities to grow and flourish.

Q. Is the Ohio State offense really going to feature a wide-open spread attack? It sure didn't seem like it during the spring game.

A. As with most spring games – which are really only glorified scrimmages – the main goals are to work on fundamentals and keep injuries to a minimum. Because of some prior injuries as well as depth issues at various positions, this year's spring game featured only about 30 percent of the overall offensive play-book.

A. That is accurate especially because the Buckeyes return nine regulars on that side of the ball. Meyer's spread offense gets most of the buzz, but when he won his national championships at Florida, the Gators ranked sixth nationally in total defense in 2006 and ninth in 2008.

The bulk of the star power for the Buckeyes is up front, and leading the charge is defensive end John Simon, who was off the charts this spring in terms of his mental and physical approach to the game. It's all but guaranteed Simon will be a team captain in the fall.

Q. What about the linebacker position? Who are the favorites to start there?

A. Sophomore Ryan Shazier parlayed his excellent play at the end of last season with a solid spring to lock up the weakside spot. Meanwhile, the light may finally have come on for former five-star prospect Etienne Sabino. He will enter fall camp seemingly having found a home on the strong side.

In the middle, sophomore Curtis Grant bounced back from what was a somewhat disappointing rookie campaign to cement the starting middle linebacker spot. But Grant missed the spring game with a pinched nerve, and senior-to-be Storm Klein should be fully healed from a knee injury by the time fall camp begins. That could be a position battle to watch throughout August.

Q. As long as we're talking about the defense, how about the secondary?

A. The defensive backfield features a nice mix of experience and youth. Travis Howard, Orhian Johnson, C.J. Barnett and Christian Bryant each have started a lot of games, and cornerback Bradley Roby was one of last season's bright spots as a redshirt freshman. Sophomore Doran Grant seemed to have a breakout spring while such other up-and-comers as Ron Tanner and Tyvis Powell were also solid.

It's also worth noting that Meyer seems to maximize the talent from his secondary. Going back to his six-year tenure at Florida from 2005-10, the Gators finished four times among the nation's top 12 teams in pass efficiency defense.

Q. Despite the excitement of Meyer coming on board, how about a reality check? After all, this is still a team coming off a 6-7 season and one that is ineligible for a bowl game. What are the realistic expectations for 2012?

A. There are several factors to consider when assessing how the Buckeyes will fare this season. The program is undergoing a sea change – coaching staff, philosophy, mental approach, nutrition. You name it and it's markedly different this year under Meyer. It seems more than likely it will take a while before all cylinders are firing in unison.

Yet there are several factors which favor the Buckeyes. Not the least of those is a friendly early-season schedule with nonconference opponents Miami (Ohio), Central Florida, California and UAB – teams that combined to go 19-30 a year ago – all coming to Ohio Stadium in September. That certainly bodes well for a quick start.

There are going to be tough road games, of course, including the Big Ten opener Sept. 29 at Michigan State and a Nov. 17 showdown at Wisconsin. But the Buckeyes also welcome Nebraska and Illinois to the Horseshoe as well as Michigan for the traditional regular-season finale Nov. 24.

By that time, we'll know how well the team has taken to all of the changes implemented by its new head coach and whether or not the springtime euphoria has carried over to the fall. Given Meyer's record wherever he has coached before, it would be unwise to bet against him.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

Q. We heard Meyer was extremely disappointed with the offensive line when he arrived in November. How did that work itself out this spring?

A. The new coach is a very direct individual, and a couple of offensive linemen learned that early on when they were not on time for meetings. That led to a host of mandatory early-morning workouts the result of which left no doubt as to who was in charge.

To their credit, the offensive linemen responded to their new challenges and have become a leaner, meaner unit – figuratively and literally. They have accepted new leadership roles while several have embraced position changes, all the while earning the trust of their head coach.

Q. Who will be the starting tailback?

A. With the kind of offensive style Meyer wants to employ, the starting tailback position might not carry the kind of clout it used to when the Buckeyes relied on the H-formation. Meyer still prefers a power running game to supplement his spread offense, though, and he has a talented stable of big backs from which to choose.

In terms of a pecking order at the position, it will be Jordan Hall followed by Carlos Hyde, Rod Smith and Br'onté Dunn when fall camp commences in August. Each will likely get his share of carries although Hall will see a lot of action as a kind of tailback/receiver hybrid.

Q. Which of the running backs was your particular favorite?


A. Hall and Hyde are steady if unspectacular, and we still think Smith can be a stud if he proves he can hold into the football. Dunn is the one who seems to have the most upside at this point. He did everything you could possibly ask from a true freshman – including playing through some bumps and bruises – and could be a real wild card in the fall.

Q. Did any of the young receivers emerge as a reliable go-to guy for Miller?

A. Most of the receivers had productive springs, but it's difficult to say any of them project as the go-to guy in the fall. That's because we have been teased too many times in past springs by the likes of Taurian Washington and Bam Childress only to watch those players disappear once the regular season began.

Potentially, the Buckeyes have a lot of weapons with Devin Smith, Corey "Philly" Brown, Evan Spencer (whom we really like), Chris Fields and Tyrone Williams. And you can't escape the fact that Michael Thomas caught 12 balls for 131 yards in the spring game. They are all going to get a chance to catch a lot of balls come fall. We're just not sure right now which ones will make the most of those opportunities.

Q. It seems the strength of the team will once again be on defense just because of an experience standpoint. Is that an accurate assessment?



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Charter Member

Offense Progresses Slowly But Surely

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For the first time in more than a decade, the Ohio State football team had to learn a new offense during spring's 15 practice sessions.

That means new terminology, new plays, new strategies, new coaches and a new tempo – a calculus complicated by the fact the offense new head coach Urban Meyer, offensive coordinator Tom Herman and the staff have put together is not an easy subject to tackle.

"This offense takes a while," running backs coach Stan Drayton said midway through the spring. "This is not an easy offense. It's a very complicated offense. They have to know a lot, and right now they're still playing the game thinking. Once they get it, you'll start to see the speed improve."

Add in the fact that Ohio State stumbled to a 6-7 record a season ago with an offense that checked in at 107th in the nation in yards gained and it was fair to expect the Buckeyes to struggle this spring on that side of the ball.

It did exactly that through the first few sessions, and Meyer even used the phrase "clown show" to describe some facets of the team's hit-or-miss sessions in late March and early April.

But by the time the spring game came around, it was fair to say there had been progress for the Ohio State attackers. The offense beat the defense on a winner/loser day for the first time April 11 and then tied the defense – thought to be a more veteran, more consistent unit – a week later in front of the media.

