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Nothing To Shrug At

With Draft Hype Growing Louder, Bosa Focused On Getting Better

By RYAN GINN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

With his arms outstretched like an airplane, Ohio State defensive end Joey Bosa glided across the indoor field of the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, zigging and zagging down to the end zone where the defensive line practices.

Less than 10 minutes into the first spring practice of his junior season – which is considered to be the money year for elite NFL prospects – Bosa looked immune to the pressure of an impending multimillion-dollar payday and all the scrutiny that comes with that potential.

In two seasons with the Buckeyes, Bosa has emerged as one of the nation's elite defenders. Last year, he became a unanimous All-American while anchoring Ohio State's defensive line en route to winning the national championship.

His pro prospects are legitimate. Mike Detillier, a veteran draft analyst who has been producing his M&D Draft Report long enough to have scouted Bosa's father and uncle (both of whom were taken with the 16th overall pick), said he believes Bosa is currently one of the top five players available for the 2016 draft.

He even took that praise a step further, saying that Bosa would be one of the top players taken if he were eligible for this year's draft as a sophomore.

"If he were in this draft class, he's possibly the top defensive end off the board and one of the top players period," Detillier said. "I'll put it to you this way – he doesn't have a lot of negatives. We're talking about a 20-year-old kid. He's not even fully physically developed yet. That's what's so striking about him. He's still developing and yet he's a dominant player."

There is a danger that comes with that praise, through. The year-round obsession with the NFL draft can lead to a magnifying glass that follows the lives of the top underclassmen in the NCAA. Every game, every play and every movement is seemingly inspected.

For example, former South Carolina defensive end Jadeveon Clowney wilted under the intense spotlight that tracked him after he de-cleated Michigan running back Vincent Smith with a brutal hit during the bowl game of his sophomore campaign, although his predraft workouts restored his place at the top of the pecking order.

Before that, the months leading up to Clowney's junior campaign saw talk of a Heisman Trophy and vaulted him to the top of most draft boards. But in the season opener against North Carolina, Clowney managed just three tackles. His decision to sit out a midseason game against Kentucky due to a rib injury brought out accusations of selfishness, and he finished the season with just three sacks.

Self-preservation isn't an uncommon trait among college players who routinely see teammates go down with costly injuries. In 2014, Ohio State senior captain Michael Bennett attributed his lackluster first half of the season at defensive tackle to lingering fears of deflating draft stock.

"I looked back on my senior year and then I watched film of last year and I wasn't firing off the ball," he said nine games into the campaign. "I realized I was playing cautious. I was too scared to make mistakes, I didn't want to mess up, I didn't want to get hurt or whatever. I couldn't afford to do that for my teammates or for myself so I decided I was going to go out, play as hard as I can and whatever happens, happens."

When Ohio State defensive line coach Larry Johnson Sr. was recently asked if the OSU coaching staff needed to worry about similar thing happening with Bosa, he barely let the question finish before delivering a definitive answer.

"It will never happen," Johnson said, repeating it for effect.

Johnson and others close to Bosa have their reasons for believing the Fort Lauderdale, Fla., native won't succumb to the suffocating pressures that have taken down others in his position. The first reason dates back to the pairing of two players who were drafted nearly three decades ago.



SONNY BROCKWAY

NO BIG DEAL? – Ohio State's Joey Bosa (97) was named the Big Ten's Nagurski-Woodson Defensive Player of the Year and the Smith-Brown Defensive Lineman of the Year last season, not to mention a unanimous All-American.

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COVER STORY

Bosa Comes From Strong Football Lineage

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The Perfect Storm

Bosa's father, John, a New Hampshire native who played his college ball at Boston College, was taken by the Miami Dolphins in the first round of the 1987 NFL draft. He played three seasons for the Dolphins at defensive end, notching seven career sacks before retiring.

One year after John was drafted, the Dolphins chose Ohio State linebacker Eric Kumerow with their first-round selection. Kumerow also played three years with the Dolphins, sliding down to defensive end in the NFL.

The pair of players is linked by more than similar careers, though. John married Kumerow's sister, Cheryl, and the couple had two sons – Joey and Nick, who is a class of 2016 five-star prospect being recruited by the Buckeyes.

With those bloodlines, it shouldn't be a surprise that football and everything surrounding it has come easy to the Bosa boys.

"Joey was prepared for this long before anyone else was," said south Florida recruiting analyst Larry Blustein, who has covered recruiting for more than four decades. "It's safe to say he was prepared for this before he was born. That's a huge advantage, to grow up in a family where both sides produced first-round draft picks. It's like a perfect storm."

That storm continued to gain strength when he got to Ohio State. Bosa had an impressive freshman season under position coach Mike Vrabel, but he really put things together the following season under Johnson. The hiring of Johnson by Ohio State is just another reason Bosa is viewed by the NFL community as such a valuable commodity.

"He's got one of the premier defensive line coaches in the country in Larry Johnson," Detillier said. "That hire by Urban Meyer was fantastic. When you look at his career at Penn State, he and Ed Orgeron at LSU are probably the two best defensive line coaches in college football. Joey's been aided by having one of the best technical coaches



SONNY BROCKWAY

POPULAR PLAYER – Ohio State defensive end Joey Bosa (97) has quickly become a fan favorite.

in the game working with him."

Those factors have given him a solid base, but he was also aided by the circumstances surrounding Ohio State's national championship run. Detillier said Bosa is currently the highest rated pro prospect playing for Ohio State – he noted that could change if quarterback Cardale Jones picks up where he left off last season – but the national championship run vaulted others

into the limelight.

Between the interest surrounding a quarterback competition that could stretch into late August and the emergence of charismatic running back Ezekiel Elliott as the nation's preseason Heisman Trophy favorite, Bosa can likely cruise into the season as under the radar as a potential top pick could be.

"It's not fair, but quarterbacks always have an advantage (when it comes to attention)," Detillier said. "From a ratings stand-

point, he's the highest rated player on Ohio State's team. But look at the 2006 draft. Mario Williams from North Carolina State went first, but all you ever heard about was Reggie Bush and Matt Leinart out of USC.

"That's what's happened to Joey. He gets overshadowed by Zeke and Barrett and everything that happened late with Cardale. But here's the thing: In the NFL, if you've got someone who can rush the quarterback like Joey, he's going to hit the stage real

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COVER STORY

quick (at the draft)."

Bosa has bristled at times about being held to too high a standard by fans, once tweeting, "Apparently if I don't get a sack I'm nonexistent..." after Ohio State's 42-27 win against Indiana on Nov. 22. However, he's otherwise more than happy to avoid self-promotion.

Bosa is notoriously taciturn in his interviews, often favoring short deadpan quips and a wry smile as his weapons of choice – a trait that Blustein said separates him from his more loquacious sibling. Teammates say they've never heard him discuss the rather large paycheck that could be waiting on the other side of this season.

"You never hear him say he's going to be the first pick or anything like that," senior defensive tackle Adolphus Washington said. "Everybody knows what he could be, but you never hear him talking about it and never hear him bragging about it. He just wants to go out there and play football with us."

Bosa knows there's no point in trying to avoid the chatter that surrounds his professional future. Instead, he lets the words roll off him like he's continuously shedding a wave of blockers reaching out to him.

"I obviously hear about it and see it around, but it doesn't get to my head," Bosa said. "I have my goals set, and it's just to get better and be a great team again this year. I feel like if I go out and work every day, everything will fall into place."

Fun In The Sun

Having grown up in a family with an uncle and father who mastered the recruiting scene and dealt with the NFL draft hype, Bosa's comfort level around the attention paid to college football gives him an unflappable aura that makes him look at ease at all times. His superior genes and his uncommon upbringing have made everything easier, allowing him to have his share of fun along the way while avoiding pressure.

