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Spring Renewal

Plenty Of Work To Be Done For Ohio State

By MARCUS HARTMAN

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The spring of 2014 marks the second in a row in which Ohio State starts spring practice coming off a 12-win regular season. That is one of few similarities to the spring of 2013.

This time around, the offensive line must be rebuilt. An open starting position is one of multiple holes in the wide receiver depth chart, and the Buckeyes are in search of a new No. 1 running back.

The work to be done on defense goes deeper, however, as a disappointing end of the season was pinned mostly on that group. The change is also greater on that side of the ball, where two coaches have departed along with three starters in the secondary and the team's top linebacker.

"Obviously it's more than just the secondary," head coach Urban Meyer said on National Signing Day in early February. "It's linebackers and everything, but you're going to see some significant changes in the way we approach our business back there."

Many areas must be addressed, but they all point toward one goal – getting ready for a regular season that will be as successful as the last two and lead to much greater things in the postseason, where the Buckeyes were 0-2 last season after being barred from participating in such competition the year before because of NCAA sanctions.

"We just had a group of seniors depart Ohio State that came from losing seven games two years ago to winning 24 straight," Meyer said. "Obviously there were a couple bumps at the end, but it was a group of players I have a lot of respect for. I love those guys. Those guys came in and they let us attack their hearts and let us coach them. And they're gone."

Patching The Offense

Just what will be the most important factor in Ohio State's improving on the past two seasons and truly becoming a national contender remains to be seen, but what is certain is its most valuable player will be back.

Braxton Miller, selected Big Ten MVP each of the past two seasons, returns for his senior season as the team's starting quarterback.

2014 Spring Football Preview

He will likely need to be better than ever to take the Buckeyes back to the top of the conference and into the first College Football Playoff. That is asking a lot, especially considering he will be limited in the spring while recovering from what has been termed minor, outpatient surgery on his right (throwing) shoulder in late February.

Even before Miller's procedure, the coaching staff knew it would need to take a long look at the rest of the quarterbacks to figure out who will be his backup this season.

Kenny Guiton graduated after admirably filling the role of super sub for two seasons, leaving behind him a three-man group with two career pass attempts at the college level.

Both of those belong to Cardale Jones, a sophomore who played in three games last season after redshirting in 2012. A 6-5, 250-pound product of Cleveland Glenville, Jones has great size and a strong arm, but he has yet to show the type of consistency the staff wants to see.

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FILE PHOTO

RAMPING UP – Urban Meyer kicked off his third spring football session as Ohio State's head coach March 4.

OSU Sputtering Down Season's Stretch

By BEN AXELROD

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Are the basketball Buckeyes back on the bubble?

After the way that they ended February and began March, it's a fair question to ask.

What appeared to be a second-half surge that included six wins in seven games came to an end Feb. 27 when Ohio State dropped a 65-63 decision to last-place Penn State. The Buckeyes followed that three days later with a 72-64 loss at Indiana, dropping them to sixth place in the Big Ten and out of the top 25 of both major polls.

With just one regular-season game remaining – a March 9 home date with Michigan State – Ohio State appears to be playing its worst basketball at the worst possible time. There's still the Big Ten tournament for the Buckeyes to turn their fortunes around, but for now they have some glaring weaknesses that need to be addressed.

"We were rolling until (the Penn State loss), in all seriousness," Ohio State coach Thad Matta said. "We're really lacking in a confidence issue and a toughness issue in terms of playing through situa-

tions. Those are things, somehow, some way, that we have to get corrected."

The Buckeyes' struggles may be the result of psychological issues according to Matta, but their problems are manifesting themselves in a measurable manner.

Most notably, Ohio State has struggled with its shooting. The Buckeyes connected on just 42.6 percent of their field-goal attempts during their loss to the Nittany Lions, but that was just a sign of things to come. Marking the first time since 2004 – a span of 367 games – that they went an entire game without a three-point make, the Buckeyes went 0 for 11 from beyond the arc in Bloomington while shooting 42.4 from the field against the Hoosiers.

But while Ohio State's 45.0-percent shooting percentage on the season would suggest a talent issue, Lenzelle Smith Jr. insists that's not the case. Rather, the senior guard believes that mental issues have turned into physical errors the Buckeyes have yet to learn how to overcome.

"It's just all confidence," Smith said. "We just have

to get the confidence back. We've got shooters. There's no excuse. We've got to put the ball in the bucket."

Ohio State's offensive struggles haven't been limited to beyond the three-point arc.

The Buckeyes' success – or lack thereof – from the free-throw line has also played a role in their two-game losing streak. OSU connected on just 66.7 percent (18 of 27) of its attempts from the charity stripe in Happy Valley before making just 14 of its 23 (60.9 percent) against Indiana. Numbers like that won't serve a team well in closely contested games, which is why Matta has placed an increased emphasis on his team's free-throw shooting of late.

"You can't simulate game situations with free throws in practice," he said.

"I would venture to say we've probably shot more (free throws) in practice this year than we have in the past."

While the extra practice has yet to pay dividends for the Buckeyes, their offensive issues extend past



Thad Matta

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COVER STORY

Buckeyes Need To Find Backup Quarterback

Continued From Page 1

Though he holds an edge in age and experience, Jones is no lock to be the No. 2 quarterback. He will face a serious challenge from J.T. Barrett, a redshirt freshman who has impressed the staff since arriving last January from Wichita Falls, Texas.

Barrett might lack some of the raw physical tools Jones has, but he possesses many intangibles quarterbacks coach and offensive coordinator Tom Herman loves.

"This will be a big spring for those two guys – a big spring," Herman said.

The third man in the derby figures to be a long shot to become the backup quarterback, but Stephen Collier no doubt will take any extra reps that become available this spring.

A true freshman from Leesburg, Ga., Collier is a three-star prospect looked upon as a developmental quarterback with potential to help the team down the road.

