

BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN

Vol. 33, No. 19

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

April 5, 2014

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JOSH WINSLOW

HOME-RUN HITTER – Dontre Wilson (2), donning a new number, should provide Ohio State with a major offensive threat during his sophomore season out of the hybrid "H" role.

Armed & Ready

Ohio State's Offensive Depth Improving

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

When Urban Meyer first arrived at Ohio State and opened up the cupboard on offense, what he found at the skill positions was famously not what he had hoped.

With no returning running back having more than 600 yards on the ground and no receiver making even 15 catches the season before – the worst output at OSU since the famously passing-averse Woody Hayes offenses in the 1970s – Meyer was blunt in his assessment of what he found.

The wide receivers? "Not functional," in the words of the new head coach. The offense in general? "It was a clown show," he said, uttering two words that would not soon go away. The stats from the year before? "Very poor."

So when Meyer recently discussed the depth the Buckeyes have as they go through 2014's spring practice sessions, the fact that his answer had a different tone had to catch some ears.

"The positions where we've recruited well and there's depth is the defensive line ... wide receiver – you see some competition for some spots – and the tailback position," he said. "Other than that ..."

Meyer's voice trailed off from there, but his intent was clear – the Buckeyes are finally getting close to having the talent he demands at the skill positions.

Much of that is because of the recruiting the Buckeyes have done since Meyer and his staff took over. The 2012 signing class included five-star running back Bri'onte Dunn and four-star Warren Ball, while four-star wideout Michael Thomas and three-star Frank Epitropoulos also arrived at OSU.

Then in 2013, Ohio State received signed pledges from four-star running backs Ezekiel Elliott and Dontre Wilson,

while five-star receiver Jalin Marshall was also in a class that included four-star wideouts James Clark and Corey Smith and four-star tight end Marcus Baugh.

The 2014 class has already provided dividends in four-star wideouts Curtis Samuel and Johnnie Dixon, who have enrolled early, while back Parris Campbell and receivers Noah Brown and Terry McLaurin are still to arrive in the summer.

All of those players are in the mix as the Buckeyes go about replacing both the top running back and No. 1 receiver from 2013's record-setting offense, and how they progress will be a big part of just how good Meyer's third team at Ohio State can be.

Catching The Ball

While the head coach sounded pleased with the progress the team's pass catchers have made – going from 125 grabs as a team in 2011 to 161 a year later and 238 a season ago – third-year receivers coach Zach Smith was not quite as excited when he was interviewed March 27.

"Is (the depth) where I like it? No, not right now," he said. "We're getting there. We're probably one or two short still. We need to develop the young guys, too, to see how talented the depth is. Numbers can be deceiving. You need to get performance out of 12 wideouts, 15 wideouts, whatever it is. We're not there yet, and we need to be."

The Buckeyes must also contend with the loss of Corey "Philly" Brown, who led the squad in 2013 with 63 catches – the most at OSU since David Boston had 85 in 1998 – and 10 touchdown grabs.

Meyer pointed to three players through the spring who

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Plenty Of Questions Facing Buckeyes

By BEN AXELROD
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Almost immediately after Vee Sanford's runner banked off the backboard, went through the basket and brought an end to Ohio State's 2013-14 season, some Buckeye fans began looking forward to the following year.

Even some players did as well.

Sitting by his locker and surrounded by a throng of media following Ohio State's 60-59 defeat March 20 at the hands of Dayton in the first game for both teams in the NCAA Tournament, LaQuinton Ross admitted out loud that he'd spend the following days determining whether he'd be returning to Columbus.

Ultimately, Ross opted to forgo his senior season in order to pursue a professional career, as the 6-8, 220-pound forward projects as a second-round pick in the upcoming NBA draft.

As a result, the Buckeyes will be replacing both their leading scorer and rebounder for the third time in as many years next season. From a team that many felt lacked a go-to scorer, Ohio State loses the closest thing it had to one in Ross, and that's before

you even mention the losses of the Buckeyes' two seniors – and second- and third-leading scorers – in Aaron Craft and Lenzelle Smith Jr.

Couple the departure of guard Amedeo Della Valle, who has returned to Italy to pursue a professional career of his own, with the addition of Temple graduate transfer big man Anthony Lee, and it's safe to say that the Buckeyes' basketball squad will have a different look when the 2014-15 season commences. With four players on their way out and at least five new Buckeyes on their way in, Thad Matta's program will be counting on plenty of fresh faces to aid what will still be a veteran-laden squad.

What follows is a breakdown of what Ohio State has coming back, what it will be adding, and what it needs to improve on at each position.

With several unanswered questions remaining at the end of this past season, several more will be added by the time next year commences, which could make for an interesting year for the new-look Buckeyes.

Center

Ohio State's center position has largely under-achieved since Jared Sullinger left for the NBA following the 2011-12 season, but the Buckeyes are hopeful that a trio of seniors – including one newcomer – will help change that in the coming year.

Amir Williams and Trey McDonald will both be back after finding varying degrees of success in each of the past two seasons. Starting all 35 of Ohio State's games last season, Williams averaged 7.8 points and 5.8 rebounds per game, while McDonald backed him up with averages of 2.0 points and 1.7 rebounds in 12.1 minutes per game.

Both Williams' and McDonald's roles could see drastic shifts next season, however, with the added presence of the 6-9, 230-pound Lee.

The American Athletic Conference's leading rebounder last season with an average of 8.6 boards per game, Lee will have one year of eligibility available to him as soon as he arrives on campus.



LaQuinton Ross

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Buckeyes Boast Plenty Of Options At Tailback

Continued From Page 1

are at the top of the depth chart in senior Devin Smith, junior Corey Smith and sophomore Thomas.

Devin Smith is no surprise considering he's been a three-year contributor. He made a career-high 44 grabs for 660 yards and eight touchdowns a season ago, but only six of those catches came in the final five games of the season.

As a result, Zach Smith is looking to push his most experienced wideout to a point where he can fight through and make an impact in the biggest games.