During his unanimous All-America season as a sophomore in 2014, he laughed off a complaint from a fan who questioned his dedication to football when he tweeted about playing late-night video games. His devotion to electronic dance music is well known, and Bosa made it even more clear when he fired off a whopping 99 tweets about the Ultra Music Festival on March 29, then laughed

Bosa's Sophomore Superlatives

Unanimous First-Team All-American

- Selected by The Associated Press, the Walter Camp Football Foundation, the American Football Coaches Association, the Sporting News and the Football Writers Association of America.

Conference Standout

- Named the Big Ten's Nagurski-Woodson Defensive Player of the Year and Smith-Brown Defensive Lineman of the Year and was a first-team All-Big Ten pick by both the media and coaches.

Award Finalist

- Was a contender for the Lombardi Trophy (best lineman), the Bednarik Award (top defensive player) and the Ted Hendricks Award (top defensive end).

Dominant Defender

- Recorded 13½ sacks, which fell a half-sack shy of Ohio State single-season record of 14 set by Vernon Gholston in 2007. Bosa's 21 tackles for loss placed him fourth in the school's single-season list, trailing just Mike Vrabel (26 in 1995), Andy Katzenmoyer (23 in 1996) and Ryan Shazier (22½ in 2013).

about losing a few hundred followers on his Twitter page.

Music is one of his loves, but there's a pretty sizeable place in Bosa's heart for football. Even when he's not on the field, Bosa said there are times when he finds inspiration for new moves by bobbing and weaving his way through crowded sidewalks or college hallways.

Occasionally, a pair of Ohio State students will cross Bosa's path only to watch in stunned silence as he briefly activates football mode, flipping his hips past one and then the other before resuming his walk like nothing happened.

"When you have a guy walking down the street and he's doing a pass-rush move, that's when you know you've got it inside his head," Johnson said. "That's kind of neat because we know he's thinking it. He'll walk past me and hit a pass-rush move, and that's what you want."

Nobody has more fun playing football than Bosa – even his trademark sack celebration, the human embodiment of the \(\smiley\) emoticon, casually laughs off his excellence. However, nobody does a better job of filtering out the noise.

"Nothing he or his younger brother, Nick, has come across – and that includes winning a national championship out of the

blue – affects them," Blustein said. "They're there to do the job."

The Final Chapter

If you were looking for one reason Bosa won't spend the next dozen or so games of his college career looking ahead to the pros, spending five minutes talking with him or Johnson should do the trick.

"Just to be very clear, (Bosa protecting himself) will never happen because he wants to be great," Johnson said. "Great players don't shut down. Great players go forward. That's what we hope Joey will do. He understands leaders have to be the best workers. Your best player has to be your best worker. Right now Joey Bosa is our best player and he's working really hard, so that's not going to stop."

When asked about what he needed to improve, Bosa initially said there wasn't any area of his game that didn't need at least some work. Pressed further, he said that one of his weakest areas earlier last fall was in adhering to Johnson's system, although he said he buckled down as the season went on. Bosa estimates that he left a handful of sacks on the table last season because his desperation to make a big play led him to freelance instead of sticking to the plan.

"A lot of times I was just doing my own thing, just because I felt like I always had to go make that play to change the game," he said. "It got better throughout the season obviously, but watching the film I see that plays could just fall into my lap and as long as I'm doing my job I could make even more plays. I'd see five or six sacks that I could have had but I went inside instead of outside or something like that."

"Just stick to the game plan and have faith it will work out."

He's also sticking to the Larry Johnson NFL Draft Plan, a proven success over the years. Johnson coached six first-round draft picks at defensive line during his time at Penn State. Only a plague of Biblical proportions appears capable of keeping Bosa from being the seventh.

Johnson said he's working with Bosa to maximize his potential, but he's also pleased that his protégé is more focused on becoming a better football player than he is becoming a high draft pick – a slight but important distinction.

"He gets it, but we're trying to push the envelope to make sure he understands what it takes to be a high draft pick," Johnson said. "That's not what's on his mind right now. Joey Bosa wants to be a great player, and he knows to do that he's got to start here. It starts every day at practice. He's not looking to the NFL. He knows he's got to get it done here."

"That's the thing I like about him. He doesn't come off that way sometimes, but when he gets in a room and sits down, he wants to be a great player. He knows to do that, he's got to go to work every day. That's what I like about him."

In Johnson's mind, the worst thing he can do is make it sound like Bosa has reached a point where he can stop growing. He and Bosa went through tape of all of the star lineman's sacks last season, but then Johnson showed him all the ones he missed.

The ones that didn't come last year are ones that Johnson wants to see this year. That's one reason the defensive line coach is holding off on any definitive judgments of Bosa's career until he completes what is expected to be his final season in Columbus.

"We can't write the story now," Johnson said.

And that's true. But all signs and shrugs point to a happy ending.



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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Talent, Questions Remain For Defensive Line

By MARCUS HARTMAN
 Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

One unit at Ohio State has the biggest potential to boom or bust this fall – the defensive line.

That is true for a couple of reasons, not the least of which is head coach Urban Meyer's well-worn line about one good way to have a bad football team: be forced to rely on a poor defensive front.

The Buckeyes were great up front a year ago, and recruiting rankings say the pieces are in place for them to be again, but those don't come close to telling the whole story.

Larry Johnson Sr., in his second year as coach of the OSU defensive line, can put together a depth chart with at least three scholarship players at all four spots up front this spring, and he would need to use only one true freshman to do so. He is likely to have a starting unit that has three five-star recruits, and there is an outside chance he could go with five-stars across the board to begin games.

The unit has been long on potential since Meyer arrived and started stockpiling athletic tackles as well as swift ends, but it has yet to translate to the depth Meyer and Johnson desire.

Johnson arrived last year with a stated goal of playing at least eight players regularly, but that never materialized because only five players were healthy and had the trust of the staff for the balance of the season. That was something Meyer lamented repeatedly during the season, and he issued a challenge to the group at the start of spring ball.

The issues that caused a lack of depth in 2014 could translate to problems with the starting unit in 2015 after three contributors graduated, but Johnson sounded optimistic that won't be the case when he spoke to reporters midway through spring practice.

"To be honest with you, we kind of close our ears off," he said when asked about his players hearing Meyer's criticisms. "We just keep going. I think the thing about it is Coach is right on. We've got to get better, we've got to improve, challenge the young players, and we're doing that right now and the young players are starting to step up."

"So whether they were listening to him or just doing it during practice, there is a movement that we want to play eight to 10 guys. That's the style we have to play. Right now moving forward we're getting close to that."

Starters Coming Into Focus?

Johnson has two known commodities to work with this spring in end Joey Bosa and tackle Adolphus Washington.

Bosa was a unanimous All-American last season as a sophomore and figures to be among the early favorites to be named



KEVIN DYE

BATTLE CONTINUES – Defensive end Jalyn Holmes (10) and nose guard Tommy Schutt (90) are among those hoping to join returning starters Joey Bosa (right) and Adolphus Washington (92) on the defensive line next season.

the top defensive lineman in the country this fall after spending this spring refining his game.

Washington returns for his senior season in a role that is not new but one that is different from where he ended last season. For much of the first part of 2014, Washington played "3-technique," the tackle in Ohio State's 4-3 defense who lines up between the offensive guard and tackle on one side of the formation, while Michael Bennett lined up between the center and guard on the other side as the nose tackle.

