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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

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One, Not Done



JOSH WINSLOW

THE BOSS – Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer has a chance to lead the Buckeyes to back-to-back national titles for the first time in school history.

With one title locked down, Buckeyes can make history

 By RYAN GINN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Armed with newly minted testimony after winning the national championship, Urban Meyer and the Buckeyes will set out this fall to spread the gospel according to Ohio State.

The 2015 season was supposed to be the year in which Ohio State made believers out of the country, with a talented but young core from the class of 2013 seemingly a year away from blossoming last fall. Instead, the upcoming season is a chance for the Buckeyes to make history.

One year ago, they entered the season too young, too injured, too overmatched. With an unproven roster further crippled by quarterback Braxton Miller's season-ending injury, all hopes for the program's return to championship-caliber football were pushed back to 2015. Even Meyer – who remained publicly optimistic in the wake of Miller's absence and a dispiriting loss to unranked Virginia Tech – admitted he told his wife, Shelley, he wasn't sure how the season might turn out last fall.

"I don't know if I shared it with you guys, but I remember talking to my wife, saying it's going to be a tough one," Meyer said at the recent Big

BSB's 2015 FOOTBALL PREVIEW

Ten Media Days. Speaking of his depreciated expectations for the season, Meyer added he had hoped "we get to a decent bowl game."

Instead, Ohio State found itself in the middle of an unexpected growth spurt as younger players – particularly members of that heralded class of 2013 – matured earlier than expected and settled into newfound key roles.

"Then all of a sudden, boom! Darron Lee, Eli Apple, Vonn Bell, Tyvis Powell, Mike Thomas – Boom! Boom! Ezekiel Elliott started really blossoming," Meyer said.

Meyer is fond of attributing this development to the culture of the program. In examining last year's campaign, Meyer points to a transition from theory to testimony, and that journey began in the spring of 2014 with a blueprint – leadership classes, seminars, guest speakers – for what Meyer wanted his program to become.

Overcoming obstacles became an obsession,

and Ohio State sure had enough chances to refine that craft. Miller was injured less than two weeks before the season opener, and J.T. Barrett, the then-freshman quarterback who successfully replaced him, broke his fibula against Michigan in late November. That same weekend, walk-on defensive lineman Kosta Karageorge was reported missing. His suicide from a self-inflicted gunshot wound was discovered the day after the win over the Wolverines.

"The amount of time that goes into our leadership training and the trying to develop that culture, it's endless, and it never stops because of the fluidity of the program with freshmen coming in," Meyer said. "I'm convinced more than ever – and I always have been, but not to this degree – that leadership training that we do, the power of the unit structure the way we do that, that the kids did that for some reason."

"If you're good enough to stay self-disciplined, have self respect and a good work ethic, that makes you one of about 10 percent if you're lucky, and it's happened because of the love of the teammates. They care about each other."

The Buckeyes slowly built to a crescendo, gathering strength with blowout wins against

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COVER STORY

Even As No. 1, A Repeat Title Would Be A Rare Feat

Continued From Page 1

bottom-feeders Maryland, Rutgers and Illinois. A road win against Michigan State changed everything, and it was eventually followed by a dizzying postseason stretch that included wins over Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon to claim the first ever CFP National Championship.

The Chase was over, and the Buckeyes were back.

The Bad News

In examining Ohio State's quest to make history as the first back-to-back champions in the history of the program, let's start with the bad news: Winning two straight titles, as it turns out, is really hard. Alabama did it in 2011-12 and USC followed a split national title in 2003 with a championship in '04. The only other repeat in the lifetime of current college athletes came when Nebraska won it all in both 1994 and '95.

Like last year, the Buckeyes don't appear to be in for a smooth ride. It was announced July 30 that four key contributors – defensive end Joey Bosa, wide receiver Corey Smith and hybrids Jalin Marshall and Dontre Wilson – would be suspended for the season opener against Virginia Tech for violating team rules.

For all of Ohio State's work in culture development, it's still a battle the program will have to fight just as much at the top of the rankings as it did following the loss to Virginia Tech that sent expectations tumbling.



FILE PHOTO

CELEBRATE – Head coach Urban Meyer (left) and running back Ezekiel Elliott lifted the national championship trophy a year before OSU was expected to make a move.

"There's an element of human nature on the way to the top, too, that you have to fight," linebacker Joshua Perry said. "Either way, you're going to have to find a way. It doesn't matter if you start at the bottom. There's human nature where you're always complaining about things not going your way."

"On the way there, things get tough and there's that human nature of, 'Man, it would just be really easy to just kind of be here and be average.' Then you get to the top and there's the human nature of getting complacent, but I think we fought

through all of those things and we were able to get to a certain point, so you'll see us continue to fight and continue to do what we do."

Further down the list of problems is the matter of making everyone happy on a roster loaded with stars who will have to fight for touches. An attempt by Meyer to name the top five receivers in the rotation perfectly illustrated this point – the list had ballooned to 10 by the time he had named everyone he thought belonged in the top five.

The quarterback race received a welcome reprieve in that department when Miller switched to wide receiver, but the position battle to end all position battles will still have one contestant who doesn't get the outcome he's looking for. Both Barrett and Cardale Jones insist the looming decision won't be a problem when the verdict is handed down, but there's no way to know for sure until it actually happens.

The possibility of injuries remains a concern. It might seem silly to suggest health problems could sink the Buckeyes – what could be worse than losing two starting quarterbacks? – but there are positions on the team that aren't as well stocked as the quarterback spot was last fall. With the exception of a meniscus injury for true freshman running back Mike Weber – one that will sideline him for only a month or two at most – the Buckeyes have actually been very lucky

in that regard this fall.

Lastly – maybe most importantly – there's the pressure that comes with occupying the top spot. After skating by unnoticed for much of last season – the Buckeyes were 16th in the initial College Football Playoff rankings released in early November – this campaign already has the feel of a team under the microscope.

Answering Questions

As one might expect, Ohio State's players and coaches have an answer and a plan for each of these issues and more. The biggest and most important answer is this: Ohio State has as much talent as any team in the country.

Just as someone can outplay an opponent in poker, it's not outside the realm of possibility that a college football team can outperform its roster limitations. It still helps to be holding the best cards, though, and in 2015 that honor belongs to Ohio State.

Even with the suspension of some of the most talented players on the team, the Buckeyes are double-digit favorites to beat Virginia Tech. With Marshall, Smith and Wilson unavailable for duty, the Buckeyes can simply rely on a trio of transplants to the position – Miller and Torrance Gibson from quarterback and Curtis Samuel from running back. In place of Bosa, the Buckeyes can turn to five-star recruit Sam Hubbard, who finally found a home at defensive end after start-



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COVER STORY

ing his career at linebacker and tight end.

"We've seen it before," senior left tackle Taylor Decker said. "It's tested. It's testimony, it's not just a theory that the next guy will play as well. We did it with the quarterbacks. All the guys we recruit can go anywhere in the country, any school. We've got talent all over the field. Mike Thomas, Noah Brown, Curtis Samuel and Braxton Miller sounds like a pretty good group of playmakers to me, so I am not worried at all."

From the perspective of surviving not just the Virginia Tech game but also the rest of the season, Ohio State boasts an obscene amount of returning talent. In addition to Barrett and Jones at quarterback, Ohio State returns its leading rusher, leading receiver, leading tackler, leading pass rusher and its interceptions leader. Four-fifths of one of the best offensive lines in the country returns, and right guard Pat Elflein was named an ESPN preseason All-American along with Elliott, Bosa and Bell.

Ohio State likely won't be able to spread the ball around enough to please everyone, but offensive coordinator Ed Warinner said he doesn't think selfishness will be a problem. The early-season snaps and opportunities will be divvied up based on success in practice, and the staff will take it from there.

"By your performance and consistency we'll figure out how to distribute the ball," he said. "The defense sometimes dictates that, but we have great players and a lot of skill guys on offense who can make plays. The ones who do it the most consistently through training camp are going to be the ones who touch the ball early. We don't worry about that because we understand it's a good problem to have."

As far as dealing with the pressure goes, Ohio State has a weapon that it didn't during the 2013 season. Such players as Jones, Powell, Lee and Bell are standouts not only on the field but also in interviews and the locker room. The constant stream of antics that engulfed the team outside of practice made it easier to form bonds and work together.

"I don't think we had as many guys like that in 2013, and the tough thing about that team too is that we just weren't as close," Perry said. "We're not going to make any bones about it. It's just harder going into battle with guys you don't feel as close to, as opposed to right now where everybody feels really close to each other and we know each other really well. I think it's a pretty big deal. It really is."

The change began after the low point that was the Orange Bowl after the 2013 season. Perry said he and his fellow linebackers made the decision that the position room was going to be a fun place to be.

"We were like, 'This is not going to be a place where people come and they

hate coming here. This is not going to be a place where people don't want to spend time here. This is not going to be a place where people feel stressed out. It's going to be a place where we care about each other.'"