"The biggest thing that we've had to do and I've had to do is present adversity to him, move him positions and move him around and create those hard situations," the receivers coach said. "He's great when things are great, and when things are hard that's when he needs to shine, and he's been inconsistent in that. So far (this spring), so good."

Thomas brings a physical package to the table at 6-3, 202 pounds. The nephew of former NFL wideout Keyshawn Johnson, Thomas caught three passes and was a key blocker at the position in 2012 before redshirting last year.

"He didn't have a great fall camp," Zach Smith said. "I didn't play him in the first game, mainly because I wanted him to realize we're not going to go a whole season preparing the way he prepared, performing the way he performed. That's just not what we expect. After that game, we kept going and he kept growing, and we didn't want to waste a year on Mike just to catch 12 or 15 balls."

As for Corey Smith, the JUCO transfer also took a redshirt last year as the wideouts faced a numbers crunch, but he could be a candidate for a breakout campaign. At 6-0, 190 pounds with excellent speed, the Akron native could be the most physically talented member of the group according to his coaches but must be ready after taking a year off.

Then there's senior Evan Spencer, who made 22 catches and had three touchdowns a season ago. He should also be in the mix for a starting job despite being out for spring drills while rehabbing from a leg injury suffered in the Orange Bowl.

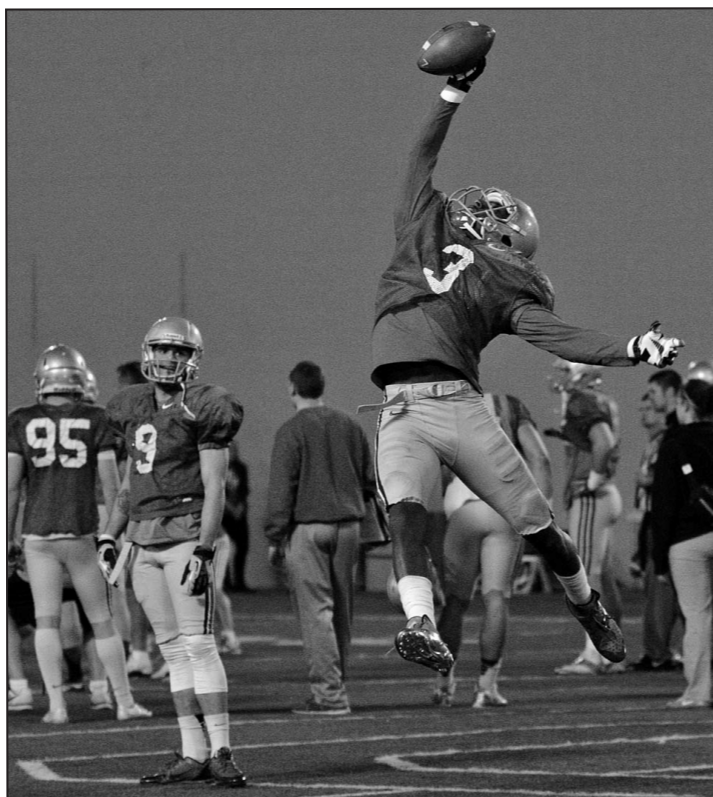
While those four appear to be at the head of the class so far, Dixon has also earned some time with the top unit this spring. Already earning praise from Zach Smith for his work habits, Dixon dominated Florida's state playoffs a season ago and is noted for his ability in the open field.

Meanwhile, Georgia Tech transfer Jeff Greene has turned heads at times in spring, and he's impossible to miss at 6-5, 220. The junior has had an "OK" spring in the eyes of Meyer but has size that can't be taught. Epitropoulos has had just one catch his first two years but also adds depth.

Another player who cannot be forgotten is Clark, who earned some early playing time a season ago before suffering a leg injury that ended his season. The redshirt freshman has worked slowly back into the mix but also appears to be a quick target.

There are also some X-factors at play. The move of Wilson from the running backs room to the hybrid "H" position seems to have energized the sophomore from Texas, who averaged 8.7 yards per touch last year as OSU tried to get him on the edge on sweeps and swing passes.

After an offseason of weight training and working on his speed, Wilson appears to be



KEVIN DYE

WATCH THIS – Ohio State sophomore Michael Thomas (3), seen here making an acrobatic catch during a spring practice, could play a big role in the Buckeye offense this fall.

ready to make a big leap forward and has been hard to cover during spring ball.

"I use the term 'Percy Harvin' very loosely because there's only probably one of him, but that hybrid position is really a key guy if we could do that," Meyer said. "Dontre is the No. 1 (at the) spot."

Behind him are redshirt freshman Marshall and true freshman Samuel, both of whom have been dogged by injuries this spring. Dubbed "Mr. Excitement" in high school in Middletown, Ohio, Marshall looked electric in the early throes of spring before knee surgery sidelined him. A native of Brooklyn, N.Y., Samuel also battled a hamstring injury early in camp but is known for his jets.

Add in the play of Baugh, who has shown the ability to stretch the middle of the field, to a tight end group already featuring solid pass catchers Jeff Heuerman and Nick Vannett, and the Buckeyes don't appear to be short on potential targets in 2014.

"We have a lot of guys, not just me and

Evan with the experience," Devin Smith said. "We have guys like Dontre, who is really stepping up and is talented. Jalin Marshall stepped up before he got hurt. Johnnie Dixon is another guy that came in that really turned some heads, and we have a lot of guys around that can help us."

His position coach agreed.

"I'm really excited about the group," Zach Smith said. "We're getting there slowly. Right now, there's a lot of competition. The culture is growing and they're really buying in to what we're trying to build."

Running The Rock

While amassing 1,521 yards, 15 touchdowns and 7.3 yards per carry, Carlos Hyde became the engine that made the offense go for large stretches of 2013. And as Meyer's first-ever 1,000-yard back, he certainly leaves big shoes to fill as the Buckeyes progress into 2014.

Don't call running backs coach Stan Drayton worried about the situation, though.