The two flipped late in the year, and Bennett's production soared when he was the beneficiary of fewer double teams and less responsibility for holding the middle at 3-technique. That bit of vital dirty work fell to Washington, who was happy to do whatever he had to in order to help the team win.

"That makes it sound like I didn't really want to do it," he replied when asked if he felt like he took one for the team by switching positions last year. "I was doing whatever was going to help the team play better and definitely to help Mike in his last year because he's known as a pass rusher. You can't pass rush from nose guard, so I made a

pretty good transition going to nose. I don't have any complaints."

With a move this season come expectations for him to show once and for all why he was Ohio's top-rated prospect and a five-star talent as a senior at Cincinnati Taft in 2012.

"That position means a lot in our scheme because that guy gets so much one-on-one pass rushing," Johnson said. "He's one-on-one a lot by himself. When you concentrate on the outside, the inside guy goes free. That guy is the most critical guy in our defense – a 3-technique has to be a great pass rusher. Mike Bennett down the stretch, that's what we needed."

The man who has taken over at nose tackle this spring in place of Washington is senior Tommy Schutt. Like Bosa and Washington, Schutt was a five-star recruit when he arrived in Columbus, but he has not had the impact expected of one yet, largely because of a series of nagging injuries.

"He's had a great spring," Johnson said of Schutt, who has 17 tackles in 29 career games. "One thing, he's been hurt two years in a row so he didn't get a chance to get on the field. This year he's probably dropped 15 or 16 pounds. He's lighter than he was last season. He's moving real well. I really think he's having a great spring."

"He's a really smart player. He can play the run. He's really intelligent. And he gets everybody to line up. That's the kind of thing you have to have inside."

With Schutt holding down the middle, the last question for the starting lineup this spring has been at the end opposite Bosa. Sophomores Tyquan Lewis and Jalyn Holmes have battled there while getting a push from redshirt freshman Sam Hubbard, another five-star talent who has yet to have an impact in part because he has already practiced at three different positions since becoming a Buckeye. He

seems to have settled at defensive end after shuttling between linebacker and tight end last season.

"Tyquan has had a great spring, a really great spring," Johnson said. "Jalyn is starting to be the player we think he'll be. Sam is kind of out of nowhere, but he's really got a good chance to be really dynamic, also. I'm really pleased."

"They help us in the sense that you've got a guy on the inside, 3-technique, who can rush the passer, you've got a guy on the far side and you've got a guy on the back side who you double team. That's my plan. I hope that when they double team one, we turn somebody loose. We'll have to wait and see, but I like the direction we're going."

Redshirt freshman Darius Slade is also in the mix at end along with Jashon Cornell, an impressive true freshman trying to learn the defense this spring.

Inside, Johnson has been pleased with what he has seen with a trio of sophomores in Donovan Munger, Michael Hill and Tracy Sprinkle. He also sang the praises of Joel Hale, a senior who played significant minutes on the defensive line early on before spending last season on the offensive line. Hale has been limited by a calf injury this spring, however.

"It's going to be a challenge (for Schutt to keep the job)," Johnson said. "Mike Hill is coming around. Mike Hill is pushing him. We've been using Tracy a little bit inside. We had Joel Hale before he got hurt and really Joel was doing a good job of pushing Tommy, but going into the spring I think Tommy is excited he's got a chance to start at nose guard in the fall."

How it all shakes out this fall remains to be seen, but the answer could go a long way toward whether Ohio State is able to defend its national championship.



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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Improvement Is Goal For Junior Safety

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

Vonn Bell leapt from the 3-yard line and fully extended his right hand to get his palm on the ball. He nearly caught it cleanly with one hand before tipping it safely toward his chest and securing the interception just short of the goal line to save a touchdown.

That was over a year ago now, but Bell's first career interception in his first start on defense for Ohio State in the 2014 Orange Bowl remains one of his most memorable moments as a Buckeye. That play against Clemson, one of the more acrobatic defensive plays for the Buckeyes all season, introduced Bell's immense talent to the Ohio State fan base.

Some of that talent was realized last season as Bell started in the Buckeyes' final 14 games, finishing second on the team in tackles with 92 and leading Ohio State in interceptions with six. He seemed to get more and more comfortable as the season wore on, but there is still room for the Tennessee native to get better and Bell seems ready to fully realize the potential he showed in his first big play as a Buckeye.

"He had a good year, but the goal is not to be good, it's to be great," defensive coordinator and safeties coach Chris Ash said. "We need to enhance Vonn Bell just like the rest of the defense."

"Our challenge right now is to take what he did at the end of the season and make it better."

As Ash said, Bell was at his best as the season came to a close, and it was likely not a coincidence that his strong play matched the elevated performance of the Silver Bullets.

In his final four games of the season – Ohio State's regular-season finale with Michigan and postseason contests against Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon – Bell excelled. He recorded 30 tackles in those games, good for 7.5 per game compared to the 5.6 tackles he averaged in the Buckeyes' first 11 contests, and three of Bell's interceptions came in those four games.

"As the season went on he just kept getting better and better and better," Ash said. "Vonn had an outstanding season. I wish he would have started off the season a little better, but he really hit his stride as he got more comfortable and the game slowed down for him."

"The last half of the season he played extremely well. I would say he's probably one of the best tacklers I've ever been around. He's done a great job of tackling this last season, has just got a real good knack for being around the ball when the ball's in the air."

Bell showed that ball-hawking ability in his first career start and built on that performance last season, his strong play snowballing as the season wore on until he was one of

the most trusted members of the Buckeyes' championship defense.

Given his strong finish to the season, it would be easy to forget that Bell started the season on the bench. He played significant minutes in the season opener against Navy, but Cam Burrows got the start as Bell was still working to grasp the defense implemented by Ash.

Bell's slow start to the season was likely a result of missing all of spring practice after he tore the MCL in his left knee in the first practice session of spring in 2014. The junior has been participating fully in spring practice this time around and thinks that combined with a full season of starting alongside fellow safety Tyvis Powell will elevate his play next season and as a result the play of the entire defense.

"We play with more confidence and get faster to the ball," Bell said. "Everybody looks at (Powell and me) as leaders. They look for us to make that big play, bring that passion and bring the energy every play. We're yelling out down and distance every play."

"That gives a good vibe to the whole defense, and they just look up to us to make a play for them."

Bell made plenty of plays last season, perhaps none as spectacular as his first career interception against Clemson, but as a junior he has a chance to elevate his knowledge of the game, Ash said. The staff is working to improve Bell's understanding of offensive schemes and situational recognition this spring to ensure his immense talents are maximized.

While being in the right place at the right time is a product of understanding the game of football, it also comes with natural ability. Both Ohio State safeties appear to be natural playmakers, but according to Powell, who had four interceptions of his own last season, Bell is a cut above in that regard.

"Vonn is the man around here! I'm just that other guy," Powell said laughing. "When the plays need to be made, one of us is going to make the play. The last couple of games, me and him made some very key plays. It's basically like a good duo. I would say we're like one of the best duos in the nation. We just have to go out there and prove it."

Bell has proved his talents over his time as a Buckeye, from his acrobatic interception in the Orange Bowl to his goal-line pick of Alabama in Ohio State's Sugar Bowl win last season, but both Bell and his coaches believe that he has far from reached his potential.

Last season Bell made sure that he was known for more than just his emphatic Orange Bowl introduction to the Ohio State fans. In 2015, he will look to show that as productive as he was last season, he was just scratching the surface.



SONNY BROCKWAY

BALL HAWK – Ohio State safety Vonn Bell recorded a team-high six interceptions last season as a sophomore.