"That's exactly what it became. It was just a group of us, and we would always be around each other, whatever it was – whether we were doing football stuff or not. I think that's why guys played well. You saw the same thing happening with Vonn and Tyvis and those guys doing what they do together and Eli Apple going around with Doran Grant. And then you see all those guys on the D-line, they're just so tight. I think that had a lot to do with (the success)."

Moving Forward

As Ohio State chases another trophy, its players recognize that the same result will likely require a different path.

The Buckeyes started that process this summer by banning any reminiscing of the previous season. Lee in particular has kept a vigilant watch to make sure the focus has shifted from what has happened to what will come.

"You saw a couple of guys still talking about last year and it's getting to mid-June, close to July, and it's like nah, ixnay that," he said. "We need to start focusing on this year and no more celebration and all that. Say, if we were still celebrating right now, it would be crappy practices and whatnot. It was a group effort. We have had a couple of leadership meetings and just said, 'Hey, enough is enough. Last year is over and done with. Nobody wants to hear about it.'"

Added Apple, "Looking back isn't going to help you move forward. We have a new team and we're going to have to find a new winning formula for this year to make things work."

The Buckeyes took down the banner dedicated to The Chase and signed it last winter. It now hangs on the opposite wall in the indoor facility, relocated from its previously prominent position. In its place rose a banner espousing the team's new motto – "The Grind."

Meyer also switched up spring practice, moving it from the typical afternoon time slot to the morning. But amid those superficial changes, the framework of the culture in the program remains the same.

"You call it a different name and you get up a little earlier to practice, but really, we do all the same things," Perry said. "That's just the way we run our program, the culture that we have, the way that we practice, the way that we work out and how we get after guys, those are all the same."

"I don't know if that has anything to do with making it a different season. The big difference for us is going to be just going out here with a little bit of a different group of guys and making that jell and making that work and then figuring out a way to be successful on the field."

For the early blooming Buckeyes, a shot at history awaits.



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Buckeyes Aim For Heights Missed By '03 Squad

By **BLAKE WILLIAMS**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Buckeyes won the national championship last season in the face of long odds while surviving some close calls, all despite the fact that many thought Ohio State was a year away from truly competing for college football's top prize.

While that would be an apt description of the 2014 Ohio State football team, it's also a fitting characterization of the last Buckeye team to win the national championship. In 2002 Ohio State survived close shave after close shave, riding a young, talented roster to the pinnacle of college football.

The following season, the Buckeyes were favored to return to the national title game, bringing back 17 starters on offense, defense and special teams and returning their entire coaching staff. The 2003 Buckeyes succumbed to the pressure, however, dropping two games along the way and finishing the season as the fourth-ranked team in the Associated Press poll after a victory against Kansas State in the Fiesta Bowl.

Certainly an 11-2 season that included a major bowl win is not a failure, but considering the possibilities available to that team it seemed that the 2003 Buckeyes missed a shot at history. The 2015 squad will try to avoid a similar fate, one that has befallen each Ohio State team that has tried to repeat as national champions.

To Roy Hall, who redshirted during the 2002 season and saw his first action at wide receiver in 2003, the parallels are everywhere.

"I think one thing that is common from the 2014 Buckeyes and the 2002 Buckeyes is those national championships were sort of unexpected," he said. "You always set out to win a national title and you put that as your end goal, but those teams were kind of the dark horses to win the national title."

"I think what changed in 2003, and what will change for the Buckeyes in 2015, is you kind of go from being unexpected to being the team that everybody is looking to dominate. You're like a cadaver all of the

sudden – people are just breaking you down and tearing you apart."

The Roadblocks

While the 2003 Buckeyes and this year's squad face some different challenges – the quarterback battle and one-game suspension of four players this year vs. the Maurice Clarett saga that resulted in the running back not playing in 2003 – many of the roadblocks the 2015 team is approaching mirror those that faced Ohio State last time it set out to repeat.

Step one for both teams was moving on from the euphoria of a national championship and focusing on the task ahead. The 2015 team has said all the right things in that regard. The Buckeyes' mantra has changed from "The Chase" to "The Grind," and to a man team members said they have turned the page on last season.

Dustin Fox, a junior cornerback for the Buckeyes in 2003, said those things are easy to say but harder to enact.

"A lot of it just had to do with the leaders we had on our team and the coaching staff trying to make us put everything in the past, but it's hard to do with the hype surrounding the team," Fox said. "It was hard to get away from it. It was tough to deal with it. You want to be on a good team and you want to be talked about a lot, but as much as you say you want to put it behind you and move on, as college kids it's difficult."

Hall echoed Fox's sentiments that moving on from the title wasn't easy, and things may be even more difficult 12 years later with the inescapable presence of social media added to the mix.

Talent should make that process easier. The Buckeyes are undeniably loaded this season, but such was the case for the 2003 team that stumbled in its sixth game on the road against Wisconsin and again in the season finale at Michigan. That team faced everybody's best shot, and the 2015 team will get the same treatment.

"You can't afford to have mental lapses," Fox said. "You can't be flat ever. You have to bring it every week."

"They're going to be double-digit favorites in every game this year, but I guarantee there will be some games decided by three points."

Hall advised this year's Buckeyes to not

focus on repeating as champions but to look at themselves as just one of 128 FBS teams chasing the 2015 national championship. The 2014 title was won for that year's seniors and the 2015 team should center its attention on doing the same for a new group of leaders, the former receiver said.

If the Buckeyes do claim a title for the 2015 seniors, they will become just the 13th team in history to win back-to-back Associated Press national championships. Ohio State nearly became one of those teams not just in 2003 but also in 1969. The Buckeyes won their first eight games by an average score of 46-9 before falling to Michigan in the season finale.

Rex Kern quarterbacked the Buckeyes in 1969 and won the national championship as a "Super Soph" in 1968. The quarterback suggested that the 2015 Buckeyes focus on what they can control, something that 1969 team did thanks to pressure put on them by Woody Hayes.

"Woody was not going to allow any bit of cockiness," Kern said. "In fact, it was more difficult going into our junior year than it was going into our sophomore year because of his intensity and his attention to detail."

Meyer is an admirer of Hayes and by all accounts did his best to make this offseason a grueling one for the Buckeyes.

A Sense Of Urgency

National championships are so hard to come by – even as one of the most storied programs in the sport's history, Ohio State has only six consensus titles in 125 years of football – that pressure can build when a roster talented enough to claim one approaches its expiration date.

While Meyer continues to stockpile high-end recruits, it is hard to fathom the team not taking at least a minor step back following the 2015 season. Though they already have one title with them, the Buckeyes could start to feel pressure to maximize the talents of the likes of Joey Bosa, Cardale Jones, Braxton Miller, Taylor Decker, Adolphus Washington and the other elite college football players who are likely entering their last season at Ohio State.

Again, that mirrors the pressure on the 2003 Buckeyes. It's the cost – albeit a small one the staff would pay over and over again – of winning

a championship a year ahead of schedule.

The 2002 title was won with a group largely consisting of underclassmen and juniors. Although the team lost such senior leaders as Mike Doss and Donnie Nickey going into its repeat bid, the champions did not have a player drafted in the first round in 2003, a trend repeated by the Buckeyes in the most recent NFL draft.

In 2003 the Buckeyes got one more year with such players as Will Smith, Chris Gamble and Michael Jenkins. All of those players were first-round picks, while a draft-record total of 14 Buckeyes were selected in 2004. Even with so much talent on hand, the 2003 team couldn't capture the ultimate prize it had held a year prior.

"Those two losses really burned me," Fox said. "That Michigan game, I'll never forget that game. That one really hurts. If we would have won it, we go to the national championship game."

Early NFL draft projections, heavily dependent on early entrants, have Ohio State matching or exceeding 14 selections next season. The 2015 team may just be more talented than the one that nearly repeated more than a decade ago, underscoring the sense of urgency that comes with the final year with such a talented group of players.

So, did the 2003 team squander an opportunity to be back-to-back champions, tripped up by one of the roadblocks that face a defending national champion? The Buckeyes entered the Michigan game that season ranked second in the BCS standings, a win away from another shot at a title.

"That was the disappointing part of that season, not so much that we couldn't go back-to-back, but that we were in position to do it and we just couldn't get it done in the biggest game of the year," Hall said. "Whether it was blown assignments or just plain out we got beat in the Michigan game, I really believe that we were prepared. If you want to compare it to this team, I think they will be prepared."

"This season to me is not about winning a national title. This is a character-revealing season for that team. We're going to find out what these guys are made of on the inside."