The spurts of competency continued into the April 21 spring game. The offense averaged 5.8 yards per play, an increase of 0.7 from a year ago, quarterbacks Braxton Miller and Kenny Guiton were efficient, and a few more skill position players began to show they have the ability to threaten defenses.

All in all, it was hard to argue that each position didn't get better during spring, and excitement was not in short supply.

"I think it's really exciting being out there

knowing the guy running your offense is Coach Meyer and anything can happen at any time," offensive lineman Jack Mewhort said. "I feel like it's a little more explosive and fast, that at any time we can bust one for a lot of yards."

Through the midway point, Meyer had seen enough from the perimeter run game to feel that the Buckeyes had a good handle on what the team was trying to accomplish in that realm, allowing the offensive staff to spend the last half of the spring trying to work out the kinks in the aerial attack.

After the spring game, Meyer said he still wasn't sure if the team could throw the ball consistently, but there were at least positive steps forward.

"I have a better opinion of some guys now after more reps," Meyer said. "Throwing a football is just like anything. As often as you can throw it, you can get better and better and better because you teach off videotape."

When it came to the search for game-breakers, Meyer rattled off a top-five ranking headed by running back Jordan Hall, who also has the ability to step out and play some wideout to bring versatility to the attack. He was followed by tight end Jake Stoneburner, who can also split out wide, running back Carlos Hyde and wideouts Corey "Philly" Brown, Michael Thomas and Devin Smith.

Meyer added that tight ends Nick Vannett and Jeff Heurman also have playmaking ability but made it clear he still wasn't ecstatic about the depth in that arena.

Still, it's fair to say the developments of the spring created some anticipation both among the fan base and the players.

"I think everybody enjoys it," Drayton said. "It's a fast tempo offense. It's definitely outside the box of what they're accustomed to, but we're dealing with great kids who all want to win football games. They've bought into what we're teaching to them and what we've brought to them."

What follows is a breakdown of each position group on the Ohio State offense and its progress during the spring.

Quarterback

When Meyer was hired in November, it was thought that the marriage between the offensive guru and the multitalented Miller would be a match made in heaven. Spring did little to change that opinion.

The coach who has mentored standout quarterbacks Josh Harris at Bowling Green and Alex Smith at Utah as well as Chris Leak and Tim Tebow at Florida did little to hide how enamored he has become with Miller's tremendous tool chest of skills and intangibles.

"I'm very impressed with Braxton, first of all just as a person," Meyer said. "The guy is a worker. A great work ethic, which is very important obviously at that position, but the thing that is the most important characteristic of a quarterback is the competitive spirit, and he has that. I was talking to our coaching staff just a minute ago and said enjoy every minute you've got coaching guys like that. He's picked it up fairly well."

The sophomore showed improvement during the spring in a variety of ways, the most noticeable being in the quality of pass he throws. During Miller's freshman campaign, especially in tough weather conditions, his ball tended to wobble or knuckle, but it was clear he had put a lot of time into refining that delivery during the offseason.

His 24-for-31 performance (77.4 percent) in the spring game also showed an improved

efficiency after he completed only 54.1 percent (85 of 157) of his passes a season ago.

"He can pass the ball," Meyer said. "Release, I give him an A. He has a very good release. Arm strength, I'll probably say a B, but I'm very critical. Accuracy, a C or a B. We've got to get him more accurate, but he's getting better. He had a very good spring, a very productive spring."

The offense also seems tailor-made to showcase Miller's skills. His decision-making ability, quick acceleration and ability to make people miss is suited to running the zone-read option, Ohio State's new base run play, and the passing game overhaul has resulted in more quick reads, screen passes and crossing routes designed to get the ball to open receivers with room to operate.

"It's just a different type of offense," said Miller, who compared it to the offense he ran in high school at Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne. "It's all spread with the plays coming in quick – no huddle and just keep it moving. It's more fun. It's just like high school back at Wayne – all signals, get the ball in and make the best plays you can."

While the progress of Miller was one of the most discussed topics of the spring, one of the pleasant surprises had to be the development of Guiton. Meyer tipped his hand about his thoughts on Guiton's skills late during one press conference, following a comment about Miller's ability to make plays in broken situations by making sure he complemented Guiton's similar skill.

"Having a quarterback that makes something out of nothing is every coach's dream and we've got one," he said before pausing a beat. "We might have two."

Guiton had a solid spring game, completing 17 of 26 passes with a touchdown pass and a scoring run. He also threw an interception, which led to one Meyer critique.

"Kenny Guiton is a much improved player," the coach said. "His arm strength is there, but he doesn't let it go for some reason. His accuracy is not bad, but he doesn't let it go. We have to figure out why. That's why I was talking to him on the field. He threw a pick today, but if he lets it go it wouldn't have been a pick. Those two guys had very good springs."

Guiton, a late addition to the 2009 recruiting class out of the Houston area who has seen only small playing time to this point in his career, agreed.

"I think I came a long way," he said. "I'm going to work hard and come back next season ready to go."

Early enrollee Cardale Jones was limited in his reps and looked as though he needs continued refinement to become more consistent in his accuracy.

Running Back

Between the abilities of Miller and the depth at tailback provided by Hall, Hyde, sophomore Rod Smith and true freshman Bri'onte Dunn, Meyer was pleased with the development of the run game through the spring.

The coach was clearly impressed with Hall, who has always shown impressive quickness and vision but has never truly added a game-breaking component to his game. In fact, one could argue he was a disappointment in 2011, following an 87-yard performance in his first game at Miami (Fla.) with only 321 rushing yards the rest of the campaign.

Meyer noticed, describing in March Hall's career to this point as decent but not good.



JOSH WINSLOW

GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION – Starting quarterback Braxton Miller (5) impressed new head coach Urban Meyer during spring practices.

The coaching staff asked the Jeannette, Pa., product to improve on the field, in the classroom and as a leader during the offseason, and Hall took notice. Drayton said Hall has increased his GPA, has started mentoring teammates and also looks good with the ball in his hands.

"Once he gets the ball, his first step when the ball is in his hands is as good as I've ever seen," Drayton said. "He's tough to tackle. He's so quick, so to not get him in space, we've got to be dumb coaches, right? We're going to do the best we can to showcase that ability."

Hall has also caught four touchdown passes in his career, and Meyer said his abilities in that area will allow the Buckeyes to split him out wide if necessary as he takes on more of a hybrid role.

The senior-to-be was being followed closely in the pecking order by Hyde, who led Ohio State with 5.3 yards per carry a season ago while adding six touchdowns on 106 tries. Hyde continues to be an intriguing combination of size – he is listed at 6-0, 235 pounds – and speed with the ability to take the ball to the house if he does hit the open field.

"Carlos Hyde has had a good spring as well," Meyer said.