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Buckeyes Practice In Front Of Fellow Students

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

Throughout Ohio State's run to the first-ever College Football Playoff championship, Urban Meyer continually opened press conferences by thanking Buckeye fans and students for their support. On April 11, the Ohio State staff expressed that gratitude with more than just words during the fourth annual student appreciation practice.

Approximately 1,900 students and fans packed into the indoor practice field at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center to watch the Buckeyes compete in their 11th practice of the spring.

"This football team is a part of the students, and the students are a part of this team," Meyer said to the Buckeyes before the practice. "And together, we are a family."

Ohio State welcomed its family in for an 11 a.m. practice (two hours later than the Buckeyes' normal practice time to ensure a better student turnout), and pulled out all the stops as photo opportunities were available with the 2014 College Football Playoff trophy and members of the marching band. Brutus Buckeye was also on hand to get in on the action.

The morning started with quick calcs. While students are normally encouraged to participate from the Block "O" student section during game days, those in attendance April 11 got to work into lines with the players and followed that by running through initial stretching with the Buckeyes.

Ohio State strength coach Mickey Marotti served as the day's emcee and informed the students – many of whom were clad in black national championship attire – of the day's theme, one representing the mind-set of competitive excellence held by the team.

"Ohio State student body," Marotti belted into a microphone, his voice booming over the rap music playing throughout the facility, "today we will win or lose. It's time for winner-loser day."

Every drill the Buckeyes did throughout the two-hour practice lived up to that moniker, resulting in a clear winner and loser which were announced to the stu-



KEVIN DYE

SAY CHEESE – Ohio State running back Ezekiel Elliott (center) poses for a photo with one of the nearly 2,000 students and fans who attended the annual Student Appreciation Day at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center.

dents by Marotti. Whether it was Joey Bosa defeating Taylor Decker in the circle drill or the offense topping the defense in a red zone drill, the players and students were told clearly who had won and who had lost.

A running tally was kept throughout the day in both individual and team drills, and in the end the defense came out on top 49-40, an unsurprising development given the fact that injuries and concerns over rest kept much of the first-team offensive line out of most team drills.

Despite the high stakes that came with the practice, Jalin Marshall said getting to

perform in front of the students kept the team loose.

"It's a little relaxing day for us because practice is always intense, you know that around here," Marshall said. "It's relaxing for us. It allows us to interact with the community, the fans."

"It's definitely fun. We like to show them our appreciation for coming to our games each and every week, week in and week out. It's a great day for us, and it's a great day for them. It's a lot of fun."

While students watched most of the drills from the sidelines, standing multiple rows deep along either side of the field, those in attendance were encouraged to come in close for the final competitive drill of the day, an "inside drill" performed in the red zone. Athletic training major Katie Olinger even had an opportunity to take some shotgun snaps and hand the ball to running back Warren Ball.

"She better not keep it," defensive end Tyquan Lewis could be heard joking with teammates as Olinger took the snap. "She's live."

The student participation continued as a few students attempted field goals, with one connecting from 31 yards out despite Jalyon Holmes' jokes about going for the block.

As the players cleared the field to get out of their pads, Anthony Schlegel took over the mic to oversee contests between the students that included push-up and ab challenges, a two-person wheelbarrow race and 40-yard dash races to determine which students would compete against players at this year's spring game, set for April 18.

During those competitions it was the players' turn to watch as they cheered on their fans. Running back Ezekiel Elliott captured much of the action as he ran around the facility with a camera, filming the festivities.

Ohio State junior Nick Dalonzo was in

attendance for the third consecutive year and said that everything about the day helped to make the fans feel a part of the program.

"I like being real close on the goal-line plays," Dalonzo said. "It's real intimate with everyone, and it's a lot of fun. Everybody is talking to you. It's like you're a part of it, you get to see it up close."

"It's just great. Everyone on the team is super cool, and it's great to just tell them congratulations and that I'm proud of them. It's cool to see this team and what they've done and to be a part of it. It's like a big family day almost."

As the day concluded students and players congregated at the 50-yard line for pictures on the Block "O."

Notes

- In addition to Bosa's win over Decker, the circle drill saw offensive linemen Chase Farris and Billy Price defeat defense tackles Donovan Munger and Michael Hill, respectively, Jamarco Jones top Holmes, early enrollee Nick Conner defeat Bri'onte Dunn and quarterback Cardale Jones best cornerback Eli Apple.

- Curtis Samuel and Dunn took first-team snaps in the kick return unit with Samuel back deep and Dunn the up-back. They were replaced by Marshall and Ball on the second team.

- Despite the fact that the miscue came on a play in which he was on the sidelines, J.T. Barrett went out of his way to get in the face of lineman Grant Schmidt after a missed assignment.

- Members of the 2,000-rep club – individuals who have taken 2,000 or more competitive snaps in practices and games at Ohio State – did not see much time in team drills. That meant that Decker, Pat Elflein, Joshua Perry, Adolphus Washington, Bosa, Darron Lee, Tyvis Powell and Vonn Bell spent much of the day watching with the students.

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Coach Comes To OSU With Meyer, Ohio Ties

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

When Tony Alford was hired as Ohio State's running backs coach, everything just seemed to fit.

Everything in his life – from his upbringing under his father, Robert Alford, a successful Ohio high school coach, to playing under Earle Bruce and Urban Meyer at Colorado State to his experience at the position and his ability to recruit – just made the coach seem like a perfect fit for the Buckeyes, and the Buckeyes a perfect fit for Alford.

Even though the coach was in a good position coaching running backs at Notre Dame, the harmonious union of Alford and Ohio State was simply too good an opportunity to pass up.

"I was at a great place, make no bones about that," Alford said of Notre Dame, where he spent six years as an assistant coach. "It was an agonizing decision because I had been there a long time, but for my professional goals I thought this would be best for me. For my professional goals, I had to do this.

"I have an unbelievable amount of respect for Urban. It's a guy I played for. I've known him since I was in my early 20s, and Earle Bruce and the great job and the great history of this place. I thought it would be good for me and to put on my résumé as I move forward in this profession."

While Alford took some time to think over his decision to move to Columbus, in some ways he has been moving toward Ohio State his entire life.

Growing up in Kent, Ohio, he always wanted to follow in his father's footsteps as a coach. After a playing career at Kent State University and a brief stint with the Pittsburgh Steelers,



JEFF SVOBODA

LONG RELATIONSHIP – Ohio State running backs coach Tony Alford was a senior running back at Colorado State when Urban Meyer was the Rams' receivers coach.

Robert Alford began coaching football at Roosevelt High School in Dayton in 1969 and two years later moved back to Kent and continued coaching there until 1978.

"I wanted to coach really because of my dad," the younger Alford said. "I grew up a gym rat, standing on the sled. It's great history back in Kent, Ohio, where I came from."

About two hours northeast of Ohio State, Alford learned the ins and outs of the game that his father loved. Despite the proximity, however, Alford would not spend his college days in Columbus. Still, his move west would simply serve as another step toward becoming a Buckeye.

Following his high school playing days, Alford continued his football career as a running back at Colorado State. It was there that he crossed paths with a pair of giants in Ohio State coaching.

When Alford first became a Ram in 1987, Earle Bruce was still coaching the Buckeyes. Two years later, however, he was at Colorado State mentoring a young man who would become a Buckeye 26 years later.

Alford called Bruce instrumental in his development as a man and a coach, but he wasn't the only Buckeye head coach who was working on the Rams staff at the time. Meyer followed Bruce to CSU as an assistant coaching the wide receivers, arriving in time for Alford's senior season. While he didn't directly coach Alford and the running backs, Meyer made an impression on his future employee.