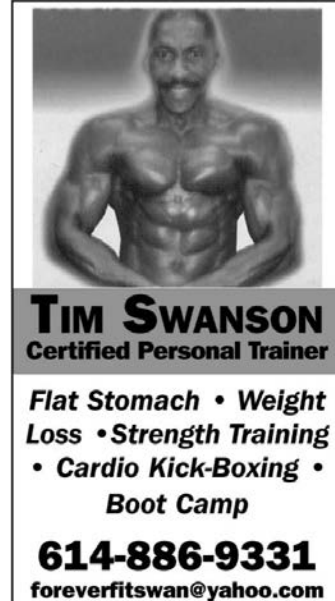
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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEPTH CHART BATTLES

Position Battles Go Beyond Quarterback Duo

By RYAN GINN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When Ohio State debuted as the first unanimous preseason No. 1 selection in the history of the Associated Press Top 25, it came in large part because of one thing in particular: The Buckeyes return an astounding number of key contributors from last year's national championship team.

That list includes two standout quarterbacks, a preseason Heisman favorite at running back, four-fifths of one of the best offensive lines in college football, last year's leading receiver, a defensive end who is the early favorite to be the 2016 NFL draft's No. 1 selection, a trio of award-winning linebackers and three out of four members of the defensive secondary.

The Buckeyes are not without holes, though. The list of departed players includes receivers Evan Spencer and Devin Smith, right tackle Darryl Baldwin, tight end Jeff Heurman, defensive ends Steve Miller and Rashad Frazier, defensive tackle Michael Bennett, linebacker Curtis Grant and cornerback Doran Grant.

Many of those spots were filled either in spring or in fall camp, but a handful of battles remain active as the season draws near. What follows is BSB's complete breakdown of the depth chart competitions and how they were won or where they stand.



SONNY BROCKWAY

REPLACEMENTS – Parris Campbell (21) is among the OSU wide receivers vying for a spot in the lineup after the departures of Evan Spencer and Devin Smith from the Buckeyes' title-winning squad.

Quarterback

There's no better place to start a position battle breakdown than the spot that has captivated the entire country.

Ohio State may be the No. 1 team in the country, but OSU fans won't be able to find out which quarterback will be leading the Buckeyes into battle against Virginia Tech until the winner trots out onto field at Lane Stadium for the season opener. Both players have their merits – J.T. Barrett's success came over the long haul, while Cardale Jones' wins came against some of the top teams in the country – but as the team broke camp Aug. 22 neither player had gained sustained separation.

"They're both doing good," Meyer said.

"I try to be as honest as I can, and they are. They're neck and neck. I really thought in my mind two days ago one guy was starting to move ahead of the other, and guess what today is? They're back to (even)."

Both players have maintained a friendly demeanor throughout the competition, and Barrett said he believes that they both have the team's best interests in mind as they work to earn the starting role. When pressed for an example, the Texan noted that he wouldn't stay silent if he noticed something Jones could improve, even if doing so might give Jones an upper hand in the battle.

"The main thing is that we want the best for this team," Barrett said. "If I could help Cardale see something, if there was something I saw on film or whatever it was and he may not have seen it, I would be a bad guy if I didn't help him. You know what I'm saying? At the end of the day, it would make him better and it would make our team better."

Wide Receiver

One piece of the puzzle at wide receiver is firmly in place – junior Michael Thomas, the team's leading receiver as far as catches by a significant margin in 2014, will occupy the same starting role that he did last fall.

The Buckeyes still have to replace Spencer, a do-it-all senior whom many termed the team MVP last year, as well as the deep ball specialist Smith. That will almost certainly be done by committee, especially after the late-August injury to sophomore Noah Brown, who had consistently been one of the first names mentioned by Meyer when asked about potential starters at wide receiver.

Receivers coach Zach Smith's job is complicated by the fact that three of the four players suspended for the Virginia Tech game – receiver Corey Smith and hybrids Dontre Wilson and Jalin Marshall – are from his position group. Furthermore, the Buckeyes had quarterbacks Braxton Miller and Torrance Gibson switch to receiver this summer, and the staff is also experimenting with running back Curtis Samuel as a

receiver.

The OSU head coach suggested Aug. 22 that there could be up to five guys rotating most of the wide receiver snaps – and then, in a telling statement of the riches that Ohio State currently possesses, he proceeded to list off nearly a dozen players when asked for the names of those five guys without even mentioning Miller.

For now, it seems likely that Thomas will start while Miller will man the H, while such players as Gibson, Samuel, Parris Campbell, Terry McLaurin and Johnnie Dixon will provide the depth until Marshall, Wilson and Corey Smith return.

Right Tackle

After hosting sophomore Taylor Decker in 2013, the right tackle spot has transitioned from one fifth-year senior to another.

Baldwin's position will be filled by Chase Farris, who served as a sixth man of sorts for last year's offensive line. He edged out sophomore Jamarco Jones, who saw the field as a true freshman last fall in backup duty for Decker at left tackle.

It's a fitting end to the nomadic career of Farris, who finally has a starting role to call his own after years of being shifted around.

"We're very proud of Chase," offensive coordinator Ed Warinner said. "Chase is a guy who came as a defensive lineman, played offensive line then, (in 2013) we had some issues and he went back over to D-line. He got injured then he came back to us on offense, so he's been a team guy doing those position changes for the benefit of the team and now he's got a home and a unit and a place and he's really flourishing in it."

At Big Ten Media Days in late July, Decker noted that he would buy stock in Farris if he could and said the Elyria, Ohio, native had one of the best off-seasons on the team – a sentiment that was later backed up by Meyer, who put Farris in a group of his five most improved players.

"Right now I would say he probably had the best off-season of anybody in our program," Decker said. "He had an awesome off-season and I think he's just developed not so much physically, which he has, but as a leader. People listen to him, he's been a great leader in the off-season and his work ethic is awesome. He grinds through everything, and you always know what you are going to get with him. I'm looking forward to him this year."

Tight End

Last year featured an impressive one-two punch with Heurman and Nick Vannett, and tight ends coach Tim Hinton would like to see a similar setup with Vannett ascending to the No. 1 spot and sophomore Marcus Baugh taking on a bigger role.

Whether Baugh can fulfill those expectations remains to be seen, but it's clear that Vannett's place at the top spot is unquestioned. The fifth-year senior got plenty of reps in critical moments last season because of Heurman's injury struggles, and he spent all spring taking the first-team reps.

"Jeff left, so someone has to step up," Vannett said. "Being a senior, I'm trying to be a leader for the other guys and for Marcus and just trying to show the way for the young guys, too. They're looking up to the old guys and seeing how we do it, and we want to teach them the culture."



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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEPTH CHART BATTLES

Defensive End

Although there will be two new starters at defensive end on Sept. 7 thanks to the one-game suspension of All-American Joey Bosa, that won't be the case for long. When Bosa returns, he will do so alongside Tyquan Lewis, who won the right to replace the tag-team of Steve Miller and Frazier opposite the team's leading sack artist.

The Tarboro, N.C., native emerged in the spring and continued to solidify his position atop the depth chart with a productive fall camp.

"I think he will have a very good year this year," defensive tackle Adolphus Washington said of Lewis. "He's a freak of nature, he's so explosive, he's fast and he's strong. Sometimes I think he is too fast for himself. Sometimes he'll do something so quick that he'll be looking like, 'Did I really just do that?'"

The battle to temporarily replace Bosa might be more intriguing, with redshirt freshman Sam Hubbard battling sophomore Jalyn Holmes. Like the two quarterbacks, Hubbard and Holmes both say they're close off the field.

"Me and Jalyn are great friends, we're close," Hubbard said. "We talk every day and hang out, but every day we try to get better. We're really competing with ourselves though, trying to do our thing and get better each day."

Unlike the quarterback race, though, this one has a leader. Meyer said Aug. 22 that Hubbard was out front.

Defensive Tackle

After years of injury-related setbacks, senior Tommy Schutt finally appears in line to win a starting job at defensive tackle. The former five-star prospect out of Illinois is expected to start alongside Washington after a productive training camp.

"He's had a good camp," Meyer said. "The clock has been ticking. He's really handled himself the right way. He's had a really good camp. He's one of our top five most improved."

Schutt noted that he feels fully healthy for the first time in a couple of years. Without any nagging injuries to worry about, he's been able to get the most out of camp and seized control of the starting job.

"I feel great," he said. "My body feels OK. It's just a grind trying to get through these two weeks. It's long days and a lot of practice, but personally I feel I've done pretty well. Obviously there are still some things to improve on, but overall I've been doing well."

Donovan Munger, Michael Hill and Joel Hale all remain in competition for playing time, though, and Meyer hinted that the interior line might end up with a "by committee" approach.

Middle Linebacker

Sophomore Raekwon McMillan wasn't officially tabbed as the starting middle linebacker for 2015 until senior Curtis Grant departed, but he effectively won this battle during his first fall on campus when he beat out Camren Williams for the backup spot on the depth chart.

Doing so gave McMillan the chance to rotate with Grant throughout the national championship season and helped him fulfill his role as the heir apparent at the middle linebacker spot. With Grant gone, there was no tough choice weighing on defensive coordinator Luke Fickell this spring – the spot belonged to McMillan from the start.