Smith is third on the depth chart. This spring, he started to show some of the quickness and power that made him one of the most talked-about players on the team while he took a redshirt in 2010. That should be a confidence boost after a tough 2011 season that included only 116 rushing yards, two lost fumbles and a short position switch to linebacker.

Lastly, Dunn enrolled early and turned enough heads even while battling a knee injury that Meyer expects him to be part of the running back rotation come the fall.

"He's putting all kinds of effort in all over the place and I'm really excited to see his progression in the spread," Drayton said.

The fullback position promised to be used in a variety of different ways. Fourth-year starter Zach Boren quickly became one of Meyer's favorite players because of his

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JOSH WINSLOW

TOP TARGET – Freshman Michael Thomas (83) was impressive during the spring game, catching 12 passes for 131 yards.

toughness and work ethic, and the reward in spring was more access to the ball than he had seen in years past.

Sometimes lining up in the backfield and other times as an H-back, Boren was a target in the passing game through swings and shovel passes while receiving the occasional handoff, a new development in his time at OSU.

Wideout/Tight End

One of Meyer's biggest goals during the spring was turning around a passing game that finished 115th in yards per game last season, and to do that the coach made it clear he needed to see improvement out of the wide receiver corps.

Brown, Devin Smith and Stoneburner tied for the most receptions on the squad a year ago with 14, a total that clearly would not be acceptable to the head coach in 2012.

"One of the first things Urban told us is he is used to guys catching more than 14 passes," Devin Smith said. "He said 14 passes in his offense is called one game."

In the spring game, that turned out to be a prophetic statement. Though true freshman early enrollee Michael Thomas didn't quite get to that total, he did haul in 12 passes for 131 yards while providing a pretty positive introduction for himself.

"About the first scrimmage, he started to come on," Meyer said of the Californian who spent last year at Fork Union (Va.) Military Academy. "Unfortunately he's going the wrong direction at some points in time, but he's very talented. He's a kid that is working nonstop. He's our most dedicated receiver as a true freshman. I'm not surprised he had that type of day today."

Thomas boasts excellent size at 6-2 and 196 pounds and isn't afraid to sky for the ball with his excellent leaping ability.

He was named one of the top receivers of the spring by Meyer along with Brown, who caught 205 yards' worth of passes a season ago including a touchdown in the Michigan game. Brown has always boasted excellent straight line speed but has had a rocky transition to a full-time role at wideout after splitting time as a back and receiver in high school at Springfield (Pa.) Cardinal O'Hara.

Smith, who spent most of camp working with the first unit, is right behind after leading Ohio State with 294 yards and 21.0 yards per catch a season ago while scoring four touchdowns, most among the receivers.

No one has doubted Smith's speed since he won Ohio's prep 100-meter dash title in 2011, but receivers coach Zach Smith said the Massillon Washington product needs to play as fast as he is.

"Obviously with speed you can get past DBs, but it's not all about long balls. There's the short game and intermediate passes and making a move," Devin Smith said. "That's one thing (Meyer) talks about. Making a defender miss is one thing he really likes skill players to do."

Sophomore Evan Spencer was starting to show signs of breaking out before suffering a broken bone in his shoulder midway through camp. After catching just three passes last year, the son of former OSU running back and assistant coach Tim Spencer was excelling on the field and putting in the work off the field expected of a coach's son.

Tyrone Williams has always been a red-zone threat at 6-6 but struggled catching the ball his first two seasons at Ohio State, a skill he seemed more adept at this spring.

"I know Coach Meyer expects a lot out of us, so at the same time he's saying that he knows we have talent and we just have to prove it every day," Spencer said. "We did feel like we had to step up. At the same time, we know we're talented and know what we can do so it's just up to us to show what we can do."

While the wideouts were showing progress, the tight ends were confirming they will be a big part of Meyer's first offense at Ohio State. That starts with Stoneburner, who caught seven touchdowns a season ago and figures to be more involved in the passing game considering the past success Meyer and Herman have had at developing pass-catching tight ends.

"In practice I'm noticing how and why we're able to get open," Stoneburner said. "We still have to go out there and do it, but as long as I keep running the routes, getting confidence with Coach Meyer, and Braxton and I get confidence with each other, my numbers will definitely change from last year."

Though he might not be quite the game-breaker that Stoneburner figures to be, Heuerman showed the ability to both block and catch passes throughout practice sessions and games a season ago and continued to develop in the spring.

Vannett also has the speed and size (6-6, 248) to be an elite receiving tight end,

though position coach Tim Hinton said the redshirt freshman was still adjusting mentally to the offense.

Offensive Line

Meyer was dissatisfied with both the depth at offensive line and the shape the big men were in when he arrived on campus, but the head coach told Ohio State's high school coaches clinic April 20 that the offensive line was the most improved position throughout the spring.

He saw the gains both on and off the field, noting that linemen were not exactly disciplined when he first arrived.

"Three or four missed my first team meeting and unfortunately I had a couple miss the second team meeting," Meyer said. "That led to the 5 a.m. workouts for a whole week because for some reason we couldn't get to meetings on time. I'm proud to say they don't miss meetings anymore."

By the end of the spring, Ohio State seemed to have settled on a starting five that included two players fairly new to the position of tackle. Newly installed left tackle Mewhort – who quickly established himself the leader of the group – had dabbled at the position before this season but started all 13 games at left and right guard a season ago. On the right side, Reid Fragel was getting used to the position after spending his first three seasons at OSU as a blocking tight end.

Left guard Andrew Norwell – who started all 13 games between left tackle and left guard last season – was still a mauler in the run game while right guard Marcus Hall returned to a starting role at that spot after beginning the 2011 season there.

Coaches raved about Hall's rededication to the sport this spring, and the same could

be said of center Corey Linsley, who moved over from guard and put a firm grasp on his new position.

"I'm really proud of the way guys responded," Mewhort said. "There's a tough crew out there. Reid Fragel is a hardworking, lunch-pail type of dude, same as Marcus Hall. You guys know Andrew Norwell is one of the toughest guys I know, so it's a tough group and I know that coming in Coach Meyer wanted us to change and adapt and I think we did that. I'm proud of how it happened."

One of the biggest surprises of camp was true freshman tackle Taylor Decker, a four-star prospect from Vandalia (Ohio) Butler who split reps on the left and right sides during camp and even made a cameo or two as the starting right tackle.

"He's as smart as anybody in my room football-wise," offensive line coach Ed Warinner said. "He has a bright, bright future."

Another early enrollee, center Jacoby Boren of Pickerington (Ohio) Central, turned heads with his standard-issue Boren cussedness before undergoing shoulder surgery near the midway point in an effort to make sure he's healthy before fall camp. Sophomore guard Antonio Underwood also was showing the ability to contribute.