"Wow," Alford said when asked to recall what Meyer was like at Colorado State. "Take him now and multiply it by 100. You can tell the guy had a passion and a fire about doing things and not just doing things, but doing them right and being very particular about the finer details of everything that happens. For him to be doing that now 20-some-odd years later, it's no surprise."

While Meyer made an impact on Alford, the inverse was true as well as Meyer spoke of his relationship with Alford when intro-

ducing him as Ohio State's newest coach Feb. 10.

"I've known Tony Alford for a long time, and I am very pleased to be adding him to our staff," Meyer said. "He is an exceptional person and coach who is going to work really well with our staff and who will be an outstanding mentor and teacher for this football program."

After a productive career at Colorado State – Alford rushed for 1,035 yards and was a Doak Walker Award nominee during his junior season – the coach was briefly a member of the Denver Broncos before fully committing himself to the mentoring that Meyer spoke of, something that had been ingrained in him at a young age.

Alford's passion has already made an impact on his pupils.

"Coach Alford is great," running back Curtis Samuel said. "He brings energy, he's dedicated to making his players better, he works us hard and he's a great person."

Alford's time under Bruce certainly helped him develop as a football player and a man. And surely his coaching stops at Iowa State, Louisville and Notre Dame helped to form him as a coach. But really, many of Alford's philosophies – both for coaching and for life – can be traced back to his family.

Robert Alford would consistently have kids in and out of the house, those youngsters staying with the Alfords for months at a time because their own family environments weren't stable. At the time Tony Alford didn't think much of it, but years later the type of dedication his father had to his players is something he strives to mirror.

"I think that's kind of ingrained in me," Alford said. "Every single day you have an opportunity to impress, every day you have an opportunity to help change somebody just by your actions, by your words, maybe it's a gesture. You have an opportunity to affect people every single day, and you can leverage that out how you want."

"I watched my dad mentor guys and I just thought, 'I'm so tired of hearing this same tired story, and man, if I hear this one more time I'll choke myself.' I'm telling the same tired story now. Ask my kids."

Now, Alford uses those stories in the same way his father did, carrying on the legacy of the man who raised him. Robert Alford lost his fight with cancer in June 2010 at the age of 70. Three years later Aaron Alford, Tony's younger brother who was on the coaching staff at the University of Utah, died of a heart attack at just 39.

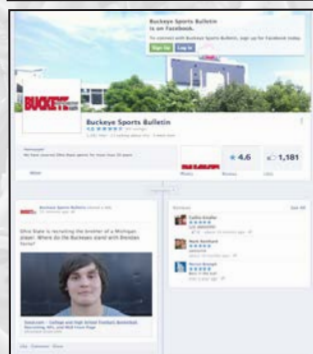
Tony Alford has carried on the coaching legacy of his father and brother to the sidelines in Columbus, striving to exemplify the characteristics of the men who helped to shape him as a coach.

"I am passionate about the way I coach," Alford said. "I think I'm a guy that really works to get close to his players. There's a lot of mentorship involved in coaching. You wear a lot of different hats. You're not just coaching but you're a disciplinarian, you're a confidant a lot of times, so you wear a lot of different hats, but I love that about this."

That's the way his dad coached, Alford said, and he couldn't imagine approaching things any other way.

It seems only fitting that a kid from Kent grew up to coach at the biggest football power in the state where his father made his name as a high school coach. Robert Alford started the journey that got his son to Ohio State, every step along the way making Tony Alford the perfect fit for the Buckeyes.

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Apple Has Quickly Become Defensive Vet

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Student Appreciation Day at Ohio State in 2014 might best be remembered as Eli Apple's coming-out party.

After redshirting his freshman season of 2013 and then battling illness in the winter, Apple began spring practice in 2014 still needing to shed the black stripe from his helmet used to signify he hadn't yet done anything on the field to be fully accepted into the fold.

With thousands of students ringing the field last year, Apple had a monster day, pulling in an interception, breaking up a pass and delivering a big hit, impressing to the point he was promoted to the first unit. When practice was over, head coach Urban Meyer gathered the team and announced that the black stripe would come off Apple's helmet, with Michael Bennett doing the honors.

Fast-forward 371 days and a lot had happened between student appreciation practices. From 2014's version to the 2015 event held April 11, Apple had cemented himself as a starter, helped shut down star Alabama receiver Amari Cooper on the way to the national championship, was named a freshman All-American and had become the elder statesman in the cornerbacks room.

"What a difference a year makes, for sure," Apple said after the open practice. "Last year at this time, I was definitely fighting for a spot and I didn't even know if I was really going to play or what I was going to do. Now being a leader of the guys in the room, everybody is looking up at me. It's a lot different for sure."

With that, Apple paused for a second. "And I like this role," he added with confidence.

That confidence has been well-earned. Apple started all but one game a season ago, and even that performance – when he didn't start at Michigan State because of a hamstring injury but entered to solidify the pass defense two series in – showed just how valuable he had become to the cause by the stretch run.

His individual stats showed 53 tackles, 5½ tackles for loss, three interceptions, 10 pass breakups and a fumble returned for his first career touchdown, but Apple did more than that. Playing opposite All-Big Ten choice Doran Grant, Apple was solid enough for a defense that improved more than 80 spots in the national rankings in pass defense that the Buckeyes didn't have to work to match up Grant against the best opposing receivers each week.

"My confidence is through the roof right now," he said. "I feel real good with my game. I feel real good where I'm going right now."

The feeling is mutual between Apple and cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs. When asked which of his charges is having the best spring, Coombs didn't hesitate to name the sophomore.

"Eli was coming off of an illness last year in the spring, and we didn't have any idea how he was going to play," Coombs said. "I thought he had a very good season, but I think he's had a much better offseason and spring than he's ever had and his growth physically but also his growth as a leader and a player – he's not finished, and he knows that. We talk about that all the



JOSH WINSLOW

SOLID STARTER – Ohio State cornerback Eli Apple made 53 tackles, nabbed three interceptions and returned a fumble for a touchdown last season.

time, but he has had a really good spring. I'm excited about that."

With his burgeoning confidence and skills as a playmaker, Apple might draw comparisons to another New Jersey native who starred as a youngster and just kept getting better at corner – Malcolm Jenkins.

Jenkins first became a full-time starter in his second year on campus and was a three-year stalwart on the edge for the Buckeyes, not to mention a Thorpe Award winner and first-round draft pick. Apple could follow in those footsteps and said he hopes to join Jenkins on the wall of All-America cornerbacks featured in the position room at Ohio State.

"It's always been a goal of mine," he said. "It's been a goal of mine since I was in middle school coming to camp here. It's something I always wanted to do, wanting to strive for and have been working for."

"When I started really liking the Buckeyes, (Jenkins) was the guy. Plus he was from Jersey just like me. I watched everything he did trying to emulate him."

Apple can also draw inspiration from a former teammate in Grant, who held the job as the leader of the cornerbacks a year ago like Apple does now.

"Doran was always very consistent," Apple said. "You knew what you were going to get out of Doran. For me, I'm trying to follow in those same footsteps and do the same things he did and add my own twist to it. I'm trying to be more consistent, coming in every day with a great attitude and lifting everybody up."

Apple will also take over Grant's job as the boundary corner, the one most likely to be left on an island against the opposing team's top wideout. He's come a long way in the span of one year, and the next step is becoming a lockdown corner along the lines of his predecessor.

When asked if Apple is ready for that role, Coombs didn't hesitate.

"I think he can be very, very good," Coombs said. "I would like to say that all of them better be because that's the coverage we play, but he has had a really good spring. I'm very excited about him."

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Ohio State Moving Around Pieces At WR

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

The terms "clown show" and "nonfunctional" to describe the Ohio State passing offense in general and wide receivers specifically will likely never be forgotten, but it's hard to argue those descriptions are fading further and further into the distance.