The once-heralded recruit has been jokingly bestowed with a "Chosen One" moniker from his teammates because of all the praise he received as a prep star, but he doesn't take lightly his new responsibilities as the quarterback of the Ohio State defense.

"Coach Fickell puts trust in me as the Mike linebacker on the field to have everybody around me in the right position and the right spots," McMillan said. "Being out there on the field, I've got to be the coach on the field like Curtis Grant was for us last year during the national championship run. Being out there as the Mike, you have to make sure everything around you is good."

Williams, for his part, has accepted his role as a backup to McMillan. He said he's looking forward to spending his year pushing the sophomore in practice and hopes to raise his level of play to a point where he can see the field as a rotation player.

"What's my role? Push Raekwon every day. Push him every day," Williams said. "I definitely want to rotate more at the linebacker position, hopefully. I have to play better. But I have to push Raekwon every day and get to the point where I can get on the field."

Cornerback

Although Damon Webb made him work for it, this spot belongs to fellow sophomore Gareon Conley.

While that revelation may come as a concern to Buckeye fans who remember Conley's brief, troubled stint against Michigan State in 2014, his teammates and coaches have been saying since spring and into fall that the Massillon (Ohio) Washington product looks like a completely different player.

"The one name that people are a little bit iffy on is Gareon Conley because he didn't play a ton last year and people had some questions about him," linebacker Joshua Perry said. "That kid, the way he's worked this summer and some of the stuff that he's been through, his development right now is just huge. He's going to be a great player for us."

Conley's growth as a corner leaves Webb in a backup role along with talented redshirt freshman Marshon Lattimore, who has continued to battle hamstring problems that cost him his first year of college.

Kicker

Unlike all the other spots on this list, kicker is a spot where an incumbent and unchallenged starter in 2014 could be unexpectedly unseated.

Ohio State wasn't necessarily in the market for a kicker, but Jack Willoughby came at no cost as a walk-on graduate transfer from Duke. With kickoff specialist Kyle Clinton gone, it was a good opportunity to fill that job considering sophomore Sean Nuernberger hasn't impressed the staff in that role.

Willoughby isn't settling for simply handling kickoffs, though. He noted at Ohio State's media day that he wanted a crack at field goals, and he appeared to be giving Meyer something to ponder as the season grew closer.

"We're having a battle at kicker right now," Meyer said. "That new guy came in, Jack, and had two 60-yarders in practice the other day, back to back. I've never seen that before."

"If you asked who's kicking right now, I can't answer that question."

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: OFFENSIVE OVERVIEW

Warinner Ready To Take Reins Of Offense

By RYAN GINN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

New Ohio State offensive coordinator Ed Warinner wants to make one thing clear: The longtime assistant may have a fancy new title, but the final say still belongs to head coach Urban Meyer.

"It's not my offense, it's Coach Meyer and Ohio State's offense," he said this spring when asked about what changes might come during his tenure. "My job is to make sure that we continue to operate at a high level and then to enhance the offense as we move forward."

That doesn't mean he won't have a say in what Ohio State does, though. Although his emphasis on the offensive line will remain – to the point where he'll spend games on the sideline so OSU doesn't lose his valuable in-game adjustments – Warinner has been heavily involved in meetings with the various offensive position groups.

At his Ohio State media day press conference Aug. 16, Meyer shed some light on what Warinner's role will look like after his promotion from line coach.

"It's not a dictatorship. It's never been that way," Meyer said. "We have an offense. He's a very good manager. One of his strengths obviously is he's a heck of a coach, but he's an organizer. It's not this guy does this and all those other guys are below. It's a team concept and he's done very well."

"What I can't do is let him take away from that offensive line. Offensive line is the most critical – that has to be the best coached position on your team. We're very fortunate with what's happened the last few years here, so we can't lose that. We can't dilute that with (him focusing on) calling a play. ... I hear people say, 'I'm going to be the play caller this year.' Great. Wonderful. I'd rather make sure those five guys (on the line) are ready to rock and roll and those plays usually work better."

That description seems to resemble at least some aspects of Warinner's last stint as an offensive coordinator. From 2007-09, Warinner presided over one of the most successful stretches in Kansas program his-

tory, including the notable 2007 campaign that rewrote the school's record book and finished with an Orange Bowl win, a 12-1 record and a No. 7 ranking.

Penn offensive coordinator John Reagan, who served as Warinner's run game coordinator with the Jayhawks, said Warinner's brilliance showed in his organization and idea sharing.

"Ultimately, one of the things he was great at was using the staff to help put ideas together," Reagan said. "If there's a better organizer out there, I'm not sure who it is. He did a good job of putting it together in packages where it made sense and it was easy to teach and easy to make adjustments."

The Machine

Nothing in Meyer's program is improvised, and Warinner has been clear from the start of his tenure about how he plans to lead the Ohio State offense.

"I'm not going to try to do anything other than continue to carry the banner of execution," he said.

For that task, Ohio State has found the perfect man. Todd Reesing, who started at quarterback for Kansas from 2007-09, told BSB that Warinner was seemingly omnipresent at team practices and always had something to offer.

"The guy's a machine," Reesing said. "He keeps going, and I don't know how his voice didn't get more hoarse when he was coaching at Kansas. He takes a look at every part of the offense. When we're running team drills, he's coaching everybody up. He's looking over at what the receivers are doing, what the running backs are doing, what the tight ends are doing."

"If they need to make some adjustments, he's going to be vocal about it. He's not the type of guy just to let it go. He wants everybody to succeed. He'd much rather say something in practice than to have it be an error in the game."

At Kansas, Warinner ran practices with the same rapid-fire pace that Meyer does at Ohio State, doing so to try to make the actual games slow down for his players. His practices were marked by an intense environment



SONNY BROCKWAY

PROMOTED – Offensive coordinator Ed Warinner earned a new title after teaming with Tom Herman, now the head coach at Houston, to lead the Buckeyes' explosive offense in 2014.

designed to extract everything he could out of his players.

"He was very demanding on the practice field," Reesing said. "He's kind of a go-getter. He wants people to practice at a fast pace, and he demands a lot out of the players. I

think it comes from that whole concept that if you practice at a fast pace and practice is tough and loud, when you get to the game things will be easier than you're used to."

Warinner grew up playing quarterback, and the men who worked with him say that detail shows in the way he grasps all aspects of offense. A diverse list of assignments early in his career didn't hurt, either. As an assistant, Warinner has coached running backs, interior offensive line, the full offensive line and quarterbacks in addition to serving as a run game coordinator and an offensive coordinator.

"He knows what good looks like," said Bill Whittemore, who was an offensive graduate assistant at Kansas from 2006-08. "He's one of those guys that doesn't have to see the whole play unfold to know what went wrong. From that standpoint, I would say he's not going to have an issue. He'll probably be focusing more on his offensive linemen, but if he sees a hole open up and the running back didn't hit right where he should, he'll know what needs to change in order for that not to happen."

Warinner's eye works just as well in real-time game situations as it does on the practice field.

Ohio State senior left tackle Taylor Decker described in vivid detail why the Buckeyes value Warinner's presence down on the sideline as opposed to the press box, noting that he often makes instant in-game adjustments to neutralize defensive advantages or exploit any weaknesses.



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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: OFFENSIVE OVERVIEW

"It's weird because he remembers every play and every little thing that happens," Decker said. "He can just see things on the field as they pan out, and he's great at making in-game adjustments for us. That's huge. You have to be able to adjust throughout the game because teams are going to do things that you didn't necessarily expect. He's going to be right there in front of us being able to draw up things and be able to calm us down. I think that's going to be huge."

Living The Dream

Warinner has never shied away from potential promotions or increases in responsibility – he was a finalist for the Army West Point head coaching job in December 2013 – and this move appears to be right up his alley.

"I love it. It's been everything I thought it would be," Warinner said. "I have what many would consider the best offensive job in the country. I get to coach at Ohio State. I get to coach for Urban Meyer and run his offense, which has been very successful, and I have great players. That combined with

the fact that I love offensive football ... I've always loved it. I love what the wideouts do as much as I love what the center does. I'm totally immersed in the whole thing and really enjoying it."

A quick look at Ohio State's roster would seem to affirm what Warinner believes about his status as the holder of the best non-head coaching offensive role in the country.

At quarterback, the Buckeyes return a top-five Heisman vote getter and the man who piloted them to their first national championship in more than a decade. Either J.T. Barrett or Cardale Jones will be handing off to junior running back Ezekiel Elliott, who happens to be the Heisman Trophy favorite for the 2015 season. Ohio State also returns its leading receiver, junior Mike Thomas, and a productive tight end in fifth-year senior Nick Vannett. Although a leg injury will sideline projected breakout receiver Noah Brown, the passing game will still be able to rely on such playmakers as Braxton Miller, Curtis Samuel, Jalin Marshall and Johnnie Dixon.

And then there is Warinner's pet project,

the unit that finished the 2014 season as one of the best offensive lines in the country. That group returns four starters – Decker, left guard Billy Price, center Jacoby Boren and right guard Pat Elflein. The right tackle spot will be filled by versatile fifth-year senior Chase Farris, who served as a de facto sixth man last season.