"They've done a good job," Meyer said of the line. "Their bodies are changing a little bit, their attitudes are changing. Jack Mewhort leads the crew. Corey Linsley right now is a fine player. He's the first one to tell you he wasn't a fine player a year ago. His complete commitment to Ohio State wasn't there a year ago. It is now. Marcus Hall is another guy who really has come a long way. I really like him right now."

"There's a unit being built there."



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Defense Hopes To Continue Silver Bullet Tradition

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Perhaps the reason the hiring of Urban Meyer was so exciting for Ohio State fans – other than the fact that he won two national championships at Florida – was that he's become known for always possessing a creative and diverse offensive playbook.

So it wasn't a surprise when Ohio Stadium filled more than 80,000 seats with eager fans waiting to see that new offense April 21 during the annual spring game.

But if the Buckeyes are going to win the way Meyer hopes they will, the head coach understands it is more contingent on whether his team will be able to keep up the tradition of Ohio State's prominent defense.

"I expect (our offense) to get very close to Ohio State's standards here real soon," Meyer said.

In six practices during which Meyer set the offense and defense in direct competition, it was the defense that posted a winning 3-1-2 record. Meyer, of course, mentioned he hoped the defense would be the more efficient unit, specifically because the offense is undergoing a transformation in its scheme.

The defense likely would have been the better unit either way when looking at what it returned this year. The Buckeyes lost only two players from their starting defense a year ago in defensive back/linebacker Tyler Moeller and linebacker Andrew Sweat, and the squad returns what should be the most talented defensive front in the Big Ten.

The Buckeyes also kept Luke Fickell, who served as the team's interim head coach a year ago, on staff. Fickell, who is the defensive coordinator as well as linebackers coach, is expected to keep consistency with the way Ohio State has approached its defensive philosophy in the past.

Meanwhile, co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers, the interim head coach at North Carolina a year ago, will bring new perspectives to an OSU defense that should be rather experienced personnel-wise.

"There are a lot of guys that have one goal in mind and that's to try to win all of the games," Withers said. "That's the bottom line. I believe that each one of us came here or stayed here at Ohio State to win it all."

"We want to play the best defense we

can to try to win it all. The key is that we all believe that if we'll work together that we'll have a chance to win it all."

The following is BSB's look at the Ohio State defense following 15 spring practice sessions with the addition of some analysis.

Defensive Line

It didn't take long for Meyer to identify what will be the strength of his football team this season, and the head coach is comfortable that his Buckeyes will be primed to replicate the defensive success of the past.

Meyer didn't hide his admiration for John Simon from day one at Ohio State and recently hinted the senior defensive end will be one of the team's captains come fall.

Simon didn't let his coach down during spring drills, turning in perhaps the most dominant three-week span of practice by an individual player the team has seen in years. Rarely – if ever – was Simon corralled by the Buckeyes' offensive line, which caused Meyer and the staff to consider holding him out of drills because he was disrupting the offensive productivity.

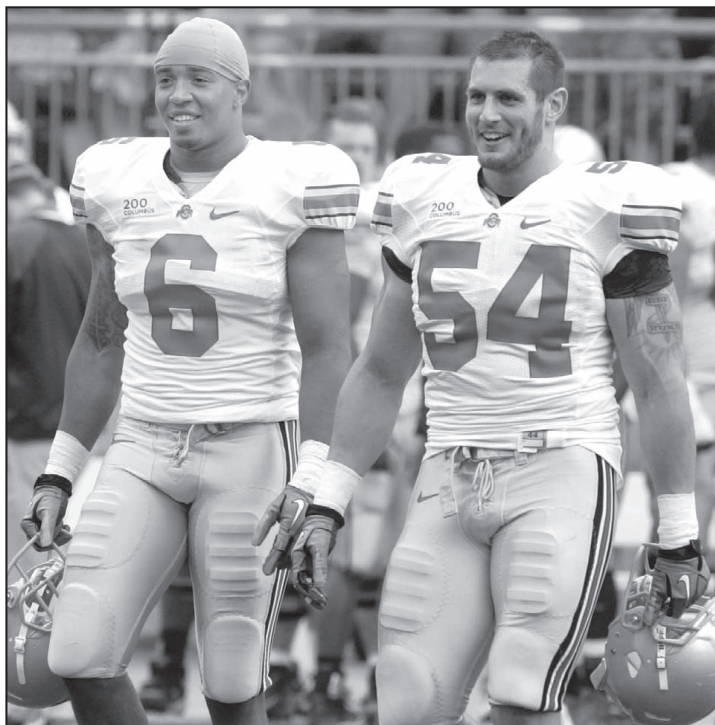
"It is a tremendous honor," Simon responded when asked what it was like to be singled out by Meyer as one of the team's elite players. "For someone with his track record to say something like that about me, it's great. But we've got a lot of great guys on this team who are just like me. We go in every day and work hard."

Simon's effectiveness along the defensive line carried to the point where Meyer didn't feel the need to play the senior in the spring game. Simon, who was fully dressed for the game, instead paced up and down the sidelines anxiously wanting to get into the action.

Meyer, however, didn't see the point of Simon participating, saying after the game, "John Simon didn't play because he didn't need to play."

Having a stopper such as Simon on the defensive front most certainly is a tremendous weapon, but that's not where it stops for the Buckeyes at that position group. In fact, that's just where it begins.

Junior defensive tackle Johnathan Hankins could turn into another player who can single-handedly take over a game. Known for his slimmed down but still massive 317-pound frame, Hankins was also unblockable during spring drills.



SONNY BROCKWAY

GOT THE DAY OFF – Senior defensive lineman John Simon (54) did not play in the spring game despite being a Gray team captain with classmate Etienne Sabino (6). Head coach Urban Meyer later explained Simon 'didn't need to play.'

Perhaps what makes him dangerous, however, is the quickness with which he flows to the football. Typically a player of his size and stature is relegated to an interior line role, but the Buckeyes felt comfortable moving him outside last season.

"I'm moving well," said Hankins, who hasn't forgotten that his stamina was the biggest concern before his collegiate career started. "I'm not getting tired anymore. My pass rush is looking pretty good. I feel pretty comfortable where I am right now."

Hankins didn't play in the spring game because he had arthroscopic surgery on his knee two days before the contest. Meyer

wasn't concerned about long-term effects the procedure might have on Hankins, saying he should be fine in the near future.

Ohio State started the spring with the same starters as last year – Adam Bellamy and Garrett Goebel starting alongside Hankins and Simon. However, sophomore Michael Bennett used the spring to impress the new coaching staff enough to seemingly pass Bellamy on the depth chart. Ohio State rotates the players throughout the line positions, but Goebel will primarily play nose guard while Hankins plays tackle and Simon and Bennett play on the ends.