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"I am extremely confident that we're going to get to where we need to be," he said. "I'm extremely confident. They have a culture that's being created in that room right now that they're going to be the hard-working unit on the football field."

Right now, the Buckeyes have four backs, only one of whom is an upperclassman in senior Rod Smith. All, though, appear to be in the mix for carries, with Drayton saying that each can help the football team in different ways.

Smith goes into his final campaign with 67 career carries, 350 yards and four touchdown runs – solid numbers but not what was expected when he was a high four-star prospect in the class of 2010.

Smith has just one final chance, but Drayton thinks the 6-3, 231-pounder has grown into his body and is ready to use his size to make him into a dynamic runner.

"Really, he was Bambi-ish for his first three years of college football," Drayton said. "Now he's starting to grow into that body and learn how to use it and create power angles for himself, and it's starting to really show. He is on the right track. I'm excited for Rod."

Elliott was the second-stringer a season ago and started the spring at the top of the heap but is not assured of any spot. The sophomore ran 30 times last year for 262 yards and two scores and is a do-it-all back with good size (6-0, 225), speed and moves, but he must be more consistent in the eyes of offensive coordinator Tom Herman to become the No. 1 back.

Dunn and Ball were also considered big gets when they arrived in Meyer's first season, but Ball redshirted his initial campaign and Dunn took one last season. Ball is coming off a season in which he carried 13 times for 76 yards and also provides size at 6-1, 224 pounds, while Dunn (25 rushes, 133 yards, two TDs in 2012) is a slasher with good moves at 6-0, 216 who is learning to play fast.

"They're just going," Drayton said. "They're accepting their mistakes as they go and they're getting better from it. I just love the competition. They know competition amongst each other is healthy, and it's fun to watch a bunch of guys get better at the same time, it really is."

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

New Leader, Same Expectations For D-Line

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

Like many units on the Ohio State football team this spring, the defensive line is an area undergoing a significant amount of change.

Many of the faces will be familiar, though, and fans probably won't notice a difference in the way the Buckeyes line up.

Veteran Michael Bennett said things do sound different this spring, though, with Larry Johnson taking over as line coach for Mike Vrabel.

"I'd say the only thing is he doesn't curse," Bennett said of Johnson with a laugh. "They're both great coaches. They bring a lot of energy. They care, they love you and they're going to get after you if you mess up, but Coach Johnson doesn't curse."

Teammate Adolphus Washington has seen more of a difference between the current coach and his predecessor. He called both of them intense but said they express their focus in different ways.

"Coach Johnson and Coach Vrabel are like the complete opposite," Washington said. "They're both great coaches, but their intensity level is different. One is up here (Vrabel) and the other is down here (Johnson)."

"Sometimes you need that Coach Vrabel-type of guy to get you going, especially when you're feeling one of those days like when you don't want to be out there, he'll get you going. But then again if you're already motivated to get out there, then a Coach Johnson is good."

Bennett, a senior who has played multiple positions on the line during his three years in Columbus, is back at nose tackle this spring, the spot he finished 2013 after opening it at 3-technique tackle.

Juniors Noah Spence (rush end or "Viper") and Washington (3-technique) and sophomore Joey Bosa (strongside end) are all back in their spots from the end of last season, too, but that might be the only constant.

Behind them a plethora of youngsters are vying for playing time, and Johnson says that

will be available because he plans to adjust how the troops are deployed this fall.

"I hope they (are competitive) going into the fall so we can play eight or nine guys," said Johnson, who is in his first year at Ohio State after 18 seasons at Penn State. "To do that, we've got to do that in practice, so there's not a first group or a second group."

"There's a group of guys trying to work together to get better, and I've sold them on the idea there are going to be eight or nine guys playing, so they have to compete to get into the game. It's not the guy who started the game, it's the guy who finishes the game that's going to make a difference, and I think they've bought into that."

In less than three years on the job, head coach Urban Meyer has already recruited enough defensive linemen to go three deep at all four spots, and Johnson is reaping those rewards this spring.

Senior Steve Miller and junior Jamal Marcus have been seen backing up Spence (who is suspended for the first two games of next season after violating the Big Ten's drug policy last year) while redshirt freshman Donovan Munger and junior Chris Carter work behind Bennett.

In the mix at the 3-technique tackle spot behind Washington are sophomore Tommy Schutt and redshirt freshman Michael Hill. Crowding into the picture behind Bosa are junior Rashad Frazier and redshirt freshmen Tyquan Lewis and Tracy Sprinkle.

"I'm really impressed with some of the young guys," Johnson said. "Donovan Munger is one guy. Mike Hill has done a really good job. Tommy Schutt, who was hurt most of last year, he's having a really good spring ball. I think a lot of young guys are. Tyquan Lewis is doing a great job."

He resisted naming a pecking order behind the starters but said he would like to see a variety of guys earn a role, whether that is rushing the passer or in short-yardage situations.

Playing more guys on a regular basis will mark a departure from the past two seasons under Vrabel, who preferred to pick his four starters and ride them as far as he could. It was a philosophy he brought with him from



KEVIN DYE

DIFFERENT TONE – New Ohio State defensive line coach Larry Johnson Sr. might be as intense as Mike Vrabel but "doesn't curse," according to his linemen.

the NFL, where he was a standout linebacker for 14 years after starring at Ohio State.

The result last season was Spence – a first-team All-Big Ten choice with eight sacks – playing 799 of the Buckeyes' exactly 1,000 defensive snaps while Bennett logged 772. Bosa, who began the year backing up Washington at end but entered the starting lineup when the latter was injured and finished with 7½ sacks, played 659 plays while Washington was on the field for 540.

No one else played as many as 400 snaps on the defensive line, and the player who logged the fifth-most plays (Joel Hale at 360) has moved to offense this year.

With Schutt also missing significant time because of injuries last season and the line in general being very young, Bosa pointed out there were not necessarily a lot of options for Vrabel in terms of substitutions. The freshman All-American admitted the group tired at times, though, and that is something Johnson hopes to avoid this year.