Just because Warinner is blessed with so many toys doesn't mean there aren't still things that keep him up at night.

"We have to find out how to replace Jeff Heurman. Can Nick Vannett do that? Yes he can. Will he? We'll see," Warinner said. "I sure hope so because it looks like he can. How do you replace Devin Smith? We're trying to find that answer. How do you replace Evan Spencer? Are the pieces out there? I think they are. Who is that piece hasn't been decided, and then we need to develop some depth on our offensive line and see if that is some older guys or some freshmen. Who's going to go in the game if Zeke Elliott needs a rest? Who's that going to be? So there are a lot of things to be settled, and some starting jobs, too."

For all the perks of the job – having two quarterbacks in Miller and Torrance Gibson who might be just as good at wide receiver comes to mind – that Warinner undoubtedly enjoys, there's one fairly prominent drawback. Ohio State can stockpile defense-killing beasts to its heart's content, but it can still use only one ball.

The amount of heralded athletes compared to the amount of snaps in a game might suggest that not everyone will end up happy. But Warinner is nothing if not fair, and he'll stick to the plan.

"By your performance and consistency we'll figure out how to distribute the ball," he said. "The defense sometimes dictates that, but we have great players and a lot of skill guys on offense who can make plays. The ones who do it the most consistently through training camp are going to be the ones who touch the ball early. We don't worry about that because we understand it's a good problem to have. So far it's going well."

Warinner's track record as an offensive coordinator would indicate that it will likely stay that way.



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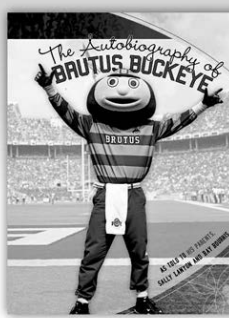
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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

Barrett vs Jones Could Come Down To Gut Feeling

By BLAKE WILLIAMS
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For the second consecutive season J.T. Barrett and Cardale Jones are battling for a spot on the depth chart, but the 2015 competition for the starter's spot bears little resemblance to the one that Barrett won for the backup job in 2014.

Sure, the key players are the same, but they entered the current competition with a wealth more experience, accolades and renown than they did a year ago and with a new assistant coach overseeing the process. And this time around, they know it's for the starting spot.

That was eventually the case last season as the 2014 battle to back up Braxton Miller became a competition to start after the senior suffered a shoulder injury 12 days before the season began. Miller has now removed himself from the quarterback room, transitioning to wide receiver and clearing the way for Barrett

and Jones to go head-to-head.

Barrett, who won the job to back up Miller last season at quarterback, led the Buckeyes to an 11-1 record before going down with a broken bone in his right ankle in the regular-season finale against Michigan. Now fully healthy, Barrett is again contending with Jones, the big-armed quarterback who led the Buckeyes to three consecutive postseason wins and a national championship in his only three career starts.

The unlikely narrative of the 2014 Ohio State quarterback position was a feel-good story worthy of its own motion picture, but it created a quandary for the Buckeyes in 2015. To be sure, there is not a wrong choice between Barrett and Jones, but that may further complicate Urban Meyer's decision on who mans the team's most important position when Ohio State takes the field Sept. 7.

The coach insists that he will be using every relevant piece of data – on-field performance,

leadership skills and his own gut feeling – to determine who starts. As of Aug. 22, the last time Meyer spoke with the media before press time, no decision had been made and the coach said that the starter will not be made public until the team takes the field against Virginia Tech.

"It's a little different because they are both established guys," Meyer said of establishing a timeline to name a starter. "Cardale not necessarily, but Cardale has been here a long time now. What is this, his eighth year here? J.T. has played a lot of football.

"We won't announce anything until the first guy takes the field against Virginia Tech. That won't happen."

The Tools Of Judgment

Meyer is not taking this decision lightly. Not only will it impact the structure of a team with hopes of cementing its place in history with a second consecutive national championship, but deciding who plays quarterback for the

Potential Starters

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16 • J.T. Barrett

6-2 • 225 • So.

Wichita Falls (Texas) Rider

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2015 Buckeyes also means deciding who won't. Whether it is Barrett or Jones who opens the season watching from the sideline, his career trajectory and development will be stagnated, at least briefly.

That's all the more reason for the head coach to embrace every measurement available to him when evaluating the position. He knows the gravity of the decision those metrics will yield.

"I want to be able to look those people in the eye and say this is where we're at and it not be a shocker when it happens," Meyer said.

To be able to be at peace with his eventual decision, Meyer is evaluating every rep of fall camp in addition to more intangible, off-field aspects. How the two performed last year, of course, is relevant as well, serving as a baseline in the process.

In 12 games last season Barrett (6-2, 225) proved himself to be one of the best and most consistent quarterbacks in the country. The calm, reserved signal caller completed 64.6 percent of his passes while tossing for 2,834 yards and 34 touchdowns against just 10 interceptions. His passer rating was second in the country to Heisman winner Marcus Mariota, and he added 938 yards on the ground and 11 rushing scores.

Jones' sample size isn't nearly as large, but in three postseason games – including two against teams that finished in the top 15 in total defense last season in Wisconsin and Alabama – the statuesque quarterback completed 61.3 percent of his passes for 742 yards with five touchdowns and two interceptions. Jones (6-5, 250) rushed for 90 yards, including one touchdown.

Clearly, both have had impressive moments.

"It's a gut feeling, but it's also communication of people when they witnessed those guys in that situation," Meyer said. "That's what I mean by gut feeling. I've already seen those kids. I've seen Cardale Jones on fourth-and-1 against Oregon launch himself as he's looking at the first-down marker. That's burned in my brain. I've seen that.

"I've also seen J.T. Barrett with a second-degree MCL sprain at Penn State look at me and say, 'I'm not coming out of the game.' Those are all embedded, then you just have to make the decision."

On a per-game basis, Jones barely had the edge in passing yards, topping Barrett by just over 11 per game. Barrett, however, was more efficient and did a better job of taking care of the ball. His 3.4-to-1 touchdown-to-interception ratio is far superior to the 2.5-to-1 ratio Jones put up in the final three games.

Barrett was also more adept at running the read option, which has served as a big part of the Buckeye offense. Jones, however, more consistently guided the offense to big plays. Ohio State was second in the country last season with 46 plays of 30 yards or more, and 16 such

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

instances occurred in the short time that Jones was under center.

Those big-play numbers reinforce the thought that the fourth-year junior has the big arm while Barrett has more efficient control of the offense. Jones was adamant that isn't the case.

"My aim is not to prove or impress anyone outside of this facility," Jones said. "My aim is to impress my teammates. For those who say I don't know the offense and just overthrow coverages, they probably don't know much about football."

"My main focus on winning this job is just managing the game. I'm pretty sure it will come down to who manages the game better, who can manage the offense better, keep us in third-and-manageable on third downs, and who has the intangibles and who can show it more consistently."

To evaluate that, every snap of practice has been charted for Jones and Barrett, and Meyer ensured that at least for the first dozen practices the two would split reps 50-50. The two quarterbacks even flipped a coin to determine who would take the first snap when camp began Aug. 11 (Jones called heads and won).

To hear Meyer report it, there was no early separation between the two. Quarterbacks coach Tim Beck, who was hired in the offseason to replace Tom Herman and thus inherited the most interesting quarterbacks room in the country, said that there's a chance neither quarterback will fully separate himself by Sept. 7.

"There's probably going to be times throughout the season we're going to need both of them," Beck said. "I think the best thing to do is let them keep competing. Competition is a beautiful thing. It keeps them focused, keeps them working hard, and the better guy at the end will come out being that guy, but we're going to need that backup too."

"You're taking into account everything that goes on through practice – leadership and just who's moving the team, who's not moving the team, how are guys handling the football, ball security, making good decisions – all of those things that could hurt a football team."

"Guys have to make plays, too. We can't have a robot back there, we have to have a guy that is a good athlete who can do some things. There's a lot that goes into it. There's a lot that is going to go into the decision, and all hands are on deck for it."

Beck's Unique Position

There is no question who has the final say in this quarterback battle, and it isn't the man directly responsible for coaching them.

Meyer has said he has never dealt with a situation like the battle between Barrett and Jones and speculated it may be unique in the sport's history. Thus, the man with three national championships and a career .844 winning percentage is going to make the final call.

Though Beck, who spent the past seven seasons at Nebraska, might not have the same level of say in the quarterback battle that Kerry Coombs has in naming a new starting cornerback or that Larry Johnson has in determining the defensive line rotation, he is comfortable with his place in the decision-making pecking order.

"Obviously, it's Coach Meyer's program," Beck said. "I think (offensive coordinator Ed) Warinner will be involved. I think through the process as we go, everyone will have some input to some degree because everyone is going to see practice."