"We saw a lot of attributes to him we thought could turn into a very good player for us," Meyer said. "That's why we took him."

The backfield will be crowded this spring despite the loss of seniors Carlos Hyde and Jordan Hall, who combined for 2,075 yards and 23 touchdowns last season. Hyde accounted for 1,521 of those yards while averaging a school-record 7.3 yards per carry.

Three sophomores and a senior are in line to compete for the carries available with the departure of that duo, and the youngest member of that group is considered the front-runner to assume most of the workload.

That would be Ezekiel Elliott, a 6-0, 218-pounder from St. Louis who ran for 262 yards on 30 carries last season as a true freshman. He averaged 8.7 yards per carry – mostly in garbage time – and passed class of 2012 signees Warren Ball, who redshirted in 2012 after suffering a foot injury, and Br'onte Dunn, who redshirted last season after playing as a true freshman, on the depth chart.

In addition to those sophomores, fifth-year senior Rod Smith, who like Ball appeared in 11 games last season, figures to get one more shot to show why he was a highly touted recruit in the class of 2010.

"It's time for (Smith) to show improvement," running backs coach Stan Drayton

said. "Ezekiel Elliott proved that he has the maturity. His body is definitely ready to play. We've got Warren Ball and Br'onte Dunn. What I say to them in the meeting room would not be brand-new in regards to our scheme. So we've got four guys that are ready to compete for that starting job."

"They've got big shoes to fill. And if it takes more than one of them to get that type of productivity we got from Carlos, then we'll do it. So I'm really excited about what we have coming back."

Wide receiver also figures to see a lot of attention this spring with top pass catcher Corey "Philly" Brown as well as key reserve Chris Fields out of eligibility. Senior Evan Spencer will miss spring practice while recovering from a lower leg injury suffered in the Orange Bowl in January, leaving senior Devin Smith and a bevy of inexperienced players to work on filling out the depth chart.

Smith has been a major contributor since arriving on campus in 2011, but many believe he still has another level he can reach in his last season in scarlet and gray despite already catching 88 passes for 1,572 yards and 18 touchdowns in his career.

The rest of the receivers who are healthy this spring have combined to catch four passes for 28 yards at the major-college level.

Michael Thomas, another sophomore in eligibility who redshirted last season, accounted for three of those receptions and 22 yards as a true freshman in 2012 while Frank Epitropoulos caught one pass for 6 yards as a redshirt freshman last season.

Corey Smith, a junior who redshirted last season after transferring from East Mississippi Community College, joins the mix along with redshirt freshman Jalin Marshall and true freshman Johnnie Dixon.

Corey Smith and Thomas are both intriguing prospects who bring size and strength in older bodies, and receivers coach Zach Smith is looking for them to make a move this spring.

"Because of the depth issues we had at receiver, those two prepared every week to play," Zach Smith said. "So they didn't take a redshirt and take a year off. The only thing they didn't do was play on Saturday. They didn't lose a year of development."

Marshall is a five-star talent from Middletown, Ohio, who was one of the top prospects in Ohio a year ago but saw his pre-season marred by a concussion, while Dixon is a 5-11, 195-pound speedster from Florida who enrolled in classes in January.

Redshirt freshman James Clark could also fight for playing time, but he will be limited in spring as he continues his recovery from a broken leg suffered early last season.

Despite the lack of experience, the receivers' position coach said he feels good about the raw material at his disposal.

"I have not felt better than I do now since I've been here about that room," Zach Smith said. "It's been a two-year work in progress in both recruiting and development, and I'm really excited to watch my guys go out and compete because a lot of the motivation that I've had to provide is going to be provided just in the room with competition."

In addition to the traditional running backs and wide receivers, a handful of players figure to work on earning a role as the "H" or hybrid in Meyer's spread offense. That was most often filled last season by Dontre Wilson, who rushed 31 times for 255 yards and caught 22 passes for 210 yards as a freshman.

Herman said prior to the Orange Bowl that the staff did not use him as much as it would have liked last season, though that was in part a function of the production of Miller and Hyde.

They figure to push for more from the "H" spot this season and have more weapons to work with as true freshman Curtis Samuel joins the mix.

"Ezekiel Elliott and Curtis Samuel and Dontre Wilson are those prototype guys, hybrid-type players we're looking for, although really Ezekiel is more a pure tailback," Meyer said. "Curtis Samuel, he's electric fast to go with Dontre."

With all of the upheaval on the offense, spring in the tight ends room could be pretty boring. That's not a bad thing, though, as a position that often was an afterthought in previous years at Ohio State has evolved into one of strength thanks to the development of senior Jeff Heuerman and junior Nick Vannett.

They are back after ably sharing the position last season while senior J.T. Moore and redshirt freshman Marcus Baugh work to earn a share of what playing time is left over.

Last but certainly not least is the offensive line, a position group coming off two dominating seasons but now in major flux.

After developing a sterling reputation among Ohio State fans for his work with the group upon arriving from Notre Dame in 2012, offensive line coach Ed Warinner has his work cut out for him this year with 80 percent of his starting unit to replace.

He has some known quantities to build on, however, beginning with junior tackle Taylor Decker. A starter on the right side last season, he is expected to shift to the left side this year to protect the quarterback's blind side.

Junior Jacoby Boren is expected to take over at center after being groomed there the past two seasons as the backup to Corey Linsley, and sophomore Pat Elflein is penciled in at one guard position after positive cameos there against Michigan and Michigan State last season.

From there, things get murkier.

Senior Darryl Baldwin, a former defensive lineman, and sophomore Kyle Dodson figure to get the first crack to win the other tackle spot while a bevy of unproven players compete for the guard spot opposite Elflein.

The latter group includes senior Antonio Underwood, junior Tommy Brown, redshirt freshman Billy Price and early-enrolling freshman Marcellys Jones of Cleveland Glenville.