"The game has changed," Johnson said. "You talk about spread offense, quick snaps, quick balls, getting out of there, that number can go from 65 to 90 (plays per game) pretty

quick. You add that times 12 games, one guy doing that, that's a lot of football. What I want to do is play fresh. I want to play eight, nine guys every time. That way you can play as hard as you can every snap, and that's how you play defense."

That sounds good to Bennett, who is adjusting to a new defensive line coach for the third time in his four years at Ohio State. Prior to playing for Vrabel the past two seasons, he was a pupil of Jim Heacock, who favored playing at least two full units throughout the season as well.

"I've adjusted a couple of times, but it's hard especially going from Coach Vrabel to Coach Johnson," Bennett said. "They've got different styles of coaching. You've just got to learn some new stuff, relearn some stuff. I wasn't practicing that much toward the end of the season because of injury so I don't know if I can get away with that under Coach Johnson."

"It's just little stuff like that. You've got to try to get to know them quickly and understand them and understand where they're coming from. They've got to learn you and all your teammates, so it's just a learning process while you move forward. You can't take time to learn them."

The veteran tackle, who had had 11½ tackles for loss including seven sacks last season, said the overriding message this spring is to play hard from start to finish.

"He just wants us to go 100 percent to the ball every play, so if there's a screen as a D-lineman you don't really think you can get to it," Bennett said. "You hope the DBs get there, but with Coach Johnson he wants us going all the way until the ball is on the ground. He wants strip sacks, not just regular sacks. He's really adamant about that. Just going until the whistle blows and then getting back on the line and not being tired."

Johnson has fully embraced Meyer's mantra of playing with maximum effort for four to six seconds every play.

"That's going to be our style, and we're going to work on that as hard as we can," Johnson said. "When we get there, have an attitude. That's football. That's defense. It's not X's and O's, it's playing hard. That's our style, and that's what we're going to do."

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

OSU Needs To Replace Plenty Of Production

By MARCUS HARTMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

This spring the Ohio State football team is dealing with the loss of more than the stat sheet alone indicates. Not that the tangible numbers on paper are pretty, of course.

Graduated seniors Carlos Hyde, Jordan Hall, Kenny Guiton and Corey "Philly" Brown ran 333 times for 2,429 yards and a whopping 28 touchdowns last season. That is 52 percent of the team's ground yardage and 62 percent of its rushing TDs gone.

Meanwhile, the trio of Brown, Hyde, Hall and Chris Fields caught a combined 107 passes for 1,164 yards and 19 more scores. That's 45 percent of receptions, 41 percent of receiving yards and 50 percent of receiving touchdowns.

The percentage that is most worrisome, however, is 80. That represents the losses to graduation on the starting offensive line, a unit that was among the best in the country the past two seasons, especially when it came to clearing the way on the ground.

Throughout the first 26 games of the Urban Meyer era at Ohio State, there was little doubt what the Buckeyes would do when they needed a few yards – or on first down, for that matter.

At 6-0 and more than 230 pounds, Hyde was an imposing force in any short-yardage situation, and he had the speed and quickness to turn short gains into intermediate ones and intermediate ones into long ones as well.

Braxton Miller, the 6-2, 215-pound OSU quarterback entering his senior year but



JOSH WINSLOW

SENIOR STANDOUT – Ohio State running back Carlos Hyde rushed for 1,521 yards and added 147 more receiving last season, producing a good chunk of the Buckeye offense.

sidelined this spring by shoulder surgery, also brings his fair share of power to the table, but his main weapons are his sweet feet that make him nearly impossible to tackle on the first try in the open field.

Their running ability also came in handy on first downs when greater gains often equal easier conversions later in the series

and a more efficient unit overall, and getting those first few yards was made easier by the job often done by senior linemen Jack Mewhort, Andrew Norwell, Corey Linsley and Marcus Hall along with sophomore Taylor Decker.

They set the tone on the ground, and that will be hard to replace.

That's why head coach Meyer acknowledged the Buckeyes will probably have to find more consistently effective ways to move the ball in 2014 than they had in 2013, when they rushed for a Big Ten-record 4,321 yards and also broke Ohio State records for points (637), touchdowns (87) and touchdown passes (38).

"As bad as we want an offensive line like we had last year, it's going to take a while to develop," said Meyer, who expressed confidence line coach Ed Warinner will be able to mold a new line into a functional unit in time for the regular season. "At some point, because we recruited well and because of our line coach, that's going to happen."

"We're going to have to lean on some perimeter ways of getting first downs. Last year we were running for 300 yards a game, and it's because that offensive line was so good. We have other weapons. It will be a little different taste than what we had last year though."

Attacking the perimeter is not new for Meyer's offense, and neither is talking about doing it since he arrived at Ohio State.

It was also a big part of the conversation last season, but there were still only glimpses as the personnel continued to dictate a more straightforward approach.

"If they can't stop it, why go elsewhere?" was often the mantra.

The lack of a consistent threat on the outside was a factor, too, and the staff is looking for multiple players to change that as well.

While Brown was a productive starter at wide receiver who sometimes doubled as the "H" receiver who runs the ball out of

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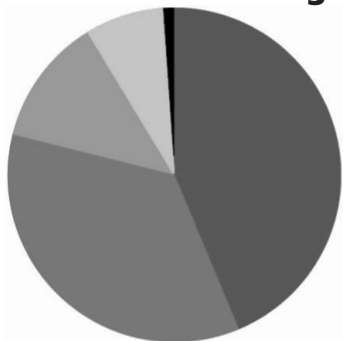
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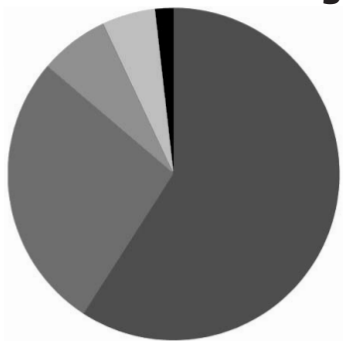
OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

OSU 2013 Rushing



Total Lost - 2,429 yards (56.2 percent)

OSU 2013 Receiving



Total Lost - 1,164 yards (40.9 percent)

the backfield, he lacked the size to create mismatches down the field and the elusiveness to make big plays around the line of scrimmage.