"They're going to see it unfold. They're going to get a feel for all the intangibles, they're going to get a statistical analysis and the data and all the types of things that we're going to do to sit down and evaluate these guys. I think everyone will have some input to some degree, but obviously Coach will make the final deci-

sion. I'm great with that."

Beck said there is no question that this is the craziest quarterback battle he has been a part of. The combination of the skills, intelligence and experience that Jones and Barrett both have makes it all the more important to judge them on every practice of the fall, Beck said, and not make a knee-jerk reaction to one good or bad day from either player.

As an outsider, however, Beck can also bring a fresh eye to the position battle.

"I think there's obviously no predisposition with me," he said. "I'm not coming in with any previous knowledge of either one of those guys

and how they handle a room and how they learn and how they translate it onto the field. Maybe it's a little bit of a breath of fresh air."

Learning From Last Year

While the quarterback competition facing Ohio State is unique to all involved, Barrett and Jones are no strangers to competing with one another.

The two quarterbacks competed throughout the spring and fall in 2014 when vying for the job as Miller's backup before Barrett edged Jones in fall camp. Though he won the job last year, Barrett said he was able to learn from the

mistakes he made last time he competed with Jones for a spot.

"I was too busy worrying about extra stuff (in the spring)," he said. "I was thinking too much, and if he made a good play I was like, 'Well, I have to do this. I have to force it or whatever.' In fall, it was like let me focus on things I can control. That's the same place I'm in right now – just worry about me and what I can control and do the best I can to help our offense."

Jones also took a lot from last year's competition, but his lessons were more emotional

Continued On Page 22



Jake Ballard



Michael Bennett



Zach Boren



Michael Brewster



Bob Brudzinski



Bobby Carpenter



Kurt Coleman



Tom Cousineau



Doug Datish



John Epitropoulos



Dustin Fox



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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

Quarterbacks Competing Again Just A Year Later

Continued From Page 21

than Barrett's. The Cleveland Glenville product said that after losing out on the job he went to a "dark place," one he had to eventually pull himself out of in order to be ready to step in for Barrett late in the season.

"It was just having the wrong mind-set about everything," Jones said. "You know, 'Oh they screwed me. I should be the starter. I should be this. I should be that. Screw this, I'm just going to go through the motions for the rest of this year. I'm out of here after this year.' That mind-set – not understanding my role on the team."

The quarterback said that he didn't fully snap out of his mental funk until after the Buckeyes topped Michigan State in November. That victory cemented the fact that Ohio State could be special in 2014, and Jones didn't want to miss out on that.

The maturation was not lost on his teammates.

"I think the most growth for him came when he didn't win that spot initially, when J.T. won the spot," senior left tackle Taylor Decker said. "I think he realized he had to take more responsibility, had to mature as a person not just as a quarterback. I think he kind of took that to heart and throughout the season he prepared properly and handled himself with the proper demeanor. When he got his shot, from all the practice he had done the correct way, he was ready. He got his opportunity and he shined."

The maturity Jones gained from pulling himself out of the dark place has allowed the quarterback to approach the 2015 version of the quarterback competition from a better place.

Certainly, it's easier to do that with all of the first-team reps in the spring and with the confidence gained from winning a national championship. But what is there to ensure that losing the job once again won't lead Jones down the same path? Would the darkness be even more profound after he's had a chance to shine?

"I'm pretty sure I would be able to (avoid a dark place)," Jones said. "Just being older and having more experience, being more mature. It's more than just me. It's about more than just me. This team is bigger than

any one single person, so if I have to take that backseat role again I will have to – no choice."

Avoiding A Divide

Jones' apparent willingness to sacrifice his ego for the team if he is not chosen as the starter indicates the Buckeyes may be able to avoid any sort of fallout from naming one of the two stars the starter.

Barrett offered assurances that he was also taking a selfless approach to the process.

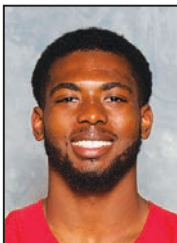
"I just want my best play to be better than his best play," Barrett said. "I still want him to perform at his best, but the fact is that I still want to be quarterback and be out there making the calls. I don't want to downplay that. But I don't want him to not succeed. That's not a lift to me. I still want him to do well, too."

Both quarterbacks insist that they are close friends off the field. Whenever a team is dealing with a quarterback competition, however, there is the fear that players outside of the position room will choose sides, allowing the final decision in the matter to build resentment and splinter the team's foundation.

Linebacker Joshua Perry said that the relationship Jones and Barrett have helps prevent the team from picking sides, and that the leaders on the team will keep the quarterback competition from disrupting what could be a special season for Ohio State.

"I don't think that's going to happen with us," Perry said of a divided locker room. "We want to be successful, we want the guy who really earned it to win the job, and then we also know that we've got two really good guys battling for it right now and they're going to support each other either way."

"For us to see them working so hard together and helping each other out even though they're competing, that kind of helps. It's hard for us to pick sides when they're doing that. They wouldn't want us to pick sides, anyway. We're past that point."



J.T. Barrett

The friendship of Barrett and Jones has allowed the rest of the team to go about its business without worrying about who will take the first snap against the Hokies on Sept. 7, even if they can't avoid the question.

Decker, for one, is hardly interested

in the position battle that has the attention of the entire college football nation.

"I don't know and not to be too blunt, I don't really care," the tackle said when asked who would start. "I have full faith that we will be successful with whoever steps in at that position. The coaches have their approach on how they pick their quarterbacks. They haven't let me in on that, and they haven't let anyone in on that. Their approach has worked. It's not a theory, it's a testimony. Last season you saw it. I'm not sure, but I trust whatever they do completely."

That level of trust from a senior leader speaks to the immense ability that both Jones and Barrett bring to the battle to be Ohio State's quarterback in 2015 and reinforces the thought that when picking between the two accomplished signal callers, there really is no wrong choice.

The Other Guys

While Jones and Barrett have been the focus of the quarterback room for the Buckeyes, Ohio State does have a few other signal callers on the roster.

Stephen Collier is back after taking a redshirt season a year ago while newcomer Joey Burrow is a likely redshirt candidate this season. Torrance Gibson, the highest rated Ohio State recruit in the 2015 class according to Scout.com, will not redshirt this season, but his snaps will not be coming at quarterback.

The 6-4, 205-pound Florida native was adamant throughout his recruitment that he would be playing quarterback for



Cardale Jones

the Buckeyes, and while that remains the long-term goal, he has been working at receiver and on special teams since arriving on campus in order to get on the field more quickly.

No matter what happens at receiver this year, Gibson confirmed that the plan will be to slide back to quarterback in the future.

If and when he does, Burrow and Collier will be waiting there.

Collier (6-4, 225) threw for more than 2,200 yards and rushed for more than 1,000 while accounting for 44 total touchdowns as a high school senior in Georgia. He worked to develop his body last season, he said, while studying under the Buckeyes' two high-profile quarterbacks.

"You know, coming from high school, the game is so much more slow (at that level)," Collier said after last season. "I wouldn't want to say dumbed down, but it's definitely watered down. When you come to this level, you have to be on it. Learning from Braxton and J.T. and Cardale, they're all so smart and so knowledgeable about the game. I'm light-years ahead of from when I came in."

Despite the progress, Collier is likely to have another season go by without taking a snap for the Buckeyes.

Burrow, a coach's son from Athens, Ohio, finds himself in the same position, a likely redshirt candidate as a freshman despite throwing 63 touchdowns last season for the state Division III runner-up. The four-star prospect stands 6-3, 208 pounds and could take the year to add weight, as Collier did in 2014.

Even if neither Burrow nor Gibson takes a snap at QB this season, Beck said he was pleased with what he saw from the freshmen early in fall camp.

"Both of those guys are really hungry guys," the coach said. "They want to do right. They're very talented guys, both of them."

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE OVERVIEW

Buckeyes Look To Continue Playoff Form

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

No one had to tell Chris Ash the challenge he and the rest of the Ohio State coaches face as far as assembling the 2015 Buckeye defense.

"How do we start the season off where we finished it?" the Ohio State safeties coach and co-defensive coordinator said. "We can't afford to start the season and let it take us four or five games to get to where we were at the end of the season. We've got a very tough challenge with Virginia Tech in a hostile environment against a good football team. We've got to go play excellent football."

Where Ohio State ended the 2014 season as a defense had a lot to do with where the Buckeyes ended the season overall – as national champions.

That is because in their first season in a new style of defense they showed tremendous improvement from start to finish.

After giving up 370 rushing yards to Navy in the season opener and springing just enough leaks to lose to Virginia Tech in week two, the Buckeyes gradually got better throughout the season.

When all was said and done, they had the No. 26 scoring defense in the country at 22.0 points per game and finished 19th in total yards per game (342.4). The Buckeyes were tougher to throw against (ranked 28th in yards allowed and 13th in pass-efficiency defense) than run (ranked 34th), and they were very good on third down (16th) but a bit below average in the red zone (tied for 77th).