Chase Farris, a junior who battled Decker for a starting spot last spring then played some on defense last fall before suffering a knee injury, will be held out of drills this spring as he continues to work toward full health.

Joel Hale, a senior who has played 29 games on the defensive side of the ball and been a regular in the depth chart for three seasons, also presents a wild card at guard, where he will try his hand this spring.

Evan Lisle, a four-star recruit who redshirted last season, could also be in the mix at tackle, where he will be joined by incoming four-star recruit Kyle Trout out of Lancaster, Ohio.

Without the combination of Hyde and the offensive line to lean on this season, more pressure likely shifts to Miller. Herman agreed the major focus for the offseason is figuring out how to complement the senior quarterback's abilities.

"That's a good way to put it," Herman said. "We've got a guy coming back who is a seasoned veteran who continues to improve his game, and we've got to make sure everybody around him is up to that level."

"I think our two tight ends coming back are fantastic players and we've got a couple of wideouts that continue to improve so we'll be all right. It may look and feel a little bit different here and there, but we've got a great system and a great staff with quality older guys who have been through the fire, so we'll be OK."

Offensive Players On The Spot

• Darryl Baldwin and Kyle Dodson, offensive tackle:

These two came to Ohio State from northeastern Ohio in different seasons and in much different circumstances, but they find themselves sharing a pivotal spring on the offensive line. Taylor Decker provides a strong presence at left tackle, but a reliable right tackle is vital to rebuilding the front. Baldwin is a former defensive lineman entering his fifth year in Columbus while Dodson was among the high-profile recruits Urban Meyer flipped two years ago when he took over as Ohio State head coach. Considered the more naturally gifted of the two, Dodson has had a hard time staying healthy after shoulder issues cut short his high school career at Cleveland Heights.

• **Rod Smith, running back:** A five-star prospect in 2010, Smith arrived at Ohio State as one of the top running backs to come out of Indiana high school football. The Fort Wayne native has been the subject of buzz coming out of practice on and off ever since, but to this point he has carried the ball only 83 times for 453 yards and four touchdowns in 31 games. The 6-3, 232-pounder

could replace the physical inside running presence provided by Carlos Hyde the past two seasons, or he could stay behind sophomore Ezekiel Elliott and spend another year mostly in the shadows depending on what he shows this spring.

• Corey Smith and Michael Thomas, wide receiver:

There should be plenty of reps to go around at their position, and this pair has a chance to show what they learned during redshirt seasons last year. Thomas has been a standout each of the past two springs, but the California native has yet to translate that to much success in the regular season. At 6-3, 202, he could bring a physical presence to the receiving corps that has been missing in recent seasons. The 6-1, 191-pound Smith is also a big receiver whose skills made him highly coveted coming out of both Akron Buchtel High School in 2011 and East Mississippi Community College last year, but he has yet to display those at the major-college level.

– Marcus Hartman



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COVER STORY

Spotlight On Defense

Any remodeling that will be done on offense this spring pales in comparison to the complete reworking needed on the other side of the ball.

Virtually nothing went as planned for the Ohio State defense in 2013 as a completely rebuilt defensive line turned out to be a strength and the veteran secondary turned in one of the worst performances by a Buckeye pass defense in memory.

The 377.4 total yards Ohio State allowed per game are the third most in school history, and the pass defense narrowly missed setting a school record for futility as well with the 268.0 yards allowed per game better only than the 273.1 yielded in 1981.

The 2013 season replaced the 2012 campaign as the second worst in school history when it came to pass defense, so perhaps it is no surprise many are welcoming change in the secondary, where new assistant coach Chris Ash replaces safeties coach Everett Withers (who became head coach at James Madison) and three starters graduated.

The group of safeties inherited by Ash, who also received the title co-defensive coordinator in his move from Arkansas, is young but talented.

The most experienced is Ron Tanner, a fourth-year junior from Columbus Eastmoor who has played only sparingly on defense so far in his career but has been a contributor on special teams.

He is joined by Tyvis Powell, who spent most of his redshirt freshman season as the team's nickel back last year before starting the Orange Bowl at safety. Powell was one of last spring's standouts and will head into this one looking to build off the experience he got last season when he made 48 tackles, forced a fumble and broke up two passes. He also intercepted a two-point conversion attempt to preserve the Buckeyes' 42-41 win at Michigan in the regular-season finale.

Many eyes this spring figure to be on sophomore Vonn Bell, a five-star recruit last year from Georgia who showed flashes of great raw ability on special teams last season before starting the Orange Bowl at nickel back. He was victimized for a long touchdown pass early in the game but made a highlight-reel interception and finished the night with seven solo tackles.

Sophomore Cam Burrows, another highly regarded member of the 2013 recruiting class who played sparingly on defense last season, has reportedly moved to safety where his coverage skills could make him an asset.

"He'll be playing some nickel, playing some safety," cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs said on signing day. "There will be some changes."

Also in the mix this spring will be redshirt freshmen Chris Worley and Jayme Thompson, though Thompson will be limited as he continues to recover from a broken ankle suffered early in preseason camp.

Who ends up at the nickel spot is anyone's guess, though Powell, Burrows and Bell all figure to be in the running. One or more of the cornerbacks could work there as well.

That group is four deep this spring with returning starter Doran Grant the headliner. He entered the lineup last year as a junior and turned in a solid campaign with 50 tackles, three interceptions and 10 pass breakups.

The other veteran, Armani Reeves, started three games as a sophomore last season when All-Big Ten performer Bradley Roby was either hurt or suspended, but he figures to get a strong push from redshirt freshmen Eli Apple and Gareon Conley.

"The competition I would tell you is wide open," Coombs said in reference to the secondary as a whole. "You've got to perform to

play. We're going to work really hard on finding those guys who can compete and who will challenge in tough situations, whether they're incoming freshmen, redshirt freshmen or experienced kids."