Dontre Wilson made cameos at the "H" position throughout the season as a freshman, but Meyer and offensive coordinator Tom Herman at times expressed frustration at the limitations Wilson's knowledge of the offense created. It was not uncommon to see teams key on him when he entered the game because of the likelihood he would get the ball on a handoff, shovel pass or flare out of the backfield. He finished the year with 250 yards rushing on 31 carries and 22 catches for 210 yards while scoring a total of three touchdowns.

With the knowledge they could fall back on overpowering opponents with Miller, Hyde and the offensive line, the staff could rest easier in 2013 when Wilson's development slowed, but that is no longer the case.

"He couldn't play receiver last year," Herman said. "He didn't know what the hell he was doing and didn't know how to do it."

"His ability limited us. Ability doesn't just include running fast and making guys miss. There's a lot that goes into usability in the offense, and he's had a great offseason and took to the position and is still learning and still makes mistakes you wish he wouldn't at this stage, but at the end of the day he played tailback his entire life and to move him into this 'hybrid' role, he hasn't been doing it very long."

In addition to the more experienced Wilson, the staff has added true freshman Johnnie Dixon this spring. It also had high hopes for redshirt freshman Jalin Marshall to bring the versatility as a receiver and runner they crave, but his spring was cut short by knee surgery.

While that trio can pose threats as runners in the backfield or in the quick screen game, there is a renewed push to develop the downfield passing game with senior returning starter Devin Smith as well as sophomore Michael Thomas and junior Corey Smith. While Devin Smith caught 44 passes for 660 yards and eight touchdowns last season, the latter pair redshirted.

"Every year has its own personality," Herman said. "It certainly will be different."

I remember having the same conversation last year. We'll never leave our core values, core tenets of what we believe in offensively, which is to spread the field horizontally and vertically, to use the shotgun to add the quarterback as part of our run game and have that dimension, and to be a downhill, (center-guard)-gap, tight zone, vertical, power-run team with play-action pass off it."

As Herman alluded, the ground game isn't going to be de-emphasized. It just might not be quite as reliable when the going gets tough.

The pair of Miller and Hyde combined for 2,589 yards and 23 touchdowns last season, and whatever running back pairs with the QB for his senior season is unlikely to be able to exactly re-create the effect the pair had together.

If there is a back on the roster capable of emulating Hyde, it is senior Rod Smith. At 6-3, 231 pounds, Smith has long been expected to take over the mantle of next great Ohio State tailback. That hasn't happened yet, but the staff has been pleased

with what it has seen from him early in the spring. Sophomores Warren Ball (6-1, 224) and Bri'onte Dunn (6-0, 216) also bring power back elements to the offense, but they all were trying to catch shifty sophomore Ezekiel Elliott (6-0, 225) as March came to a close.

How it all shakes out remains to be seen, but Herman promised to let the talent dictate the scheme rather than the other way around.

"So what does that evolve to? I don't know, but when people ask me what am I most proud of the first couple of years here, especially that first year, is we didn't fit a square peg into a round hole," Herman said.

"It's hard to not say, 'This is our system, this is what we do, so we're going to do it because that's what we know how to do.' You have to figure out what everybody can do and what they can do well and try to mask the deficiencies while you're improving them and play to strengths. Where that's headed after six spring practices, I have no idea, but it will be different."

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Perry Among LBs Making Mark This Spring

By BEN AXELROD
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

In each of his first two seasons in Columbus, Urban Meyer deemed his linebacker corps to be "not Ohio State-ish."

Now the Buckeye head coach is hopeful that the third time will be the charm.

Three-fourths of Meyer's quartet of highly touted linebackers in the 2014 recruiting class won't arrive on campus until this summer, but spring practice has already provided a glimpse into what's left on a unit that will be replacing an All-American next season in Ryan Shazier.

With Ohio State having lost its top three tacklers from a season ago, junior Joshua Perry is the Buckeyes' top returning tackler with 64 takedowns to his credit in 2013, but his new responsibilities loom larger than a single statistic.

Moving from the strongside linebacker spot that he occupied a season ago, Perry has spent the first three weeks of spring practice playing the Will linebacker position. That's the same spot Shazier played while tallying 143 tackles a season ago, which is why Perry has adopted a new "see ball, get ball" mentality this offseason.

"It's a little bit new," Perry admitted. "We're downhill, we're reacting in the pass

game and trying to get hands on guys. We're really aggressive. I love it."

A native of Galena, Ohio, Perry showed flashes in his first season as a starter, particularly toward the end of the year. In January's Orange Bowl against Clemson, the 6-4, 250-pounder recorded 10 tackles – seven of which were solo stops – and his lone sack of the season.

Asked about his apparent progress last season, Perry chalked it up to momentum that he hopes to maintain throughout this spring.

"I had that comfort level toward the end of the year to be able to play a little bit faster and know my assignment and just go," he said. "Now I'm trying to get that comfort level to where I can just see the play and react. I want to be able to do everything fast with reckless abandon."

"The sky's the limit I think for me. Last year, I did all right. I got a little bit of momentum heading into the end of the year. I think that's carried over, but I can't stop right now."

With time ticking down until the April 12 spring game, Perry appears to be adapting to his new role just fine. Whether that means that he'll replicate his predecessor's gaudy numbers from a season ago remains to be seen, but the Lewis Center Olentangy High



KEVIN DYE

STEPPING UP – After a strong finish to the 2013 season, junior Joshua Perry (37) is hoping to lead a linebacker group that loses standout Ryan Shazier.

School product hopes that his improvement and impact are evident in more than just the stat sheet.

"Hopefully," Perry responded when asked if his new role meant that he'll be doubling his tackle total from 2013. "But it's not about individual stats necessarily. It's about what I can do for the team. But if that's how it is, then that's how it is."

Perhaps the biggest surprise of spring practice thus far isn't that Perry has replaced Shazier, but who it is that has replaced Perry.