Bennett, who is finally fully recovered from a broken arm he suffered in an all-star game after his senior high school season, was incredibly active on the interior defensive line. He recorded two tackles and a sack in the spring game.

"I feel really good right now," Bennett said. "It is great to be healthy and I think I've made a lot of strides this spring. Last year at first, my arm was kind of weak and I had to wear a splint on it. Early in the spring I took it off to see what I could do, and I feel like I've gotten stronger."

Rounding out the first-string defensive line is Goebel, who enters this season after a serviceable year in the starting lineup last season. He hasn't stuck out so far as a dynamic playmaker, but his prowess tying up opposing blockers has allowed other players on the defense to flow to the ball more easily.

But what makes Ohio State's defensive line a weapon of immeasurable importance is the depth, and players not atop the depth chart will all have impactful roles for the Buckeyes this season.

Bellamy was a more than workable option on the starting line a year ago and will likely

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

be an active member of Ohio State's rotation. Bellamy, who recorded a sack and a half in the spring game, arguably has the skill-set to start at other prominent programs but is more of a testament to the vast depth the Buckeyes will sport at the position this year.

Other names hoping to crack the two-deep are Chase Farris, Steve Miller, J.T. Moore and Joel Hale, each of whom made plays during the spring game. Miller recorded two sacks in the contest.

"We're going to play physical and we're going to play square and we're going to play with violent hands," said defensive line coach Mike Vrabel, who is instructing the group after overseeing Ohio State's linebackers a year ago.

"If we do those three things, we'll be graded positively. If we're able to go from point A to point B as fast as we can and find a way to compete for the length of a play, which we talk about as four to six seconds around here, we're going to have a good D-line."

The defensive line added a new member in the form of Chris Carter, a 6-4, 358-pounder who came to Ohio State as an offensive lineman. Given the team's depth issues along the offensive front, Meyer admitted the coaching staff was reluctant to move Carter to the other side of the football.

"We didn't have the luxury to move him over," Meyer said. "But he wasn't progressing on the offensive line, so we decided to maybe give him a shot at defense."

Though Carter is still raw and developing his skills on the defensive line, his massive size has already been a valuable weapon for him. He showed signs of promise in the spring game, making four tackles and recording a sack.

The Buckeyes will have even more help on the defensive front come fall when the team welcomes the arrival of top prospects Tommy Schutt, Noah Spence and Adolphus Washington. Scout.com rated all three players five-star high school prospects.

Freshman early enrollee SeVon Pittman is one of the promising young defensive linemen but was unable to make strides toward landing a spot in the two deep this spring because of a leg injury.

Senior defensive end Nathan Williams, who took a medical redshirt last season, could also earn back a considerable role if he is fully healthy in the fall. He has been a consistent pass-rusher throughout his career but must come back from microfracture knee surgery.

Linebackers

Ohio State's linebackers group certainly doesn't have the luxury of depth like the defensive line, but the Buckeyes do return what should be proven entities in Etienne Sabino and Ryan Shazier.

Sabino – who was named a captain of the Gray team – will make the full-time move over to strongside (Sam) linebacker this fall. In his junior season a year ago, he had perhaps his most productive campaign, but he admittedly struggled at times with his role as the middle linebacker.

Now returning for his final season with the Buckeyes, a leaner Sabino could be primed for a breakout year. He'll have to put some of the issues that haunted him a year ago in the past. For example, Sabino has been known to overthink the defensive schemes at times, causing him to play slower and take questionable pursuit angles to the ball.

But Sabino, who registered six tackles and a sack in the spring game, has looked quicker in his final spring practice. Perhaps his move to the Sam position is just what

he needs to be more productive – and more importantly more consistent.

"I just want to build off last year," he said. "I want to keep playing aggressive and keep having an impact on this defense. I am a senior now and it's crazy. It's been five years. It's been long but short, if that makes any sense. It's exciting, but it's your last go-around."

One of the most promising younger players has been Shazier, who is slated to be the starting weakside (Will) linebacker. After playing in a limited role to start last season, Shazier made plays down the stretch to earn one of the starting spots at the end of the year.

Shazier, who suffered a partially torn PCL in his knee in Ohio State's regular-season finale at Michigan last season, played through the pain in the Gator Bowl. Now fully healthy, he sported the characteristics in the spring that made him one of the team's most exciting players.

Though Shazier has plenty to learn, he hasn't struggled with instincts. He plays incredibly fast and flows quickly to the ball, making him more of a natural playmaker. At the Will linebacker spot, which is generally reserved for the team's most active linebacker, Shazier will be counted on to fill the hole Sweat occupied a year ago.

"I wasn't really surprised because I planned on doing that," Shazier said of his freshman performance. "That's why I (enrolled last spring). I wanted to do whatever I could to help the team. I came in early, tried to gain weight, and I did whatever was possible to help us win."

Shazier seems to be back at it, especially if his spring game performance is any indication of what is coming in his sophomore season. He registered a game-high eight tackles, including two for loss and a sack.

The final spot is up for grabs, but it looks like sophomore Curtis Grant will be the leader to start at middle (Mike) linebacker in the fall. The former five-star recruit has lost some body weight but has grown tremendously during the offseason with the mental part of the game.

Grant, however, was limited in the final week of spring football because of an injury Meyer described as a pinched nerve, hindering what looked like a three-week span during which things were finally coming together.

"He's a big physical kid," Shazier said of Grant. "He can run pretty well for his size. When you have that combination, it's going to be tough for offenses to scheme him up and block him. He's getting a lot better. It's crazy how good he gets day to day. He keeps improving. I'm excited to see what he can do."

The lack of depth at the linebacker position became somewhat alarming at the end of the spring drills. Without Grant in the mix, the Buckeyes found time for redshirt freshman Conner Crowell to get reps with the first team.

Senior linebacker Storm Klein was supposed to be in the hunt for playing time at the Mike position, but his injury-plagued career continued into the spring. He was held out of the spring game for the second consecutive year. Meanwhile, true freshmen Joshua Perry and Luke Roberts both reported in the spring, but Perry was limited with an injury and Roberts is still in the process of getting acclimated to the college game.

Depth at the linebacker position is on its way, though, as the team will welcome Jamal Marcus, David Perkins and Camren Williams in the fall. Those players – each of whom has drawn high praise from Meyer – could compete for positions in the two-deep during their freshman season.

"Honestly, as far as the linebackers, we've always had great competition in the linebacker room," Sabino said. "You could be

the starter for that day, but it can change day to day. I think everybody's going to work hard and fight for a starting spot."

Defensive Backs

The Ohio State secondary looks to be in good shape as it heads into the offseason because it returns both starting cornerbacks and safeties from a year ago. At the cornerback position specifically, the Buckeyes should have one of the best one-two punches in the Big Ten.