While the secondary was the weakest link last season, the position group under the most scrutiny this spring figures to be linebacker.

Meyer has not been shy about declaring the dire situation at the position, where veterans Curtis Grant and Joshua Perry figure to be pushed by sophomore Trey Johnson and true freshman Raekwon McMillan.

Perry was fourth on the team in tackles last season as a sophomore with 64, but he contributed only two tackles for loss and one sack. Grant notched 52 tackles, including four for loss and 2½ sacks, as a junior last year but had his ups and downs. Injuries slowed Grant late in the campaign, and former four-star recruit Camren Williams struggled in his place.

Enter McMillan, a four-star recruit from Hinesville (Ga.) Liberty County who enrolled in January. He figures to get every chance to unseat one of the starters and has the physical presence to do it at 6-2, 242.

Johnson, a smaller prospect at 6-1, 220, backed up Ryan Shazier on the weak side last season and figures to get the first shot to replace him.

Five-star 2013 recruit Mike Mitchell also was expected to be in the competition, but sources have indicated he is seeking a transfer and will not take part in spring drills.

Sophomore Darron Lee, who came in as a safety, will look to impress the coaches at linebacker, safety or nickel after contributing on special teams as a freshman.

Walk-ons Joe Burger and Craig Fada, who worked into the depth chart last season as some of their more highly touted counterparts struggled with injuries or production, are back this year as well while junior Devan Bogard, a former safety, will miss spring while continuing to rehabilitate his second serious knee injury in as many years.

Finally there is the defensive line, where everyone is back from last season's depth chart except for the transplanted Hale.

However, this group is not immune from significant change as well with the arrival from Penn State of new position coach Larry Johnson, who replaced Mike Vrabel in January when Vrabel left to become an assistant for the Houston Texans.

Johnson, who has developed a reputation over the years as one of the best in the business while consistently churning out All-Big

Ten defensive linemen and sending them to the NFL, inherits a talented group that could go three deep at every position, but where he chooses to deploy his various new charges remains to be seen.

The Buckeyes were ninth in the nation and third in the Big Ten in rushing defense last season (109.4 yards per game), and they sacked the quarterback more times per game (3.0) than anyone in the conference while finishing seventh nationally in that category.

The leading tackler among the linemen last season was Noah Spence, a rising junior whose "Viper" rush end spot will be up for grabs early in the season as he serves the last two games of a three-game suspension for testing positive for a banned substance.

Classmate Jamal Marcus excelled in that spot when Spence missed the Orange Bowl, and he figures to continue to be the No. 1 option there with senior Steve Miller also in the mix for playing time.

Joey Bosa returns at the other end spot after recording 13½ tackles for loss last season and being named a freshman All-American by the Football Writers Association of America.

His emergence as a force came as a result of an early-season injury to then-sophomore Adolphus Washington, who moved inside to

3-technique tackle upon his return to health. That ripple effect also saw Michael Bennett move from there to nose tackle, and the result was a line that frequently got penetration but was less effective against the run in the second half of the season.

Bennett, now a senior and a likely candidate for captaincy, has versatility that figures to be an asset for Johnson to build around.

Juniors Tommy Schutt and Chris Carter as well as redshirt freshmen Michael Hill and Donovan Munger will compete for playing time inside, though Hill will be limited as he recovers from shoulder and hand injuries that caused him to sit out last season.

Filling out the large group of competitors at end are redshirt freshmen Tracy Sprinkle and Tyquan Lewis – who should add depth at rush end – as well as Rashad Frazier, a Purdue transfer from Middletown, Ohio, who holds two years of eligibility.

For all the change swirling this spring, Meyer is on record stating a team without a strong defensive line will not be able to compete for championships. That has been the goal since he returned to his home state two years ago, and the progress of the spring will be on display at Ohio Stadium on April 12 during the annual Scarlet and Gray Game.

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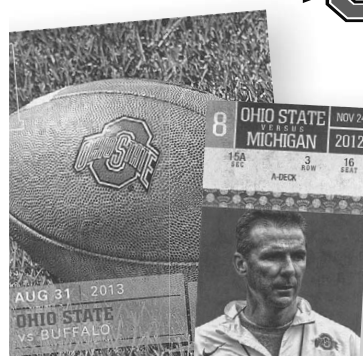
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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Ohio State Focuses On Fixing Defensive Woes

By RYAN GINN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Looking back at Ohio State's 2013 football campaign, there were certainly a number of signs that the defense wasn't necessarily capable of lifting the Buckeyes to the lofty ambitions that they held for themselves.

A slew of injuries before and during the season meant that Ohio State was never able to enjoy a full complement of options to choose from, and the replacements for those who were starters often proved inade-

quate. The passing defense struggled to the point of finishing 110th nationally in yards allowed per game, and the Buckeyes were often susceptible to a big hit. Nine different receivers had 100-yard receiving days against OSU, and the secondary surrendered seven passes of 60 yards or more.

But most of all, those struggles boiled down to the simple fact that everything had to go well in order for the defense to have a shot. Unforeseen wrinkles helped Michigan score 41 points against the Buckeyes, and it wasn't until Ohio State knew what play was coming on the game-deciding two-point con-

version attempt that it made a stop. Against Michigan State and Clemson, the Buckeyes couldn't get stops when the offense stalled or left the defense with a short field because of a turnover.

Two of those games ended with losses, and the other very well could have if not for the prescience of cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs, who told nickel back Tyvis Powell what to look for from the Wolverines during a timeout prior to the two-point conversion.

As spring practice began March 4, the OSU defense featured a handful of new faces on the field and two new assistants

on the coaching staff. The ability of new defensive line coach Larry Johnson Sr. to continue the success of the front four and co-defensive coordinator and safeties coach Chris Ash to fix the passing game will go a long way toward determining if the Buckeyes can get over the hump and into the College Football Playoff this fall.

Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer stopped shy of saying that changes to the staff needed to be made, but he agreed that the staff turnover and resulting hires would likely serve as a benefit to the defense.

"I have a lot of confidence in the coaches that were here, and obviously we didn't perform up to standard," the coach said. "We won a lot of games, but there were some holes. Just overall, we need to freshen up our defense. That's what's going to get ready to take place over the next few months."

Johnson and Ash will focus on bringing those fresh approaches to the defense and will do so with one goal in mind – a No. 1 ranking at the end of the season.

"I had some options on the table," Johnson said of his decision to leave Penn State for OSU. "I wanted the best fit for me. I wanted the opportunity, obviously, to win a national championship because that's important to me in your career and what you do. But I wanted a place where I could go and feel like it's home."

Ash echoed those sentiments, saying that his move from Arkansas was motivated by a desire to win a national title. His ability to field a competent passing defense will factor into Ohio State's championship aspirations, and he doesn't shy away from acknowledging that reality.

"You look at Coach Meyer's plan, and one of the signs up there (in the Woody Hayes Athletic Center) is his plan to win," Ash said. "Play great defense, that's No. 1. You have to be able to play great defense to win it all. You don't have to be the best defense in the country, but you've got to be pretty darn solid to be able to say you're going to win (15) games, which is what it would take in this league to win it all. You can't have an average to subpar defense and get that done."

A Fresh Start

As he goes to work on turning OSU's pass defense from a liability into an asset, Ash made one thing unquestionably clear – he has no interest in making judgments based on what transpired in 2013 or earlier. Instead, any player who suits up for the Buckeyes this year will be doing so with a fresh slate whether they come in as returning starters or true freshmen.

"I'll be quite honest with you," Ash said. "I'm not concerned about what's happened here in the past. I really don't care. I'm more concerned with the direction that we're going to go and how we get the players aligned with what our vision is going to be and we get better from today on. I really don't care what's happened in the past."

At his National Signing Day press conference, Meyer rattled off the names of



Larry Johnson Sr.



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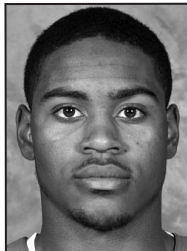
Defensive Players On The Spot

• **Curtis Grant, linebacker:** The subject of extremely high expectations since he signed with Ohio State as a five-star prospect out of Virginia three years ago, Grant has yet to have the impact many envisioned. He turned in a solid first half of his junior season last year before a variety of injuries – including those to his back and ankle – limited him later in the campaign. He finished with 53 tackles in 2013, including four for loss and 2½ sacks. To improve defensively, the Buckeyes need Grant to be not only effective but a difference maker.

• **Gareon Conley, cornerback:** Head coach Urban Meyer used Conley as an example of a player who redshirted last season even though the team could have used his services down the stretch. He has reportedly been among the top performers in winter conditioning, and the 6-2, 185-pounder from Massillon (Ohio) Washington figures to be a candidate for the starting spot vacated by Bradley Roby's decision to skip his last year of eligibility and head to the NFL.

• **Armani Reeves, cornerback:** Reeves started three games when Roby was either hurt or suspended last season, and his play did not produce rave reviews. He also played some

early in the season as the dime back in a defensive wrinkle the coaching staff tried but ultimately scrapped. This spring he will have to hold off Conley in the race to become Roby's full-time replacement. He had 26 tackles and an interception last season.



Gareon Conley

• **Trey Johnson, linebacker:** A four-star prospect from Lawrenceville (Ga.) Central Gwinnett, Johnson appeared in six games last season as a freshman and recorded 11 tackles. A smallish prospect at 6-1, 220, he backed up All-Big Ten performer Ryan Shazier last season and figures to be first in line to grab Shazier's spot at Will linebacker now that Shazier has left early for the NFL. Linebackers coach Luke Fickell praised Johnson for his instincts when he signed with the Buckeyes.

• **Ron Tanner, safety:** Tanner has been a standout on coverage units but has yet to make an impact on defense for the Buckeyes. With two starting spots open, he has an opportunity to change that this spring at a position that was weak and inconsistent last season. The 6-0, 200-pounder from Columbus Eastmoor was regarded as a natural leader on the recruiting trail and could provide a boost in that area as well.

– Marcus Hartman

a handful of 2014 recruits who will be expected to find a way onto the field – be it as a starter, backup or on special teams – this fall despite their true freshman status. That list included the star-studded group of linebackers highlighted by early enrollee Raekwon McMillan, as well as cornerbacks Damon Webb and Marshon Lattimore and safety Erick Smith.

When he was asked if he felt pressure to make sure that those players saw the field as Meyer hoped, Ash didn't flinch. It is of course the plan to prepare every player to compete and execute at a high level, but the pressure that Ash faces comes from within instead of externally.

"I've got pressure from myself to come here to be successful and to succeed," he said. "We will put the best players on this football field that will help us win, and we will give everybody an ample opportunity to show that they can do that."

In Ash's world, the players who execute best will be the ones who crack the top of the two-deep, and those efforts begin in the spring. Former starters won't earn a spot solely because of their previous success or experience advantage, and true freshmen won't be granted the opportunity to avoid a redshirt solely because Meyer expects them to play.

Putting Together The Puzzle

As co-defensive coordinator at Wisconsin and defensive coordinator at Arkansas, Ash was responsible for defensive play-calling duties. His arrival has raised curiosity over how he and defensive coordinator Luke Fickell will go about calling games and how he and Coombs will divvy up responsibility in the secondary.

In fact, Coombs seems excited to work with Ash on making sure that everyone on the defense is on the same page, something he intuited was lacking a season ago.