That would be sophomore Darron Lee, a fellow native of suburban Columbus who saw limited time on special teams in 2013 while also battling an injury. The New Albany product is hopeful that his request for a medical redshirt will be successful, but either way Lee will be counted on to produce in 2014.

At 6-1 and 225 pounds, Lee arrived on campus less than a year ago as a tweeker, with nobody really sure whether he'd be playing safety or linebacker at the college level. Through the first three weeks of his first spring practice, the answer appears to be the latter, as Lee has shown the reckless abandon and nonstop effort that Perry had

mentioned and that Meyer looks for in his linebackers.

"I have no idea what he's doing and he has no idea probably," Meyer said. "I don't care. I want to make sure that culture is out there. You're not being graded on whether you know what you're doing. What you are being graded on is being a leader."

"As a coach, you want a kid that plays as hard as he possibly can."

One advantage to having an agile linebacker such as Lee on the field is that it allows the Buckeyes to maintain their base defense even while facing a spread formation. In fact, through the first few weeks of spring practice, coordinators Luke Fickell and Chris Ash have yet to implement a nickel or dime defense, leaving Lee – a high school safety and quarterback – to cover wide receivers and tight ends alike.

With quick outs and bubble screens having killed Ohio State a season ago, a bigger body such as Lee in the de facto nickel back position could allow the Buckeyes to maintain a balance of size and speed while defending shorter passes.

"We've got these bodies," Meyer said, referencing Lee and his backup, 6-2, 218-pound redshirt freshman Chris Worley. "Stronger guys out there to hold the point on the bubble screens."

With Perry and Lee occupying the edges, most eyes of Ohio State fans have been drawn to middle of the Buckeyes defense.

That's where senior Curtis Grant hopes to maintain his starting position from a season ago, but he won't do so without a fight. True freshman early enrollee Raekwon McMillan has drawn nothing but rave reviews from both his teammates and the OSU coaching staff in what has been just limited time on campus for the Hinesville, Ga., product.

"Raekwon is doing pretty well," Meyer said. "He's a very mature player. He is a guy that has some awareness to him."

Perry also seemed impressed.

"He's coming along really well," Perry said. "He takes the game seriously. I came in early too. You have a hard time with these next practices, so the biggest thing is going to be the older guys helping him along here. But if he gets over this hump really well and keeps doing what he does, he'll be a special player here."

The Buckeyes are hopeful that McMillan – a four-star prospect and the nation's fifth-ranked middle linebacker – can become just that sooner rather than later. The same holds true for his classmates who are yet to arrive on campus, including five-star outside linebacker Sam Hubbard and four-star prospects Kyle Berger and Dante Booker.

"Those are the kind of players we want out there if we're going to be playing base," Meyer said of his true freshmen-to-be.

With Ash's addition to the Ohio State staff, the Buckeyes' defensive scheme is new and so are some of the faces who will be playing it. Meyer is hopeful that the results will be as well, but Perry said that it will take more than X's and O's and Jimmies and Joes for the Ohio State linebackers to finally live up to the Silver Bullets name.

"The biggest thing besides scheme is going to be the mentality that we're trying to build here," Perry said. "Throw everything out the window. If you've got guys who have got that killer mentality, go hard every play and play as one, we'll be all right."



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Loving Could Slide Into Ross' Spot In Lineup

Continued From Page 1

There is reason to believe that Lee could supplant Williams as the Buckeyes' starting center – or at least receive a majority of the position's minutes – as his scoring average of 13.6 points per game is significantly more consistent than anything that either of the Buckeyes' big men showed last season.

In order to fend off Lee, Williams will have to show more than just the flashes that he did during last year's nonconference slate, when he recorded double-doubles in three games, including a 12-point, 16-rebound effort against Wyoming on Nov. 25. Talent is not the issue for the 6-11, 250-pounder as much as consistency has been for Williams, who was held scoreless in 18 minutes of action in the Buckeyes' season finale with the Flyers.

Next season will be now or never for Williams, who arrived at Ohio State as a four-star prospect and McDonald's All-American but failed to reach double-digit scoring in the final 12 games of his junior season. The same rings true for his classmate McDonald, who could ultimately fall out of the Buckeyes' rotation should Lee prove capable of replicating the success that he found in his junior season with the Owls.

Ohio State remains in the hunt for the nation's No. 2 prospect, Euless (Texas) Trinity center Myles Turner, although all signs seem to indicate that the Lone Star State star will stay close to home and sign with Texas. The Buckeyes have also inked Garfield Heights, Ohio, product David Bell, but don't count on Bell to play right away, as even Matta has admitted that the 6-10, 225-pound three-star prospect is a project of sorts.

"Big guys mature differently than guards sometimes," Matta said when asked about Bell. "It takes a little bit longer to click for them."

After two seasons of underperformance, the Buckeyes are hopeful that Lee's arrival will either pay dividends on its own or at least push Williams and McDonald to a more consistent level. One way or another, Ohio State will need its play in the paint to be a positive next season, and the addition of Lee could result in just that.

Power Forward

The loss of Ross will leave a sizable hole in the OSU lineup, but Matta's affinity for long, athletic wings leaves the Buckeyes with formidable options to replace their leading scorer and rebounder.

First up will be 6-7, 215-pound Marc Loving, who appeared in all 35 games of his freshman season. During certain stretches as late as February, Matta even opted to leave Ross on the bench in favor of Loving, who averaged 4.4 points and 1.7 rebounds per game this past season.

Like Ross, however, Loving will have to fight off a talented freshman to maintain his minutes at the power forward position.

One of two five-star prospects Ohio State inked to its 2014 class, Normal (Ill.) University's Keita Bates-Diop will arrive on campus as the prototypical Matta power forward. At 6-7 and 190 pounds, Bates-Diop possesses the ability to play in both the post as well as on the perimeter and has a smooth stroke from three-point range that could help make up for Ross' 35.3-percent mark from beyond the arc.