Those were the words used by Urban Meyer as he went through his first spring at Ohio State, and it was no wonder considering he was taking over a team whose leading receivers had topped out at 14 catches in 2011.

But three years later, Meyer and receivers coach Zach Smith oversee a position group that now boasts talent and depth even after the losses of do-it-all senior Evan Spencer and perhaps the nation's best deep threat in Devin Smith.

"From the receiver play in 2012 all the way up until now, it's a tremendous difference," senior Corey Smith said. "We have a lot of depth, and we have a lot of people who can make plays."

The biggest indication of that might be the fact that the Buckeyes are confident enough in the receiver position to try to juggle the players around this spring rather than have them try to learn just one spot and learn it well in an effort to be ready for the 2015 season to begin.

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With H-back Dontre Wilson out following a second procedure on his broken foot and leading receiver Michael Thomas sidelined by surgery to repair a sports hernia, the Buckeyes have been more than happy to move pieces this spring.

What to do with Jalin Marshall, the "H" whose late-season emergence helped push Ohio State to the national title? Move him out wide to see what he can do. How to get the best out of Curtis Samuel, the explosive running back who seems ticketed to be the No. 2 rusher behind Ezekiel Elliott? Let's see what he can do in the slot. Where to put Noah Brown, the lanky sophomore who was a bruising blocker at the "H" last year before losing 20 pounds? How about anywhere and everywhere.

"We have a lot of playmakers in that room, and the coaches just want to put them in the best spot for them to excel on the field," Thomas said. "Whatever the coaches do or where they feel they should be at, we trust them. We'll go from there."

Thomas seems entrenched both at the top of the depth chart and at an outside position after having led the team with 54 catches last year, totaling 799 yards and nine touchdowns. Corey Smith also could be a playmaker outside after a strong finish to his campaign included excellent blocking and special teams work, not to mention 20 catches on the year for 255 yards.

After that, the Buckeyes have a lot of options, including Marshall, who seems set to explode after a season in which he caught 499 yards' worth of passes, was second in the Big Ten with 283 punt return yards, ran for 145 yards and totaled eight touchdowns.

He became the No. 1 hybrid "H" when Wilson was injured vs. Michigan State, and the one-time five-star prospect seems to be inching closer to becoming a complete player.

"The first couple of practices it was rough, but with coaching and technique I've gotten better throughout the spring," he said of his trial at wide receiver. "It's allowed me to be able to play fast and run deeper routes. It's allowed me to get better on my deep ball skills and I think develop a name for myself to replace Devin if need be."

That is what Zach Smith had in mind when he moved Marshall outside for the spring, even though he doesn't expect him to end up there when the season begins.

"I moved Jalin outside, just for the spring," Smith said. "The way our defense plays so much press man on the outside, I wanted Jalin to go in and get that work on the outside. I wanted him to get press-man work because that's something you don't get a lot of in the slot. I think to take his game to the next level that's a critical piece."

There was a similar mind-set at play when it came to moving Samuel to the slot



KEVIN DYE

MOVING AROUND – Jalin Marshall is one of several players who could find a new role at wide receiver this fall.

as well. Smith feels the sophomore can add to his game and become more versatile as he learns to catch the ball more, and it can also help earn Samuel touches in games in which Elliott is humming as the top tailback.

"Curtis could play a lot of different spots," the wideouts coach said. "We're trying to saturate him with this position just so we have more flexibility to utilize him back in the backfield, out of the backfield in the slot, and that's not something you can just dip your toe in and test the waters. It's something that you have to dive in on full force."

"He had a full year of running back to really work those skills, so we took him this spring and said we are going to give him a full spring at receiver so we can try to develop that skill set so he becomes more multi-talented and we can use him in more ways."

As for Brown, his skill set at 6-2, 222 pounds is intriguing. He played "H" a year ago, has already shown a blocking ability similar to Spencer and has the size to be a physical, possession receiver.

"He's kind of like Jalin," Zach Smith said. "We want him to have that flexibility so that when we need to get the best three on the

field, whoever that is, I can plug him where I need to and they'll be really good at it."

The depth and ability to play matchups will only increase as sophomores Johnnie Dixon and James Clark get healthy while redshirt freshmen Parris Campbell and Terry McLaurin continue to develop.

What was once a clown show now is more ready than ever to perform acts of extreme skill under the big top. From not having enough players who could make an impact to boasting multiple weapons who play at each spot at a moment's notice, the Buckeyes have come a long way since the early days of Meyer's tenure.

"I think the coaches have done a great job of putting us in different places on the field to make plays," Marshall said. "To be able to go into the game not worrying about what player can play what position adds great depth and value for the offense."

"You know you can switch Curtis outside, maybe me inside and then you've got Michael Thomas on the other side. It's hard to defend three great receivers like that. We are getting better and developing more players each day, and it's been good."



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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Hard Work Paying Off For Wide Receiver

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

Throughout Ohio State's spring practice one name keeps coming up.

It was heard from Urban Meyer when he was speaking about Ohio State's potential playmakers for the 2015 season. Wide receivers coach Zach Smith mentioned it when he was asked what young players were standing out. Kerry Coombs mentioned it when asked which players were challenging his cornerbacks this spring.

No matter whom you ask, the consensus seems to be that sophomore receiver Noah Brown has had a great spring.



Zach Smith

This time last year Darron Lee was the one who had the coaching staff buzzing. The linebacker, who was coming off a medical redshirt in his first season in Columbus, backed up the praise by producing on the field in 2014.

In 2015, it will be Brown's turn to back up the talk. And there has been plenty of talk.

"Noah Brown has probably had as good a spring as I could have wanted," Smith said. "He's dropped 25 pounds. He's at a different level than he was at in the fall so I am really, really pleased with where he is at. He's come a long way and he's still got a little bit of work to do, but he's looking like a guy who is going to contribute heavily in the fall."

While the endorsement from his position coach bodes well for Brown, perhaps the strongest backing of the budding wide receiver came from Meyer himself. When asked March 31 about what he looks for in players, he used Brown as the example of what he wants to see.

"I just talked to our team and there are three characteristics," Meyer said. "Competitor, No. 1; tough, No. 2; and go hard. It's those three characteristics. If we find that – and obviously there is the God-given skill or we wouldn't be talking about him – if he has those three characteristics, we're recruiting him."

"Noah Brown is a perfect example."

While he started getting the public recognition when spring practice began in March, Brown's hard work began months earlier.

Brown played at 240 pounds last fall, recording three total touches and just 28 all-purpose yards, only four more than reserve middle linebacker Raekwon McMillan. On Ohio State's spring roster Brown is listed at a much slimmer 222 pounds.

"It all started in the winter when I dedicated myself to get better and tried to change my body and become the player that I know I can be," he said. "I think I did a good job of showing that in the spring."

"I came in heavy, everybody knows that. I got back to the weight I was playing in

around high school, got a lot faster, quicker, and it's definitely showing."

Brown put on weight late in his senior year in high school, he said, during a period of time in which he was lifting but not running as much as he should. He started to drop that weight late in the 2014 season by changing his eating habits and running after practice. He played in the national championship game at 230 pounds and has continued to drop weight since.

The changes in his body have led to changes in his game. Now lighter and faster, Brown said he has been able to improve his route running without sacrificing what was his biggest strength last season.

"I've been able to keep my strength, so I'm still good in the blocking game," he said. "That started in high school. I was forced to block in high school too. It's just something that I like to do. As a big receiver I want to dominate the DB, and that's definitely a chance to do it. When the ball is coming to your side you let them know you're there."