"I don't think we function very well in isolation," he said. "And so one of the things that Coach Meyer and I talked about almost immediately after the season was installation of pass coverage, concepts and communication, having one voice. And that that would be very important to everybody in the back end."

"What I would tell you is that Chris and I are going to function as a team in the back end. We will have one voice. We both may be saying it but we'll be saying the same thing so that when we meet together, when we coach together, when we're practicing

together, we're all using the same terms, the same phrases, the same words."

Ash deftly sidestepped any notion of internal conflict and instead extolled the benefits of being able to work together and communicate openly.

"It's going to be a team effort," Ash said. "The defensive staff as a team, putting this package together, trying to identify with the direction we're going to go and what we need to get fixed, and on game day it will be a team effort."

With that being said, Ash is in Columbus because of what he can bring to the defense. He produced a DVD series titled "Aggressive 4-3 Defense," and that's the approach that he'll take in Columbus to fix the defense.

"There's only one speed, and it's full speed," he said. "That's the way we've got to play."

The idea that the Buckeye defenders need to fly to the ball and play aggressively isn't exactly new, though it didn't always have a positive effect. Junior linebacker Ryan Shazier, who declared for the NFL draft after the Orange Bowl loss, sometimes became a victim of his own intensity by overrunning his assignment.

Although he carefully guarded his words, Coombs spoke of the defense's goal of bringing a more aggressive approach to the field this season.

"I would think you would see a more aggressive style of play across the board from alignment to attack and so forth," Coombs said. "I don't want to speak out of turn, but I would say absolutely that would be the desire on everybody's part."

The 4-3 is Ash's base defense, but he said that in order to improve the defense he'll do whatever it takes to get the 11 best players on the field. That philosophy appears to be a departure from the ways of 2013.

Last year, the Buckeyes played anywhere from four to seven defensive backs on the field at a time, but those higher numbers were often out of necessity. The seven-back "penny" defense debuted against pass-happy California, with quality up front sacrificed for quantity in the back in order to try to defeat Cal's spread attack.

Now, instead of being dictated by what the offense is doing, Ash hopes to force the offense to adjust to whatever scheme allows Ohio State to put its greatest athletes on the field.

"You're going to do what your personnel allows you to do," he said. "If you have a great nickel and what the offense does requires you or allows you to play nickel, great, put the best athletes on the football field. Sometimes, some years, you don't have a nickel guy so you're playing with three linebackers out there."

"You want to play the best 11 players on the football field. I don't want to play nickel just because you say you're playing nickel when you've got a third linebacker who's a really good player standing on the sideline. That doesn't make much sense. Put your best 11 players out there that give you a chance to win. That's what I believe in."

When it comes to third down, Ash is known for a style of defense that puts a premium on confusing the opposing quarterback. Linemen can sometimes be seen standing up and roaming at will, and it appears to the opposing offense that there is no clear pattern to his approach.

In order to be most successful, Ash alternates between staying in schemes that the team has shown it can execute and showing a unique, random look that defenders may not play as well but that baffles opponents.

Teams converted 35.6 percent of third downs against the Buckeyes in 2013, and that number will have to improve for the defense to take a step forward.

"If you don't have the right pieces to the puzzle, you have no chance," Ash said. "That's one of the biggest things that a coach has to do is put people in the right spots. Get them in the right spots where they can be successful, give them a chance to go out and play without hesitation and confusion, and that's what we have to do."

That process won't be a quick or easy one.

"It takes time," Ash said. "You have to meet with them, find out what they know, how they learn. You've got to watch them compete, you've got to put them in situations at practice to find out what they can and can't do, and then you've got to evaluate every single day, every opportunity you can."



Chris Ash

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COVER STORY

Buckeyes Hoping To Avoid NCAA Bubble

Continued From Page 1

what any shooting percentage or statistic can show. Watching Ohio State play, there's a sense that this team lacks a security blan-

ket that can score, as Jared Sullinger and Deshaun Thomas provided in the recent past.

That – coupled with inconsistent outside shooting – has led to opponents stopping the

Buckeyes by packing it in and playing zone defense. And until Ohio State can show the ability to shoot defenses out of the paint, the blueprint on how to beat the Buckeyes is readily available.

"We stop attacking sometimes against the zone," Scott said. "We start throwing the ball around the perimeter and not really getting inside the paint at all. It's kind of like a windshield wiper going back and forth and side-to-side. We don't get inside the paint when (opponents) run the zone."

Whatever the reason for their struggles, Ohio State is running out of time to find a solution. Otherwise, what's been a long winter for the Buckeyes could turn into a very short spring to close the season.



KEVIN DYE

'DESPERATION' TIME – For the Ohio State men's basketball team, including junior Sam Thompson, time to right its ship before the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments is limited.

posting 20 overall wins and a .500 record in the Big Ten.

As they currently stand, the Buckeyes project to be a No. 6 seed in the NCAA Tournament according to both ESPN's Joe Lunardi and CBS' Jerry Palm. But a potential loss to the Spartans and a subsequent first-round exit in the Big Ten tournament would be the kind of thing that could make things uneasy for the Buckeyes when it comes to the bubble.

Tournament-bound or not, the Buckeyes are well aware that they still have work to do. Momentum is not on OSU's side as the final stretch of the season approaches, and the Buckeyes know that there are only limited opportunities to regain it.

"It's definitely desperation," forward Sam Thompson said. "We're not trying to fall to the tape, we're definitely trying to bust through it. Every game from here on out is a must-win. Once we get to the Big Ten tournament and the NCAA Tournament, it's one and you're done. Every game from here on out is a desperation game. We look at every game from here on out is a tournament-type game that we have to win and that we have to come out and give our best effort for 40 minutes."

Even if his team's recent play suggests otherwise, forward LaQuinton Ross still believes that you shouldn't bet against the Buckeyes. In a season that's been full of ups and downs, Ohio State is currently enduring the latter, which means that the former could be right around the corner.