Regardless of who starts, expect both Loving and Bates-Diop to see significant playing time in the upcoming season. It's unlikely that either will be able to replace Ross' scoring right away, but don't be surprised to see them on the court at the same time, given the concerns at both center and small forward.

Small Forward

Speaking of small forward, Bates-Diop could serve as the primary backup at this position as well while fellow freshman Jae'Sean Tate recovers from a torn labrum. Senior-to-be Sam Thompson should reclaim his starting spot at small forward and serve as the Buckeyes' top returning scorer after averaging 7.9 points per game in his junior campaign.

Likely the leader on next season's Ohio State squad, Thompson will have to display more than just flashes in order for his senior

season to be a successful one. His jumper remains a work in progress, and his 2.7-rebounds-per-game average leaves much to be desired, but the 6-7, 200-pounder still has untapped potential and could be the Buckeyes' go-to guy next season when all is said and done.



Marc Loving

Should Tate – a 6-4, 190-pound four-star prospect by way of Pickerington (Ohio) Central – be forced to take a medical redshirt, the Buckeyes will have the option of going big or small when Thompson's not in the game. Bates-Diop playing alongside Loving and a center would provide the former, while a guard-heavy roster could also make the latter a common occurrence.

As has been the case with the aforementioned positions, consistency will be the key at small forward for the Buckeyes next season, as Thompson's role will expand to more than just that of being a glue guy.

Shooting Guard

While Ohio State will be forced to replace two experienced players in Craft and Smith, it will do so with a versatile backcourt that could include any combination of three players.

In fact, versatility is one of the top abilities that five-star prospect D'Angelo Russell will bring with him from Montverde (Fla.) Academy as the 6-5, 180-pounder possesses the ability to play either of the two guard spots. The No. 17 overall player in the 2014 class, Russell has been noted for his ability to put the ball in the bucket on a consistent basis.

"You're getting another great guard at Ohio State," Matta said. "What position is he? Is he a point guard? Is he a (shooting) guard? I don't know exactly. I think we can run him at both. He's got ability to make big-time plays with the basketball in his hands."

On a roster that lacked a consistent scorer a season ago, Russell could prove to be just that for the Buckeyes as quickly as his freshman season. Whether he'll be able to provide the defense and rebounding that Smith did at the shooting guard spot remains

to be seen, but Russell's scoring prowess will be a welcome addition in Columbus.

Backing Russell up will likely be a fellow combo guard also playing his first minutes as a Buckeye. Kam Williams arrived at Ohio State a year ago, but the 6-2, 175-pounder ultimately redshirted his freshman season after suffering from a case of mono prior to the start of the season. Like Russell, Williams can play either spot in the backcourt and has also been praised by Matta for his scoring ability.

"Kam can make shots," Matta said of the four-star prospect.

If Russell and Williams can consistently do just that, then the Buckeye backcourt's youth infusion could ultimately more than make up for the intangibles lost from last year's squad.

Point Guard

When it comes to intangibles, none will be missed more than the ones that Craft provided in his four years at Ohio State. A two-time Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, Craft had a knack for making both the big and little plays when the Buckeyes needed them most.

But while how Ohio State plays without Craft will be worth watching, it will perhaps be as interesting to see how Shannon Scott fares in his first season as the Buckeyes' lead point guard. In the first three seasons of his college career, the senior-to-be has been playing either behind or alongside Craft and never appeared comfortable in either role.

When Craft landed in foul trouble in the Big Ten tournament quarterfinals against Michigan in March, Scott took over the reins and the results were promising. A McDonald's All-American coming out of high school, Scott scored 18 points, dished out six assists, pulled down five rebounds and recorded two steals as the Buckeyes fought back from a 16-point deficit before ultimately falling to the Wolverines.

Whether stat lines such as that will become par for the course in the upcoming season remains to be seen. But with Russell and Williams perhaps best suited playing off the ball, Scott could prove to be the key that makes Ohio State's revamped engine go next season.

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OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL

Flyers Shoot Down Buckeyes In Tourney

By BEN AXELROD
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

In a matter of mere moments, Aaron Craft went from hero to witnessing his college career come to an end.

With a reverse layup to give his team a late lead, Craft appeared to be establishing himself as a postseason legend for Ohio State with last-minute heroics for the second consecutive year. A year earlier he had buried a three with less than a second remaining to defeat Iowa State and send OSU to the Sweet 16.

But this time, on the ensuing possession, Vee Sanford answered back with a floater over Craft with 3.8 seconds left on the clock to give 11th-seeded Dayton a 60-59 win over No. 6-seed Ohio State in the opening game for both teams in the NCAA Tournament on March 20.

"Craft is a great player and a great defender, but the door was wide open as far as when the floor was cleared," Sanford said. "I just wanted to go right. I knew that if I could do that, I had a high chance of hitting the floater off the backboard."

Sanford did just that and Craft's scrambling attempt at an answer – a contested shot as time expired – fell short. As a result, the Buckeyes' streak of four consecutive Sweet 16 appearances came to an end, as did one of the most storied careers in OSU history.

"I have zero thoughts on that right now," Craft, the two-time Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, said of his career. "I'm upset at the way that we played this game and the way that we didn't take the opportunity and make the most of it. So that's for you guys to decide and discuss, but right now, I can't move past this game yet."

The ending was a fitting conclusion to a back-and-forth game in the First Niagara Center in Buffalo, N.Y., that included five ties and eight lead changes in the second half alone. The final moments were especially up-and-down, with both teams taking the lead twice after the game was knotted at 55 entering the final minute.

Ohio State forward Sam Thompson broke the deadlock with a floater with 57 seconds left on the clock, but nearly a full shot clock of good defense for the Buckeyes ended in unfortunate fashion when Shannon



SONNY BROCKWAY

GAME WINNER – Dayton senior Vee Sanford (43) banked in a running shot in the final seconds to give the Flyers a win over Aaron Craft (4) and Ohio State.

Scott fouled Dyshawn Pierre on a three-point attempt with 27 seconds to play.