If they aren't, they'll hear from charismatic first-year cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs, who has made a habit of voicing – or yelling – his displeasure for poor play during the course of his first spring.

"It's definitely been a great change," senior cornerback Travis Howard said when describing his relationship with Coombs. "I mean, he's a high intensity guy who's willing to make sure we perfect our technique and make sure we work hard at whatever we do."

Howard proved to be a serviceable option as a starter a year ago but often struggled with jamming opposing receivers at the line of scrimmage. When playing off in coverage, he also sometimes had a hard time recovering from the slack given to speedy and efficient route runners.

The senior made strides improving in those areas this spring and hopes to settle in as the team's top lockdown corner in the fall.

"We will press and they're gifted press guys," Coombs said. "They've been doing it here for a while and they're good at it, so we've really focused this spring on being able to play off with vision, and I'm glad to hear they like doing that."

On the other side, Bradley Roby enters his sophomore season and has made perhaps the most considerable strides in a short amount of time of any player on the team. He is an aggressive corner who likes to play physically with the opposing receivers. Also with a nose for the football, he has excelled in helping Ohio State's efforts with run support.

Roby, who had 47 tackles and three interceptions last season, isn't satisfied with the season he had. He said he feels like he's on track for being one of the most prolific cornerbacks to ever play at Ohio State.

"I played pretty well (as a redshirt freshman) but it's not close to my standards," he said. "I feel like the fans and everybody else were OK with how I played and they liked how I played. But to me, I could have played so much better. This year is going to be so much better for me. It's going to be crazy."

Dominic Clarke likely would have been in the mix to compete for a starting spot this season, but he was removed from the program for violating team rules shortly after Meyer was hired and that sapped depth at the corner position.

The third guy in the mix is now sophomore Doran Grant, a highly recruited Ohio prep prospect out of Akron St. Vincent-St.

Mary. Grant jumped into the two-deep quickly last season, but he wasn't able to overcome the stranglehold Howard and Roby eventually placed on the starting spots.

Though Grant seems to be on the outside looking in on the starting lineup yet again, the lack of reasonable depth at the position could have him one twisted ankle away from considerable playing time.

"He shouldn't be satisfied with being the third guy," Coombs said of Grant. "We do have two great ones but guess what, Doran? Don't be satisfied with being the third guy."

Grant could have been a skill position player on offense early in his career, but he said he chose Ohio State because he wanted to play defense. Being a Silver Bullet, he said, has always been a dream, adding that he is confident he can make a difference, especially after he got time with the first-team defense during Ohio State's preparation for the Gator Bowl last year when Howard suffered a minor injury.

"I had some good quality reps," Grant said. "I made a few mistakes, but I also got a little better. I carried that into spring ball and I feel like my spring has been pretty good."

Added Roby, "Doran will be ready. He's a good football player. He's very technique-sound. He's very coachable. He just has to get that attitude that comes along with playing corner. You have to have that confidence."

Starting at the safety spots late in the spring were C.J. Barnett and Orhian Johnson, both of whom held those positions a year ago. Johnson split time starting with Christian Bryant last season. Bryant missed time late in the spring with injury, and the competition with Johnson should carry on into the fall.

Though Johnson struggled in his starting role to start last season, he grew into a more serviceable player as time went on. During spring drills, his play continued to stand out, especially when he intercepted a pass and returned it all the way for a touchdown during an open practice April 14.

Barnett recovered from a serious knee injury sustained two years ago to enjoy his first full season in Ohio State's starting secondary last year. He has earned a reputation as a big hitter, and the aggressiveness with which he plays the game has been perhaps his best feature.

Having heard thoughts that Ohio State could have the best and most complete secondary in the country, Barnett showed that notion aside this spring.

"You want to be the best, but we'll let everybody decide that after the season," he said. "All we can do right now is focus on ourselves and try to be the best we can be."

Bryant should be a shoo-in as the team's top option at nickelback if he doesn't win a starting spot at safety. Corey Brown, Ron Tanner and true freshman Tyvis Powell, who had a spring-game interception wiped out by a penalty, are the team's top reserves deep in the defensive backfield.

Fellow freshmen DeVan Bogard, Armani Reeves and Najee Murray will join the DB group in the fall.

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Miller's Progression Was Major Spring Highlight

Urban Meyer made the spring game exciting again, a couple of freshmen introduced themselves to the Horseshoe with splendid performances, and some veterans flashed new and improved skills.

But you know what I liked most about Spring Game 2012?

Meyer set the focus on helping Braxton Miller get better.

The Buckeyes' new head coach picked a goal and executed it. That is the type of focus that was absent in Miller's development last season when the OSU coaches – either because they went conservative for fear of losing their jobs or simply weren't capable of the job – seemed to actually retard Miller's progress.

THE EXNER POINT Rich Exner

Meyer allowed for a far higher percentage of passing plays in the spring game than will ever happen during the regular season, but the coach realized that was the most important area in need of development.

It's the kind of game plan that if used to a lesser extent with Miller at quarterback against such teams as Akron and Toledo last season, the then-freshman would have been more ready for the rest of the season.

Also from the spring game, at first glance it sure appeared that the Buckeyes have a far more diverse passing offense than they've shown in years. Short crossing patterns, sideline fades and an occasional long ball were the order for the day. It's the type of variety that can put defenses on their heels.

Every pass Miller attempts in the fall does not have to be a difficult one. The yards count the same on short crossing patterns over the middle as they do on the more difficult out routes.

And what we saw of Miller in Ohio Stadium on April 21 was a quarterback comfortable in what he was being asked to do. His passes generally were sharp – with the exception of more than one blown interception.

Just consider the consistency. He completed 4 of 4 passes to three different receivers for 51 yards on the opening 65-yard TD drive. Then he closed the first half with 4-of-4 passing for 50 yards in 31 seconds to set up a field goal.

Miler finished the clock-shortened first half an efficient 16 of 22 for 197 yards, and for the game he was 24 of 31 for 258 yards.

As noted, not all his passes were good, but Miller looked much more like the high school quarterback who led his team to the

state finals in 2010 than the Buckeye freshman who guided an all-too-conservative offense in 2011.

What Else To Like

It also was nice to see the emphasis Meyer has placed on finding playmakers who can line up at the wideout spots, whether they actually are wide receivers, tight ends or running backs filling those spots.

The star of the day in that category, of course, was true freshman Michael Thomas. He caught the easy passes. He usually made the tougher catches. He consistently found ways to get open. And especially on one twisting run along the sidelines, he showed off big-play, open-field ability.

For the day, Thomas finished with 12 catches for 131 yards and didn't look like a spring-game fluke. You have to fully expect Thomas to be one of the regular receivers this fall.