"This team is still capable of a lot," Ross said. "With the players in this locker room, we can still make a long run in the tournament. There's a reason this team and coaching staff has been to four straight Sweet 16s."

Like his teammate, Smith remains confident.

Having followed a 15-0 start to the season with five losses in six games before a successful mid-February stretch, the Buckeyes know a thing or two about bouncing back this year.

So while the chances of OSU making a fifth consecutive Sweet 16 may seem dim now, there's also reason to believe that the Buckeyes' best basketball could still be ahead of them.

"We're a great team when we come to execute and when we're on top of our game," Smith said. "I said we can beat any team in the country, and I'm going to stick by that. I'm going to stay on the boat, and I should be happy with what we should produce at the end of the season."

"I'm not panicking. I'm not worried about anything."

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Ohio State Has Perhaps Peaked Too Early

I cringed when he said it.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin basketball beat writer Ben Axelrod suggested, right before the Ohio State basketball team went on its ill-fated road swing to Penn State and Indiana, that the Buckeyes were "peaking at the right time."

In my heart, I knew that this edition of the Ohio State basketball team was too inconsistent to suggest at any point that they had peaked. Or maybe Ben was partially right. The Buckeyes *had* peaked. His definition of the "right time" was just wrong and they had peaked a couple of weeks early.

As I have watched this season play out, I am beginning to believe that the Buckeyes have actually been playing about as they should – that they are, and always have been, a middle-of-the-pack Big Ten team. Of course, given the obvious strength and balance of the Big Ten in basketball, being in the middle of this pack still leaves you among the better basketball teams in the country.

In retrospect, I'm not sure why expectations were as high as they seemed to be for the Buckeyes this season. While there was a wealth of talent returning and fans might have set the bar high after a perfect record vs. a weak nonconference slate, the team lacks a dominant center – Amir Williams tends to take a lot of heat from fans but has actually been serviceable in the post, just not dominant – and a proven secondary scoring threat to go along with LaQuinton Ross.

Ross has mustered a fine 14.6 points a game, but that is down from the conference-leading 19.8 that Deshaun Thomas poured in last year, a figure that optimistic Buckeye fans hoped the offensively gifted Ross would be able to replace.

After Ross, it is a crapshoot as to who is going to provide consistent scoring support. Second leading scorer Lenzelle Smith Jr. has reached double figures in 11 of the Buckeyes' 17 conference games but has also been held to five points or less four times by league foes.

While stats never tell the whole story, I have been fascinated by them since my days of poring over the backs of baseball cards as a youth. Here are a few Big Ten rankings for conference games only, which may tell part of the Buckeyes' story.

While I was surprised to see that the Buckeye were ranked as high as sixth in the conference in field-goal shooting percentage at 43.4, a more telling stat may be that they are ranked ninth from beyond the arc at 31.4. The Buckeyes are 10th in rebounding (31.2) and rebounding margin (-2.9), and in a league where tight games are the norm, Ohio State is ninth in free-throw shooting at 70.8 percent.

On the positive side, Ohio State leads the Big Ten in scoring defense in conference games, yielding just 62.5 points per outing.

I think the way that the Buckeyes have lost their games may affect the way their fans perceive the team.

First there was the brutal stretch in January when the Buckeyes lost five of six games. And there were the opposing fans storming the court after losses at Nebraska and Penn State (one of the two painful losses to the Lions), which leaves a vivid impression. Never mind that Nebraska is actually 9-7 in league play this season and tied for fourth place.

The reality of college basketball is that it's not what you do during conference play anymore but what you do in the NCAA Tournament that matters.

With the Buckeyes as inconsistent as they are, maybe the real "peak" will come during March Madness. If so, all will be forgiven.

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

From The Pages of BSB

From time to time you will see me mention in this space how much I enjoy our "From the Pages of BSB" feature, as well as the similar feature recalling Ohio State football recruiting. I am generally entertained, but I am also continually amazed by all the things I have forgotten during my nearly 34 years at the paper.

I had completely forgotten, for instance, that the women's basketball team had ended the 1988-89 season on a 63-game home conference winning streak, never having lost a game in St. John Arena since the Big Ten went to round-robin league play in the 1982-83 campaign.

The streak was as much a comment on the quality – or lack thereof – of the conference back then as it was an indication of the abilities of the Buckeye program. Ohio State was primarily challenged, in conference, only by Iowa. But no matter the quality of a particular conference, a streak of that magnitude is still quite an accomplishment.

The Buckeyes would stretch the streak – which started on Jan. 9, 1983, with a 79-63 win over Indiana – to 66 games the following season before they were crushed by the archrival Hawkeyes, 71-48, on Jan. 28, 1990.

An interesting note about the streak, which demonstrates the growth of Ohio State and Big Ten women's basketball as well as women's basketball in general, is that the first win over the Hoosiers was witnessed by 1,058 fans, while the loss to Iowa came before 11,301 as the Buckeyes-Hawkeyes rivalry, as any long-time OSU women's basketball fan knows, was hot at the time.

I also took note of a 1989 entry in the recruiting feature about New Jersey defensive lineman Alonzo Spellman.

"When you look at Spellman, you can't believe that he is as big as he is," noted recruiting expert Tom Lemming said at the time. "He has the body of a Greek god and hasn't really had much weight training."

At the time, a BSB reader from New Jersey sent us a picture of Spellman playing basketball for Mt. Holly Rancocas Valley Regional. We passed the picture of Spellman in his basketball uniform around the BSB office – and I know staffers Mark Rea and Mike Wachsman remember this – like it was a Playboy centerfold. Other than WWF professional wrestlers who were obviously juiced up on steroids, I don't know that we had ever seen a body like that – Greek god-like, as Lemming put it.