Pierre made all three free throws to put Dayton ahead 58-57, but Craft's reverse layup with 17 seconds left gave the Buckeyes their final lead before Sanford's winner.

"Coming into this game, we had talked about extending leads and that sort of thing," Ohio State head coach Thad Matta said. "We weren't able to get over that hump in terms of what we needed to do. That was the difference."

Craft had tied the game at 55 with 2:05 left in regulation with a three-point play that erased an intentional foul that he had committed against Dayton guard Jordan Sibert shortly before. Sibert sank both of his free throws to extend the Flyers' lead to three after a Devin Oliver layup gave Dayton a 53-52 advantage.

Scoring 16 points in his college finale, Craft ultimately posted seven of Ohio State's final nine points, the first two of which came on a layup with 3:33 left on the clock to give the Buckeyes a 52-51 lead. That helped make up for a 4-0 Flyers run from the charity stripe, which put Dayton back on top after a Lenzelle Smith Jr. jumper had extended Ohio State's advantage to three.

"I just wanted to do everything I could to help our team win," Craft said.

An Ohio State exit seemed imminent early in the second half, as the Flyers took a 43-35 advantage on a Kendall Pollard layup with 13:37 remaining in the game. The Buckeyes answered back with a 10-0 run that included eight points from Thompson, as his tip-in with 10:23 left on the clock gave his team a 45-43 lead.

Ohio State's leading scorer with 18 points on the day, Thompson said that it was too soon to reflect on his impressive performance.

"I honestly don't even remember that whole stretch," Thompson said. "My mind is thinking about something else."

After Sibert – an Ohio State transfer – tied the game for Dayton with a jumper, freshman forward Marc Loving put the Buckeyes back on top with a three-pointer. From there, the back-and-forth nature of the game's second half ensued with the Flyers ultimately having the last laugh.

"I can't even describe it right now," said Smith, Ohio State's other senior this season, of the defeat. "Mistakes cost us our game and this season. It's a tough loss."

The first half saw Ohio State open on a 5-0 run in the game's opening 1:02 before a Sibert three jump-started a 13-4 stretch for the Flyers. Dayton extended its lead to six points at 21-15 on a Matt Kavanaugh layup with 9:55 remaining in the half, but the Buckeyes scored seven straight points and took the lead, 22-21, when Craft made a pair of free throws.

A Thompson three gave OSU a 28-26 lead with 2:50 to go in the half, but Dayton answered with a three by Pierre and held the advantage for the rest of the half, taking a 33-30 lead into the break.

Pierre led Dayton with 12 points on the day and Sibert added nine against his for-

Dayton 60, Ohio State 59

March 20, 2014												
First Niagara Center, Buffalo, N.Y.												
Dayton (24-10)		Total FG		FT		Reb.						
	Min.	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.					
Oliver	29	5-11	0-3	1-3	1	1	11					
Pierre	33	2-2	7-7	0-8	2	1	12					
Kavanaugh	21	4-6	1-1	0-4	2	1	9					
Price	26	1-2	0-0	0-1	1	3	9					
Sibert	23	3-9	2-2	1-4	1	4	9					
Davis	3	0-1	0-0	0-0	0	1	0					
S. Smith	14	0-1	1-2	0-0	0	0	1					
Robinson	13	2-5	0-0	1-1	0	1	4					
Pollard	15	1-1	0-0	1-1	1	1	2					
D. Scott	2	0-0	0-0	0-0	0	0	0					
Sanford	21	4-11	2-2	0-1	3	1	10					
Totals	200	22-49	13-17	4-24	12	14	60					
Percentages: FG: 44.9% FT: 76.5% 3-point goals: 3-13 (Oliver 1-2, Pierre 1-1, Price 0-1, Sibert 1-5, Davis 0-1, S. Smith 0-1, Sanford 0-2). Team rebounds: 1. Blocked shots: None. Turnovers: 13 (Sanford 4, Pierre 2, Price 2, S. Smith 2, Oliver, Kavanaugh, D. Scott). Steals: 10 (S. Smith 2, Pollard 2, Sanford 2, Pierre, Price, Sibert, Robinson).												
Ohio State (25-10)		Total FG		FT		Reb.						
	Min.	M-A	M-A	O-D	A	PF	Pts.					
Ross	37	5-12	0-0	0-2	2	1	10					
Thompson	30	8-11	0-1	1-3	1	2	18					
A. Williams	18	0-2	0-0	1-5	1	1	0					
Craft	38	6-9	4-5	0-5	4	3	16					
L. Smith Jr.	28	3-7	0-0	0-3	0	1	6					
Loving	8	1-2	1-2	0-0	0	0	4					
S. Scott	27	1-6	1-2	0-4	4	2	3					
Della Valle	5	0-1	2-2	0-0	0	1	2					
McDonald	9	0-0	0-0	0-2	0	0	1					
Totals	200	24-50	8-12	3-25	12	16	59					
Percentages: FG: 48.0% FT: 66.7% 3-point goals: 3-12 (Ross 0-3, Thompson 2-3, Craft 0-1, L. Smith Jr. 0-2, Loving 1-2, S. Scott 0-1). Team rebounds: 2. Blocked shots: 4 (A. Williams 2, Ross, Thompson). Turnovers: 14 (Ross 5, Craft 5, S. Scott 2, Thompson 2, A. Williams). Steals: 10 (Craft 4, Ross 2, Thompson 2, S. Scott 2).												
Halftime: Dayton 33, Ohio State 30. Officials: Hall, Kissinger, Schnur. A: 19,260.												

mer team. But while Sibert was the primary storyline heading into the battle between the Buckeyes and Flyers, it was Sanford, who scored 10 points including the game winner, who stole the show and brought perhaps a fitting ending to Ohio State's disappointing season and perhaps an unjust one to Craft's career.

"It's amazing the way that defense has kind of been my thing, and it's amazing how it's going to end with a kid getting the game winner on me," Craft said. "There's so many things that are going through my mind right now that I wish could have gone differently, but they didn't. He made a big shot, made a big-time play, and we couldn't come back."

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