You also have to like the play of Corey "Philly" Brown (seven catches for 90 yards). He too was getting open and making catches on a regular basis. The guess here is that Thomas eventually could be one of Miller's top targets. As for Brown, he showed he can at least play a solid secondary role.

Chris Fields (four catches for 58 yards) and Devin Smith (two catches for 40 yards) were also among those who showed signs they could be better receivers.

None of those players in 2012 will likely resemble David Boston, Cris Carter or Anthony Gonzalez. But they looked capable, and most importantly Meyer's offense will allow them to play up to their ability – not limit them.

Another encouraging sign was that both Miller and Kenny Guiton were able to find open receivers while being limited to spring game rules that prevented them from using a big part of their games – their threat to run and break out of would-be sacks to keep plays alive. There was no tackling of the quarterbacks, so many plays ended way too early.

In addition to Thomas, the other incoming freshman who was given a lot of opportunities and responded with a strong performance was running back Bri'onte Dunn.

The coveted recruit from Canton (Ohio) GlenOak showed he is ready as a Big Ten running back (seven carries for 32 yards), and he showed his versatility as a receiver with three catches for 27 yards. On many occasions, Dunn lined up as a wideout.

Having running backs who can legitimately line up at a wide receiver position poses a problem for defenses. Many teams like to sub in extra defensive backs to match up against extra wideouts, but with Dunn on the field, there is no telling whether he'll be in the backfield as a threat to run or at wideout as a threat as a receiver.

UW's Transfer Fiasco

The latest reminder of something that needs fixed with college sports comes from basketball coach Bo Ryan at Wisconsin. Redshirt freshman Jarrod Uthoff said he wanted to transfer, and Ryan responded by barring Uthoff from talking to a long list of 26 schools.

Ryan, it should be noted, makes a reported \$2.1 million a year to coach at Wisconsin. And it should also be noted that coaches routinely switch jobs without sitting out a transfer year as players are required to do.

Under questioning by ESPN Radio hosts Mike Golic and Mike Greenberg on April 19, Ryan asked if they could leave the sports network before the end of their contracts without penalty or limitations. Greenberg replied with exactly the right answer: "We're employees. We get paid, Bo. We're employees. We have a non-compete clause. This is a student-athlete."

Ryan's response was "This is a scholarship."

The \$2 million man went on to say, "When they sign the scholarship, there's fine ink, there's fine print on that paper that isn't even really that fine, it's very readable. And everybody understands that."

Part of Ryan's defense was that other coaches have done what he did, and he could be correct. But that doesn't make it right.

Fortunately for Uthoff, things soon began to change. The Associated Press reported that after Uthoff met with Wisconsin athletic director Barry Alvarez, the school decided to allow Uthoff to transfer to any school outside the Big Ten.

It's time for the NCAA – and the Big Ten, for that matter – to ease up on transfer restrictions that have grown entirely unfair when one considers the kind of revenue being generated by some colleges and the amount of money being paid to the coaches.

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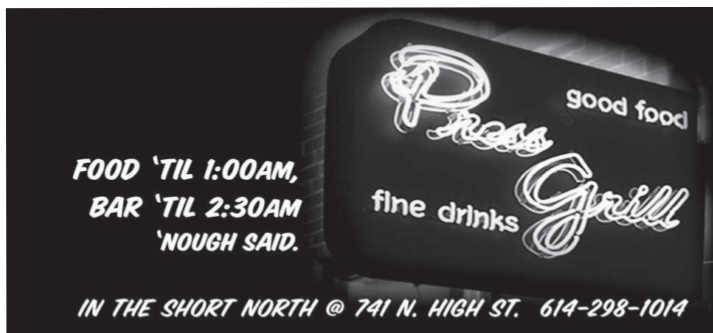
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Meyer Gets What Ohio State Is All About

As someone who grew up in Columbus and has lived all of my adult life here, I can appreciate and embrace tradition – especially when it comes to Ohio State football. Every time I'm on campus, I at least make the effort to walk by Ohio Stadium, tour the Buckeye Grove and generally take in the history that surrounds the program.

Tradition can be a blessing. It sets expectations high for which there should be zero apologies. If fans are consistently satisfied with eighth- and nine-win seasons, then they embrace mediocrity and will never get better.

THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

But tradition can also be a curse. Outsiders have no idea what to make of more than 81,000 fans attending a glorified scrimmage in cold, rainy weather. That the result didn't matter makes it even more incredible, but for those who follow all things scarlet and gray, it's simply passion. They love their Buckeyes and they will show up for anything, even if it seems kooky to some.

Some coaches don't get the whole tradition thing. You have Exhibit A being Rich Rodriguez at Michigan, who said OSU was just another game and removed pictures of former U-M greats around the football complex. Exhibit B, unfortunately, was John Cooper at Ohio State (who among other flubs famously referred to the Horseshoe as "Buckeye Stadium").

But while some coaches don't get it, others do. In his first real public outing as the Buckeyes' boss, Urban Meyer showed that he gets it – and he gets it in spades.

Meyer continued the practice of singing "Carmen Ohio" in the end zone (started by Jim Tressel) – even asking "Where am I supposed to go?" – and he said after the game that OSU's calling card will continue to be defense and a lot more running than fans saw in the spring game. Those are both cornerstones of Ohio State football.

But Meyer also showed that he isn't afraid to shake things up – and maybe start a new tradition in the process – by delaying the start of the spring game a few minutes with what the coaching staff calls "The Circle Drill." Players go one on one in a collision of shoulder pads and arms, looking to drive the other to the ground. It was an aggressive drill, one the players seemed to love, and set the tone for the day. It also showed things were going to be a bit different and conveyed a toughness and togetherness that had been missing in the program for the past 18 months.

The finale to the drill featured quarterbacks Kenny Guiton and Braxton Miller squaring off as teammates hooted and hollered around them.

"It is really fun," said Guiton, who looked like he got the short end of the brief tussle against Miller. "It's something we do before practice most days. We both got caught in there today."

Meyer said he was just looking for a jolt to give his players.

"I just wanted some energy," the coach said. "I think it was fun for fans, and I know the players came out of their shoes when we did that."

The hope is that fans will come out of their shoes this fall as the Buckeyes move away from the traditional power I-formation to more of a wide-open look. Many in attendance were thrilled with the Buckeyes throwing the ball all over the place, although that is not how the offense will look come September.

While most spread offenses are implemented to highlight the pass, Meyer's is a run-based attack. Oh, there will be passing in the same vein as it was in the spring game. The controlled, precision throws over the middle will allow playmakers to do their thing and will force teams to defend the entire field.

It was an entertaining event, a welcome change from many of the somnambulant affairs that have passed for spring finales in the past.