Spellman went on to become one of the more colorful Buckeyes in recent memory and was a first-round draft choice who played nine seasons in the NFL.

Finally, in last year's recruiting entry, Cleveland Glenville's Marcelus Jones talked about his recruitment by Nick Saban's Alabama, even after he had committed to the Buckeyes on Christmas Day 2012.

"I told them I'm still committed to Ohio State, but they said they didn't really care about that at all," Jones said. "They said they go after who they want and don't pay attention to who's committed."

This is the type of SEC recruiting mentality that Urban Meyer has brought to the Big Ten, a strategy that was met with criticism by other Big Ten coaches, Michigan State's Mark

Dantonio among them, when Meyer took over the Buckeye job.

It didn't take Dantonio – who must have figured "if you can't beat them, join them" – long to adopt a similar strategy, attempting to raid the Buckeye commit list this recruiting season.

And other conference coaches are also following suit, which might actually help lift the entire conference up in its battle to reach the competitive level of the SEC.

"He brought the SEC mentality to the Big Ten," Lemming says of Meyer elsewhere in this issue. "The other schools are starting to catch up a little bit when it comes to the non-stop recruiting. I know Illinois is doing it, and you're starting to see a big pickup in that. The Big Ten used to kind of always be... not lackadaisical, but not as into it on a 365-days-a-year kind of schedule."

"Now, I think a lot of them are starting to get that way because Urban brought it to them. I see Minnesota doing it, Michigan is doing it, and I think they're all starting to realize they're going to have to do it in order to keep pace with Ohio State."

Who's The Coordinator?

Regular readers of this column also know that I have never been wild about the notion of "co" offensive or defensive coordinators. Who is really in charge?

Sometimes, "co" means top lieutenant and is a title given as a reward and acknowledgement for a job well done. I always felt former Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel tried to give a title to as many coaches as possible. It was kind of a Tressel thing to do.

When current Ohio State assistant Luke Fickell was co-defensive coordinator with veteran coach Jim Heacock, most believed that it was Heacock who was ultimately in charge. When Meyer came along and named Everett Withers co-defensive coordinator with Fickell and the team struggled on defense, observers wondered if there was some type of tension among the two defensive coaches.

Now, along comes Chris Ash, an experienced defensive coordinator at the higher levels of college football, who also takes on the co-coordinator title with Fickell and has clearly been brought in by Meyer to help fix that which Fickell and Withers could not repair on their own.

I was struck by a quote from Ash in our Feb. 18 electronic issue of BSB Quickly.

Ash was talking about defensive schemes and how they are often dictated by the personnel at hand.

"You're going to do what your personnel allows you to do," Ash said. "If you have a great nickel and what the offense does requires you or allows you to play nickel, great, put the best athletes on the football field. Sometimes, some years, you don't have a nickel guy so you're playing with three linebackers out there."

"You want to play the best 11 players on the football field. I don't want to play nickel just because you say you're playing nickel when you've got a third linebacker who's a really good player standing on the sideline. That doesn't make much sense. Put your best 11 players out there that give you a chance to win. That's what I believe in."

That sounds like a coordinator talking to

me, as have other things Ash has said since his arrival in Columbus, including comments in this issue of BSB.

It will be interesting to see how Fickell adapts to his new co-coordinator as the team moves forward.

Adapting is something that Fickell has had to do a lot of lately.

First he had to adapt to being thrown in as head coach of the team upon the demise of Tressel. Then he had to adapt to going back to being an assistant upon the hiring of Meyer, while also being joined at the hip with Withers.

Now he has to adapt to the presence of Ash, who arrives with a mandate from the head coach to help clean up a mess of which Fickell oversaw the creation. And he has to do so without the support of his old college buddy, Mike Vrabel, who has moved on to the NFL, leaving Fickell outnumbered as far as Meyer hires, as opposed to coaches from the pre-Meyer days.

One thing I can say about Fickell.

He has handled the trials and tribulations of the past few years, for the most part, with a lot of dignity. This was especially true during the final weeks of his tenure as head coach in 2011, when he had to coach the final games of the season with constant speculation – which of course proved true – that Meyer was prepared to take over the program.

How well Ash and Fickell mesh could be a key to the improvement of the defense this season.

For a list of some of the other things you may have missed from the two BSB Quicklys published since Buckeye Sports Bulletin last went to press, see the box on page 5 of this issue.

One other interesting note in talking about the past year's porous pass defense. The 2013 squad gave up more passing yardage (268.0) than any Buckeye squad other than the 1981 squad, which yielded 273.1 yards through the air.

After the failure of the defense, especially in the last several games of 2013, it was assumed that Meyer would shake up the defensive staff. With Vrabel and Withers presumably departing on their own, Meyer was able to reshape the staff without firing anyone.

Meyer's mentor, Earle Bruce, who was head coach when the '81 Buckeye defense leaked like a sieve, was forced to act on his own and fired three defensive coaches shortly after an ugly victory over Navy in the 1981 Liberty Bowl.

The coach of the defensive secondary who got the ax after the 1981 season was none other than Alabama's Saban, now acknowledged by most as the best coach – and certainly the most successful – in college football, the coach that Meyer, who is also in the "best coach" discussion, seems most anxious to pursue and overtake.

The Buckeye pass defense ranked 136th of 137 schools that season. Also losing their jobs were defensive coordinator Dennis Fryzel and defensive line coach Steve Szabo.

"I decided a staff reorganization was needed for the best interests of the Ohio State football program," Bruce said in a statement after the firings. "It was a very difficult decision for me because of my deep appreciation and close attachment to the coaches involved. Any further comment on my part would be unfair to all concerned."

Saban was in his second year on the Buckeye staff after stints at his alma mater, Kent State, as well as Syracuse and West Virginia. He would end up at Navy in 1982, one more step in the vagabond coaching career that ultimately took him to Alabama in 2007.