The 6-2 New Jersey native is hoping to be more than just a force blocking in the run game this season, and the coaching staff certainly seems to think he can be.

Brown spent most of his time at the "H" last season but has been working on the outside this spring. That transition, in part driven by a sports hernia injury suffered by incumbent starter Mike Thomas, has allowed Brown to gain a better understanding of the entire offense and work on his ability to catch the deep ball.

"Noah's working at all the spots," Smith said. "He played the slot all last year, he played the slot a little bit as he started showing that he can get on the field. Then I moved him to the boundary this spring, but even this spring when Mike was practicing and some of these guys who are dinged now were in, I was moving him a bunch. I told him going into spring, 'The mentality right now is to get you ready to start at all three spots.'"

When Brown came to Ohio State it was unclear exactly where he would fit in. He was a four-star recruit out of Pope John XXIII High School in Sparta, N.J., the No. 123 overall recruit and the No. 24 receiver in the class of 2014 according to Scout.com, but his combination of skills made him a viable option to play in the slot, outside or even in the backfield.

Now the Buckeyes are hoping that he can maximize all of that potential and be a versatile playmaker come fall. Brown certainly thinks he can.

"I'm able to do a little bit of everything, really," he said. "I'm able to block if they need me to block. I've got some pretty good hands, route running, stuff like that, and now that I've gotten quicker it's made me more of a deep threat."

"Just the stuff that they are saying, the fact that I'm on the field and they're giving me the opportunity to make a play, that speaks for itself. I'm just going to try to keep trending upwards and work hard."

While Brown has been a hot topic this spring among the coaches, the guys he is competing with for playing time have also noticed the changes he's made.

"Noah Brown has gotten better," Jalin Marshall said. "He understands the offense, too. He's making a name for himself at the receiver position as well, and he's cracked the lineup. I think it's going to be big things from him."



KEVIN DYE

MAKING A MOVE – Ohio State wide receiver Noah Brown has been one of the breakout players of the spring.

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Vannett Set To Lead As OSU's Top Tight End

By MATTHEW HAGER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State football team had the best of both worlds at the tight end position last season.

With senior Jeff Heuerman and junior Nick Vannett, the Buckeyes had players who combined for 36 receptions for 427 yards and seven touchdowns. Both had success in the passing game, but Vannett emerged as a receiving threat as the season progressed while Heuerman continued to be one of Ohio State's best blockers.

It was more of a 1A and 1B situation for Heuerman and Vannett on the depth chart especially as the former battled injuries last season, but this season it will be Vannett as the primary tight end. Heuerman is off to pursue the NFL, leaving Vannett as one of just two scholarship tight ends for Ohio State this spring along with sophomore Marcus Baugh.

While some OSU offensive starters have gotten rest during the spring, Vannett has taken the lion's share of the first-team reps.

"It's going well," Vannett said. "Jeff left, so someone had to step up, and being a senior I try to be a leader for the other guys and for Marcus. I just try to show the way for the young guys, too. They're looking up to the old guys to see how we do it. We kind of want to teach them the culture. So far they're doing really well. It's been a good spring so far."

Vannett (6-6, 260) said he is taking the same approach this spring as he has in past years, despite the knowledge that he will be the top tight end on what could be a high-powered Buckeye attack this fall. Leadership has been the biggest thing Vannett wanted to work on during the spring season.

OSU tight ends coach Tim Hinton has tried to shore up the weak spots in Vannett's game during the spring.

"What we are trying to do is make him improve those weaknesses," Hinton said of the senior. "I've put him in every tough situation I can because there is no perfect player, there is always something everyone can do to get a little bit better. So this spring



JOSH WINSLOW

TD THREAT – Nick Vannett scored five of Ohio State's seven touchdowns by tight ends last season.

has been challenging for him and challenging for a reason because we are trying to continually put him in a position to work on his weaknesses.

"Those two were really nice where they complemented each other where Jeff was really, really good in the run game and the interior blocking and those sorts of things and Nick was a little better on exterior

blocking, so we really have tried to make sure that Nick's weaknesses become his strengths. So he's been challenged really hard, but that's OK. We don't play for a long time."

Vannett also had a propensity for making big plays last season. He caught five of OSU's seven tight end touchdowns, including one against archrival Michigan and another in

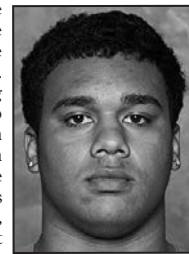
the College Football Playoff championship win against Oregon.

Not surprisingly, those catches have helped the Westerville (Ohio) Central product going into his final collegiate season.

"It definitely kind of loosens you up a little bit," Vannett said. "Once you make a big play, it's like, 'All right. Now I can relax and just play ball.' Every time you get a play like that, whether it's a touchdown or you make a big play, you kind of just relax and it's like, 'All right. It's not too bad. Just keep pushing. Everything will be all right.'"

As for Baugh, the Riverside (Calif.) North product has been more known for his off-the-field problems than his play. He appeared in 12 games last season, primarily on special teams, and caught his first collegiate touchdown pass vs. Kent State. Vannett and Hinton both praised Baugh, who was one of the top recruits at his position in the nation in the class of 2013, for his spring efforts.

"He's still a young guy," Vannett said. "He's still learning the ropes, and he's progressing each day. It's good to watch him do that because he's going to have to step up and be the No. 2 this year. I guess I'm taking more of a role to help lead him in the right direction because Jeff's gone and someone has to fill in his role, so why wouldn't it be me?"



Marcus Baugh

Said Hinton of Baugh: "I've got to tell you, I think he's had a great spring. There's a lot of learning that always goes on, there's a lot of things that have to be accomplished every day in practice. You know, fundamentally he's gotten stronger and the great thing is he is getting the reps necessary to improve his skills. I like his demeanor, I like the direction he's going and I like where we're heading as a tight end group. We're not there yet, but we will be come fall."

Hinton did not hesitate in saying Baugh's off-the-field problems – including a pair of arrests for underage consumption – are in the past, as well.

"He would not be where he is on the depth chart if I didn't believe that," Hinton said. "Obviously, there isn't a day that goes by that there isn't a little counseling that goes on to make sure we are staying on a positive track, but that's our job as coaches. We're the parent to that group, and we want to make sure that we are doing everything we can."

"He's maturing, he's doing very, very well and we have to make sure he doesn't have ... mistakes."

Vannett and Baugh (6-5, 255) are the only scholarship tight ends with the Buckeyes this spring, but that will not last long. Ohio State's 2015 recruiting class includes two tight ends in A.J. Alexander of Burke (Va.) Lake Braddock and Rashod Berry of Lorain, Ohio. Both will arrive in June.

"Depth-wise, it's kind of hard having two guys," Vannett said. "You really want to have a pair and a spare, but I hear we have two great guys coming in this summer. I'm looking forward to helping them to develop, and hopefully one of them can participate and contribute this year. After the summer, we'll have some good depth at tight end, but for now, it's kind of hard."

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OPINION

Meyer Makes OSU Know Hard Work Lies Ahead

I've learned many things as a parent, among them that my kids (and, it seems, kids in general) will often take the path of least resistance in just about anything. They'll look for ways to get out of doing this or that, and if it interferes with their television or posting on Instagram, well, you can forget about it.

THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

Fortunate then is Urban Meyer, the Ohio State football coach who seems to have a bevy of hard workers at his disposal. Anyone who paid attention last year knows the effort and toil the Buckeyes put into winning a somewhat unexpected national championship. They had to not only endure growing pains during the season but had to adapt to the late-season loss of a quarterback who shocked everyone by running the offense with the efficiency of a grizzled veteran, even though he was taking his first snaps under center.