Compared to a season before when the defense spiraled out of control toward the end of the season, the numbers against the pass were markedly better but the rushing defense dipped a bit while scoring defense stayed about the same. However, Ohio State forced nine more turnovers in 2014 than in '13 and recorded an extra 19 tackles for loss.

While acknowledging the Buckeyes have a long way to go before they can truly pick up where they left off, veteran Ohio State assistant Luke Fickell indicated being able to look at the results of last year should help.

"It feels good to have guys who play with great confidence," the team's defensive coordi-



SONNY BROCKWAY

DOMINATION – Eli Apple (13), Tyvis Powell (23) and the rest of the Ohio State defense were at their best during the Buckeyes' postseason wins against Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon.

nator said. "That's what you see and that's what you want with your own kids. You want kids, when they leave, that have great confidence in what it is that they're doing. Success breeds that. I think the way they finished, the way they played the last few games of the year and where they came from, it bred a lot of confidence in them."

Holes To Fill

The unit co-ordinated by Ash and Fickell returns seven starters but must replace some players whose contributions greatly shaped how the team was able to be successful last season.

Perhaps the most important is Michael Bennett, a defensive tackle who had 14 tackles for loss and seven sacks. He was particularly destructive down the stretch when he moved from nose tackle to "3-technique" (the other defensive tackle who lines up between the guard and tackle on the opposite side of the line from the nose tackle), including big performances against Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon in the postseason. He was also a vocal and emotional leader for the team.

Senior Adolphus Washington will begin the season with the task of replicating what Bennett did last season as he moves back to 3-technique, where he played during the first part of 2014 before switching with Bennett and playing nose

tackle capably.

The new nose is expected to be Tommy Schutt, another senior who was a five-star recruit but has failed to have a major impact so far, at least in part because of injuries that appear to be behind him.

"It's his time and he's shown he's ready to shine," Ash said of Schutt. "At this place like Ohio State you recruit at a high level. Michael Bennett's gone, and it's somebody else's time to shine. Last year at this time guys didn't know anything about some of the guys that shined and hopefully it's his time."

Is defensive line coach Larry Johnson using the impact Bennett had last season as a motivator for his players this year?

"No question about it," said Johnson, who is in his second year at Ohio State after nearly two decades at Penn State. "We've already started that. Sometimes it's how you start. Sometimes it's how you finish. It's a growth process as far as them learning me and me learning them and figuring out what we can do. Once we get that niche of what we can do with the talent we had, you saw it take off. Now it's there. The process is where it should be. These guys continue to grab that and move forward."

At linebacker, sophomore Raekwon McMillan appears ready to step in for graduated senior Curtis Grant, who shook off a disappointing first three years at Ohio State to turn in a productive if sometimes underappreciated senior season.

Hopes have been high for McMillan since he arrived as a highly touted recruit from Georgia last year.

"He has done a great job," said Darron Lee,

a returning starter at outside linebacker. "I can't really say anything bad about him. Raekwon has done a great job since Curtis Grant has left. He is leading the defense, he is being a great example for the younger guys. That's all we can really ask of him right now."

In the secondary, safeties Vonn Bell and Tyvis Powell return as juniors along with cornerback Eli Apple, who had a solid season as a redshirt freshman starter in 2014, but Doran Grant must be replaced at the other corner. He had five interceptions and a team-high nine pass breakups while finishing sixth on the team with 63 tackles to earn first-team All-Big Ten honors. As the boundary corner, he more often matched up with the opposing team's best receiver and also had to be strong in run support because offenses often like to attack that area on the ground.

The man called upon to move into the starting lineup will be sophomore Gareon Conley, who had some rough patches in spot duty in 2014 but was a highly regarded athlete coming out of Massillon (Ohio) Washington two years ago.

There is one more new starter on the defense, and that will be at end opposite All-American Joey Bosa.

Junior Tyquan Lewis has been pegged for that spot, where he will be asked to at least replicate the workmanlike contributions of graduated senior Steve Miller, who had 6½ tackles for loss but more often was doing the little things like tying up blockers so others could make the big play. Lewis, who had nine tackles including

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE OVERVIEW

McMillan, Conley Slot Into Starting Lineup

Continued From Page 33

2½ for loss in spot duty last season, could bring more big-play ability, but that remains to be seen.

Johnson also identified sophomore Jalyn Holmes and redshirt freshman Sam Hubbard as players pushing for playing time at end, and Hubbard will likely start while Holmes rotates in against the Hokies in place of Bosa, who faces a one-game suspension for violating team rules.

Ash acknowledged that how the new starters perform could influence how he and Fickell call a game, but he sounded optimistic that wouldn't be a concern when the dust had settled from preseason camp.

"If for some reason we're not as good as we want to be up front, do we have to look at maybe some different alignments and things? Absolutely," Ash said. "We've got to do what our personnel allows us to do. I do think we have a pretty talented defensive line coming

back. We've got some players that maybe people on defense don't know how they're going to perform but we feel pretty good about them.

"As it is any year, injuries do happen. Maybe a player doesn't develop like you would hope and once you get going if things aren't necessarily going the way you want, you've got to evaluate why and you've got to make decisions about how you get it corrected. Is it just more practice time or are there tweaks and changes you need to make in your system to help personnel?"

Coordinating the secondary also could present a problem if Conley (or someone else) isn't able to replicate the play of Grant because Ash's Cover 4 – or "quarters" – defense relies on all four players being able to play man coverage on every play if necessary.

"We can't put a couple of corners out there and ask them to do something they can't do," Ash said. "We are an in-your-face press football team. We're going to challenge everything. If at some point we've got corners we don't feel can

do that then we've got to really evaluate what we're doing and what we're asking them to do. It's not different with the defensive line."

Finding 'The Difference'

The coaching staff has more than just highly recruited former backups to rely on for rebuilding the defense and perhaps making it even better.

They are also looking forward to year two with a new approach to tackling and an emphasis on ways to maintain leverage in one-on-one battles.

The former is rugby tackling, something Ohio State embraced last season and reinforced this spring and preseason.

"We are working hard at it," Ash said. "Hopefully it wasn't beginner's luck last year. Our players believe in it, our coaches believe in it, it was beneficial for us last year and hopefully it will continue to be this year."

The latter has been less talked about in public circles but is simply known as "The Difference" to the OSU coaching staff.

The beginning of the first practice of preseason camp was devoted to a presentation from Ash to the players on The Difference, and he expanded on it later during an interview.

"Most college players play with the hands out here," he said, extending his hands outside his body. "The really good ones play with their hands inside. They get leverage, they can control blockers, blockers can control defenders. Coach Meyer wanted to make our team better at using our hands and gaining leverage. He put me in charge of a mission with our defensive

staff to find ways to teach the whole football team how to better use their hands. We came up with the phrase, 'The Difference.' If we could use our hands, it would make a big difference in the whole football team – and it did.

"A lot of people talk about our tackling, but our hand placement and blow delivery was off the charts last season. It improved our special teams, our offense, our defense, our scout teams clear across the board. We were better at using our hands."

The drill media were allowed to watch involved players matching up one-on-one and essentially competing to see which could get control of the chest area of his opponent faster – either to make or prevent a block.

"Every position across the board (benefits) because wide receivers use it to block, linemen do," Ash said. "Aside from the quarterbacks, everybody uses their hands, and we've taught our whole football team how to use their hands the right way."

The statistics still leave plenty of room for improvement, but the Buckeyes hope "The Difference" will be just one of the ways they end up with the same end results in 2015 they enjoyed last year.

"You can see the confidence of the players is really high right now, compared to last year at this time," Ash said Aug. 25. "We play a lot faster, we play a lot more confident, we play with good fundamentals, we tackle well and we communicate well. It's just a completely different defense right now in training camp than it was a year ago at this time."

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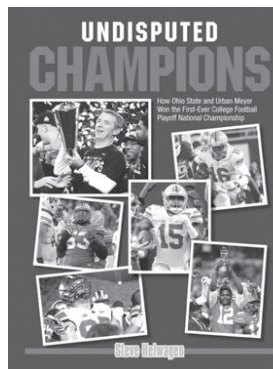
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Program History Shows Repeating Is No Easy Task

Before I get to my thoughts on the upcoming Ohio State football season, let me get something out of the way that will hopefully save many readers a lot of hand-wringing over where their Buckeye Sports Bulletin is and save us a lot of phone calls.

There will be no print issue of BSB following the rematch with Virginia Tech!!

After much thought over the summer the BSB staff concluded that, given the Monday night kickoff of the game with the Hokies, there would be no way that we could write, edit, compose, print and mail Buckeye Sports Bulletin in a manner timely enough to get it to the bulk of our readers, readers who live in all 50 states and several foreign countries, before the following game five days later with Hawaii.