You can bet that fans will embrace any changes Meyer embraces as long as he returns to one big tradition – winning football games.

Good And Bad

Here are some springtime opinions on individual players as well as position groups.

Braxton Miller – There is still some work to do, but he looked smoother in his drops and had more accuracy on his passes. How well he grasps the offense between now and the beginning of fall camp will determine how the offense fares.

"He can pass the ball," Meyer said. "Here's the way you evaluate him: Release, A. A very good release. Arm strength, I would probably say a B, but I'm very critical. Accuracy, a C to B. We've got to get him more accurate, but he's getting better."

"He had a very good spring, a very productive spring, but once again we grade our guys real hard. First-rounders, that's how I evaluate quarterbacks because I've had some first-rounders. He has a lot of talent."

Ryan Shazier – The linebacker was once again in the middle of everything and looks like he has a real chance to join John Simon as one of the leaders of the defense. He ran through ball carriers and played the game like it was real – and since he's got a new coaching staff looking at him it might as well have been an audition. From this corner, it was one he passed.

Offensive Line – Youth has a way of interrupting the best laid plans, and the guys up front were spotty at best. They opened holes for running backs, but pass protection broke down too often. If that continues in the fall, Meyer's offense won't have a chance to operate. The tackles showed flashes but were beaten around the edge on many occasions. The pocket collapsed inside, too, so the interior group needs to improve as well.

Receivers – For most of the spring, Meyer decried the lack of playmakers outside. He had his eyes opened a bit with the performance of freshman Michael Thomas. The California native hauled in 12 passes for 131 yards and repeatedly showed the ability to run precise routes and get open. Devin Smith also flashed big-play ability and scored a touchdown, and Corey "Philly" Brown looked to be over the drops that plagued him last season.

The receiving corps was a focal point of the game for Meyer, who wanted to see if the Buckeyes could move the ball in the air

after being one of the most inept passing teams in the country last year.

"We're going to be a balanced offense (although today we were) very imbalanced," Meyer said. "That was done for a reason. We're taking one of the worst passing teams in America a year ago and we've got to find out if we can do that. People can stop the run. We know that. We know we can run at quarterback. We didn't run it one time today. What we don't know is if we can throw the ball. That was the objective today. I have a better opinion of some guys now."

A couple of others who caught my eye were running backs Rod Smith and Bri'onte Dunn. I thought they did enough and have the talent to be the one-two punch for the Buckeyes this season. I know that discounts Carlos Hyde, but even though he showed ability last year I'm not sure he's a difference-maker. Smith and Dunn can make people miss and are explosive through the hole. Hyde is good straight ahead but doesn't have a ton of shiftiness. He can get the job done but wouldn't be my No. 1 or 2 choice. But I'm not the coach.

And that doesn't even take into consideration Jordan Hall, who was held out due to an injury as well as the fact that Meyer knows what he can do. Look for Hall to fill the same role Percy Harvin did at Florida – lining up all over the field, coming in motion for handoffs and using his skills to create mismatches in open space. Hall seems to be a perfect fit for this offense, so don't be surprised if he's truly a breakout performer in 2012.

More Of The Same

You have to hand it to Mike Adams – he remains consistently inconsistent.

After a maddening senior campaign in which he could alternately look like a monster on one play and a mouse on the next, Adams began preparing himself for the NFL draft knowing he had a chance to be considered as a first-round pick.

So it's curious that Adams would choose to partake in some "extracurricular" activity prior to the NFL combine – the biggest day a prospect can have, a de facto job interview during which your physical and mental skills are on display.

Why anyone would jeopardize their future in that situation is beyond me, but that's what Adams did after testing positive for marijuana at the combine. While it certainly isn't the worst offense a player can commit, it raises a red flag in that coaches wonder how important football can be to you.

Adams had a chance to push into the lower portion of the first round but now has seen that chance likely disappear. He cost himself some money – probably a lot of it – and in the process may come into the league with an uphill climb. He's going to have to work extra hard to get league GMs to get behind him. He has the talent – now he has to show the desire and commitment.

If he can't do that, his stay in the NFL will be a short one.

Badgered By Transfer

Recent transfer situations with their basketball teams pointed out the stark differences between Ohio State's Thad Matta and Wisconsin's Bo Ryan, and that should make OSU fans happy they have Matta.

Matta did not stand in the way of Jordan

Sibert and J.D. Weatherspoon when they wanted to move on, ostensibly in search of more playing time. He's welcomed in transfers before, and knows how tricky those situations can be, so he wished the pair well and allowed them to pursue their dream.

Ryan could learn a thing or two from him. The Badgers' mentor attempted to block the transfer of Jarrod Uthoff, who figured out the program wasn't a good fit for him after he spent this past season as a redshirt. Ryan made it seem like he was caught off-guard and wounded, so he compiled a list of 26 schools Uthoff could not consider including all of the Big Ten and ACC as well as in-state recruiting rival Marquette and Uthoff's home state Iowa State Cyclones.

In this day and age when coaches can walk into a recruit's living room, sell him on the program and then leave two years into a six-year contract, why can't recruits have the ability to transfer unfettered? They have to sit out a year, which is fine since that keeps them from leaving on a whim or going to three or four schools just because they're unhappy with playing time. There needs to be a restriction on that at least, and the one-year-out rule is that. Otherwise they should not be kept from going where they want.

Ryan should be thanking Uthoff. The kid wasn't happy and if forced to stay might not give full effort and would take a scholarship from someone who might work harder and be more productive. That's a lose-lose situation for everyone. Instead, the coach hides behind what he calls "procedure."

The school eventually reached an agreement with Uthoff and will allow him to transfer to any non-Big Ten school and receive a scholarship. While the end result was good, the negative publicity Ryan and Wisconsin received could hurt recruiting efforts in the near future – and deservedly so.

Running Away?

Coaches are fired or leave their programs on a regular basis, but not usually with the secrecy that surrounds OSU men's track coach Robert Gary.

The former Buckeye All-American left or was removed from the program – with only a short notice posted on the school's website – just before the annual Jesse Owens Classic.

The reasons for his departure remain sketchy at best, but it appears Gary may have hit the ground running at Furman to take over the men's program. There is speculation that Gary's wife, Rita, wanted to return to coaching, and Furman afforded her that opportunity. She reportedly wanted to go somewhere that would hire her and her husband, and Furman reportedly wants to raise the profile of its program.

The Southern Conference may not get a lot of renown, but a couple of schools have gotten into title contention thanks to an influx of Kenyan talent. Maybe Gary wanted to get in on the ground floor of that, but he seemed content in Columbus after signing a three-year extension last summer that would have kept him at OSU through 2014.

It's an odd situation, but maybe Ohio State will come out better for it, especially if Gary wasn't putting all of his energy into leading the program.