You can bet Meyer is a disciple of Theodore Roosevelt, who famously said, "Nothing in the world is worth having or doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty." The Rough Rider seemed enamored with people who hitched up their pants and went to work, and Meyer has certainly brought that type of mentality to the Buckeyes. Oh sure, there's a wealth of speed and talent and dynamic playmaking ability, but at the core there is a bunch of heart and determination.

These kids know that they aren't just going to walk onto the field and have everything magically fall into place. They have to make it happen.

It's been said that staying at the top of the mountain is harder than getting there, but OSU wants to prove that adage to be incorrect. If spring practice is any indication, then the Buckeyes may be well on their way.

"I think there's tremendous value in appreciating what you've earned," cornerback coach Kerry Coombs said after a

recent practice. "To me, that's unbelievable motivation for next year.

"I don't think there's a single kid who sits in this room that says, 'Well, we get to do all that (celebratory) stuff, so this year is not as important.' I think it's, 'We get to do all that stuff. Let's go do it again.'"

History is littered with teams that were expected to dominate on a regular basis but for whatever reason didn't. The 1985 Chicago Bears were supposed to wreak havoc on the NFL for years to come, but celebrity and fame brought them down. UNLV was a supernova in college basketball in the early 1990s – comparing this year's unbeaten Kentucky team to that bunch was folly – and to think anyone could stand up to them was ludicrous. But there was upstart Duke, erasing memories of a 30-point loss the year before and knocking off the Runnin' Rebels in a national semifinal. Heck, even Ohio State brought down the latest incarnation of the Miami Hurricanes dynasty with a team that was more blue-collar than anything else.

You get that sense that these Buckeyes really want to be remembered as some of the best in school history – and to reach that level you can't cut corners.

"What we do here is grind and grind every day," Coombs said. "We're in the immediate (moment). In the immediate, there's not a whole lot of time to say, 'Well, you know, Coach, last year I did (this.)' There's not a whole lot of that conversation going on. I don't sense that at all. I don't sense guys saying, 'Coach, I don't want to go today. I've got to go get a trophy.' I sense guys wanting to be really good at what they're doing."

There will be competition for playing time, which means the guys sitting out because of injury can only hope their understudies don't perform so well that they get Wally Pipped right out of a starting job.

Many are saying that spring practice is merely a walk-through, that the Buckeyes will really start putting in their time when fall camp opens. But Meyer has a keen eye, and he knows who is or isn't working at top level. Those guys will be in for a rude awakening because unlike in his first season, the coach now has enough talent on hand to throw someone else out there if an incumbent is loafing.

I suppose it's not a bad problem to have – guys who will go all-out to make themselves and, in turn, the team better. It could be the opposite – guys on scholarship thinking they have already "made it" because they were part of a championship team and not putting in the requisite time to keep it going. Those players – and there probably aren't too many (if any) on this Buckeye squad – will be weeded out quickly.

Which should leave plenty of time for TV and social media.

Installing New Wrinkles

The players aren't the only ones putting in extra work this spring.

The coaching staff has gone that extra mile to see if the Buckeyes can become even more potent on offense than they were last year – a comforting thought to the rest of college football.

The move of Curtis Samuel from purely a running back to more of the hybrid position manned by Dontre Wilson and Jalin Marshall gives the Buckeyes another weapon to utilize. Samuel showed electricity with the ball in his hands last year but had limited work because he was behind Ezekiel Elliott. That wasn't going to change this fall, so the coaches wanted to find a way to get Samuel more touches, as well as having him on the field at the same time as Elliott.

"It's great for me," Samuel said. "I played a little bit of running back and a little slot in high school, so coming to college it wasn't much of a big transition for me. I can say it's going to help me get in space more and be able to make more plays for the team."

Marshall will also see his role expand, as he will be more than just a motion/slot receiver in 2015. Marshall has spent some time at split end in spring drills, partly to get him more familiar with playing on the outside and partly to improve his stock for the NFL. The pros value versatile players, and by being able to handle multiple positions Marshall will make himself all the more coveted.

For the moment, he's just happy to be a big part of the Buckeye offense and believes spending time on the outside will make him more dangerous.

"It's helped me a lot because I've learned the offense," Marshall said. "I understand everything that's going on. It's made me play a little bit faster."

Faster?
If I'm an opposing defensive coordinator I might just be throwing my hands up now, knowing that there's little that can be done to stop Marshall.

Fresh Faces For Hoops

Few around the OSU men's basketball program were happy with how this season unfolded.

A lower-division finish in a competitive league was not what was expected, and even after a gritty win over VCU in the NCAA Tournament, the Buckeyes were seen a little bit as underachieving. There was little leadership from the seniors, and outside of D'Angelo Russell and Jae'Sean Tate, there really wasn't much to write home about.

But that could change as soon as next season.

If college basketball has taught us anything it's that talented freshmen can inject life into a program. John Calipari is constantly pushing the reset button at Kentucky, and that has worked pretty well. Mike Krzyzewski started three freshmen in

the Blue Devils' run to this year's national title – a bit of a change for him, but something that showed a willingness to adapt to the times.

Thad Matta has never been shy about recruiting one-and-done players, and while it's unknown whether anyone from the latest class will fit that mold, it does appear to be a talented bunch. The class is ranked among the top 10 by most national analysts and could have the right amount of athleticism and basketball savvy to put the Buckeyes back into contention for Big Ten honors. The quintet will join holdovers Tate, Marc Loving, Kam Williams and Keita Bates-Diop to make what should be a pretty formidable offensive team.

The class has a little bit of everything – talented ball-handling guards (JaQuan Lyle, A.J. Harris), deadeye shooting (Austin Grandstaff), size and grit (Mickey Mitchell) and a big man with an eye toward offense (Daniel Giddens).

I had the chance to see Harris a bit during the state basketball tournament, and any concerns I had about him being 5-9 and playing in the Big Ten were gone quickly. He will have to put on some weight to handle the physical play, but his quickness is a genuine asset, he has a high hoops IQ and doesn't mind deferring to his teammates. I haven't seen much of the others, but reports are almost universally positive, so it should be an exciting bunch to follow.

It's too bad that Russell likely won't be a part of it. With him sticking around the Buckeyes would be among a handful of teams that would be contenders to win it all.

Some out there are probably thinking that because Russell hasn't announced yet that maybe there's a chance he's sticking around. A ton of players have already said they were turning pro, but Russell has remained silent. Could he be thinking that maybe there's some unfinished business in Columbus, that being the featured cog on a championship-caliber team would make him even better?

Probably not.
I don't know the reason for Russell's delay, but it would be foolish to think he's sticking around Ohio State – especially with nearly four million good reasons to go.

Old timers will ask "Where's the pride in your school?" and scoff at Russell's decision, whenever he makes it. I've always said that few know what position a kid is in, and if they want to go pro that's completely up to them. I wasn't a fan of Michael Redd going early because at the time he had not developed enough of an outside game to be a force in the NBA. Well, he went out and took jumper after jumper and carved out a pretty good career for himself before injuries ended things a bit early.

If Russell wants to see a reason to go, he can look at recent history and see that Jared Sullinger likely cost himself a ton of cash by sticking around for a second season. Instead of being a likely lottery pick, Sullinger fell to 21. Now, Jared wasn't someone who needed the money, and he seemed to genuinely enjoy school. And that's fine. But not everyone shares that mind-set, and if they want to begin their journey toward compensation they should be able to.

Russell knows this, and it's just a matter of time until the announcement comes. Rather than get on him, fans should wish him well and marvel in the fact that his talents were something special and a major reason the Buckeyes got as far as they did.

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