However, with the miracles of modern technology, we will be posting a complete electronic issue of BSB – BSB Quickly, as these electronic issues are known – on Wednesday, Sept. 9. This issue, as are all of our electronic issues, will be free to BSB print subscribers. The Virginia Tech issue will include comprehensive coverage of this anticipated grudge match with the Hokies, as well as all the other features you expect in a regular issue of BSB.

If you are not already enjoying the 36 additional electronic issues we post each year, now might be a great time to hop on board. Just email your name, address and preferred email address to subscriptions@buckeyesports.com, and we will forward simple instructions on how to enjoy all that your BSB subscription has to offer.

Readers will still receive 24 print issues this publishing cycle as an additional print issue has been added in December, which will allow us to better cover postseason action in what might be another march by the Buckeyes to the national championship.

If you have any questions concerning our print or electronic schedules, don't hesitate to give us a call at (614) 486-2202.

Can They Repeat?

The question I get asked most about the Ohio State football team as the season approaches other than who will be the starting quarterback – sorry, as of press time I don't have an answer for that – is whether the Buckeyes can repeat as national champions.

Obviously, Ohio State has the personnel to repeat, with a wealth of talented and experienced players returning and an abundance of skilled young players behind the veterans just itching to get in on the action. And those talented players are coached by an outstanding staff led by one of the best coaches – if not the best – in the nation in Urban Meyer.

Repeating as national champions, even with a wealth of championship talent returning, is very difficult, however. The few teams who have been able to go back-to-back in the last few decades are noted elsewhere in this issue. If you want proof from closer to home of how difficult it is to win two consecutive national crowns, however, you need only think back to a legendary Buckeye team.

When Ohio State won the national championship in 1968 with a roster loaded with Super Sophomores, it was assumed that two more titles were surely on the way. That of course didn't happen.

In 1969, the Buckeyes roared through the regular season and headed to Michigan for the traditional season finale undefeated. The Wolverines, who had been humiliated in Columbus by a 50-14 score the year before, were under first-year coach Bo Schembechler

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH

Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

and scored one of the most famous upsets of the rivalry, winning 24-12 and touching off the legendary Ten-Year War.

Obviously, there are similarities this season as Ohio State will, 46 years later, again travel to Ann Arbor as defending champions to face a Michigan squad that has faced the humiliation of losing 10 of the last 11 to the Buckeyes but is being led by a new and optimistic coach in Jim Harbaugh.

I have no doubt that the fiery Harbaugh will have his team ready for the Buckeyes, just as I fully expect Meyer to have his team ready. Still, you can see how this game is a potential land mine.

In 1970, with the team now being led by Super Seniors, the Buckeyes again entered the Michigan game undefeated and the Woody Hayes-led Buckeyes downed the No. 4-ranked Wolverines and Hayes protégé Schembechler, 20-9. That sent the Buckeyes to the Rose Bowl to face Stanford with another crown – though not back-to-back – potentially on the line.

The Buckeyes, however, were upset by Stanford, denying Rex Kern and Co. the chance at a pair of titles and setting Ohio State on a course toward a 34-year championship drought. I think the lesson in 1970 is that making it through the regular season in position to play for a title is tough enough, but once you get to the postseason, every team is a good one and you have to bring your "A" game or go home.

Every season, there are probably five or six teams that have a legitimate shot at winning it all – some obvious, such as the Buckeyes this year, and some not so obvious like the 2014 squad. To use that tag-word that Ohio State has adopted this season, each season is a "grind," especially now that most playoff-caliber teams face a league championship game and then the grueling two-game playoff – a whopping 15-game season, five more than the '68 Buckeyes played.

Teams must overcome injuries, old days and sometimes just bad luck to survive that grind. As I like to say, a football is not round and thus bounces in funny ways. I also like to remind people that you are dealing with a bunch of 18- to 22-year-old kids who don't always respond to situations the way you would like them to.

We have been assured that the Buckeyes aren't still reveling in the glory of their 2014 dream season.

"You saw a couple of guys still talking about last year and it's getting to mid-June, close to July, and it's like nah, ixnay that," said Darron Lee, one of the breakout players on last year's team. "We need to start focusing on this year and no more celebration and all that. Say, if we were still celebrating right now, it would be crappy practices and whatnot. It was a group effort. We have had a couple of leadership meetings and just said, 'Hey, enough is enough. Last year is over and done with. Nobody wants to hear about it.'"

But people are out there reminding the players that they are the defending champions every day. Dustin Fox, who played on Ohio State's 2002 championship team, reminds us that it is not that easy to block out the championship chatter, especially when, as mentioned, you are dealing with young people. His team,

too, tried to put the championship behind it in 2003.

"A lot of it just had to do with the leaders we had on our team and the coaching staff trying to make us put everything in the past, but it's hard to do with the hype surrounding the team," Fox said. "It was hard to get away from it. It was tough to deal with it. You want to be on a good team and you want to be talked about a lot, but as much as you say you want to put it behind you and move on, as college kids it's difficult."

That 2003 squad finished 11-2 and wound up No. 4 in the country, as LSU and Southern Cal split the national crown. Interestingly, USC won the title outright in 2004 to become one of the few teams in recent years to go back-to-back.

Players from that 2002 squad also point out another big roadblock to a second national championship. Every team from Hawaii to Michigan State and Michigan, not to mention any postseason opponents, will be giving Ohio State their best shot.

"I think one thing that is common from the 2014 Buckeyes and the 2002 Buckeyes is those national championships were sort of unexpected," said Roy Hall, a receiver who redshirted on the 2002 team. "You always set out to win a national title and you put that as your end goal, but those teams were kind of the dark horses to win the national title."

"I think what changed in 2003, and what will change for the Buckeyes in 2015, is you kind of go from being unexpected to being the team that everybody is looking to dominate. You're like a cadaver all of the sudden – people are just breaking you down and tearing you apart."

Added Fox, "You can't afford to have mental lapses. You can't be flat ever. You have to bring it every week."

"They're going to be double-digit favorites in every game this year, but I guarantee there will be some games decided by three points."

One thing working in the Buckeyes' favor in that regard, however, is the fact that teams give Ohio State, because of its reputation and tradition, their best shot every year so at least it is something the Buckeyes are used to.

There will be another thing that I will be watching as the Buckeyes set about their title defense.

One of the things that has most impressed me about the team since Meyer took over for the 2012 season is the play of the offensive line, an area where I truly believe Ohio State underachieved in the Jim Tressel years. Much of the credit for the improvement has to be given to offensive line coach Ed Warinner, who seems to almost work magic with whatever hand he is dealt. Last year was no different as the big guys up front helped the Buckeyes average 44.8 points for the season and 47.7 in postseason play.

Four of the five starters from last year's offensive line are back, so it should be more of the same. However, Warinner has been elevated to offensive coordinator, a position where he had previous success at Kansas. I have to admit that I worry his line troops may suffer now that he has this added responsibility.

Despite all of my cautions about the difficulty to repeat, you have to believe that the Buckeyes have as good a shot – probably

better – at the brass ring as any team in the nation.

The number of athletes that Meyer and his staff have stockpiled is really stunning. This is especially true on the defensive side of the ball, where the Buckeyes really struggled the first two seasons under Meyer. But as the freshly recruited athletes started to dominate the two-deeps and after a little tweaking to the defensive coaching staff, Ohio State now fields a defense that can play with anyone – a wonderful complement to the high-powered offense.

I don't care if you are Woody Hayes, Urban Meyer, Bear Bryant or Nick Saban – you can't win without good players, and Ohio State has plenty of them.

As for the quarterback battle between J.T. Barrett and Cardale Jones, I am as curious as you are to know who is going to trot out to take the first snap against Virginia Tech on Sept. 7. I do know that the Buckeyes can't go wrong either way, as both are proven championship-caliber quarterbacks. And I also know that if the chosen one fails or gets injured, there will be a top-caliber quarterback waiting in the wings.

I was impressed with statements by each of the quarterbacks, statements that gave me even more confidence in them and the team.

"My aim is not to prove or impress anyone outside of this facility," Jones said when asked about concerns over his ability to run the offense. "My aim is to impress my teammates. For those who say I don't know the offense and just overthrew coverages, they probably don't know much about football."

"My main focus on winning this job is just managing the game. I'm pretty sure it will come down to who manages the game better, who can manage the offense better, keep us in third-and-manageable on third downs, and who has the intangibles and who can show it more consistently."

And Barrett was able to put the competition in perspective, a team perspective.

"I just want my best play to be better than his best play," Barrett said of Jones. "I still want him to perform at his best, but the fact is that I still want to be quarterback and be out there making the calls. I don't want to downplay that. But I don't want him to not succeed. That's not a lift to me. I still want him to do well, too."

Another national championship is hardly a guarantee, but I certainly wouldn't bet against the Buckeyes.

How About First Class?

This edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin was mailed Aug. 27. Make note of the day you receive it, especially if you are out of state.

If your BSB arrived after Sept. 1, chances are you will not receive your paper before the next game during football season. If your BSB came after the Sept. 7 game with Virginia Tech, you are looking at big-time postal problems during football season.

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