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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

August 2011

Fickell Takes Center Stage

New Era Begins At Ohio State

 By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

In many ways, it seems as if first-year head coach Luke Fickell's rise to the head of the Ohio State football program was preordained.

The Columbus native rewrote the defensive record book at Ohio State, starting 50 straight games from 1993-96 at nose tackle and making 212 tackles. The toughness he boasted became the stuff of legend among his teammates when he played in Ohio State's 1997 Rose Bowl victory with a torn pectoral muscle.

"Luke was just as gritty and played just as hard as anyone on the field," said Stanley Jackson, who was Ohio State's starting quarterback in 1996. "I'm not surprised (he has become the head coach). I think most guys who played nose guard in the trenches that were a little undersized, had a big heart – whatever they set their minds out to do in life after football, they're usually fairly successful."

After a brief NFL career that was cut short by injury, Fickell returned to the program as a graduate assistant in 1999 before taking a job at Akron, where he coached the defensive line for two seasons.

He then returned to Ohio State in 2002 as special teams coach before working his way up the staff ladder – first becoming linebackers coach in 2004 and adding the co-defensive coordinator position to his title in 2005 alongside coordinator Jim Heacock.

"I don't think there's any question I knew he had this in him," said Heacock, who was hired as defensive line coach in 1996, Fickell's final season as an OSU player. "You always knew he was so passionate about coaching and studied the game and did it the right way. I think you always kind of knew that he was going to be out front somewhere and just needed the opportunity."

In recent years, Fickell's stock has continued to rise. He had overtures from Mid-American Conference schools to take over their programs, and a high-profile job as an assistant at Notre



JOSH WINSLOW

NEW COACH, FAMILIAR FACE – With the exception of a brief NFL career and a couple of seasons at Akron as an assistant, new Ohio State head football coach Luke Fickell has been around the Buckeyes for much of the last 19 years since joining the team as a defensive lineman in 1992.

Dame was even offered at one point.

Instead, Fickell chose to stay at Ohio State and continue to work on some of the best defenses in the country – all the while impressing those around him.

"We all knew that someday Coach Fick would be the coach at Ohio State," senior Tyler Moeller said. "He's an Ohio State guy and he brings a lot to the table."

The only person who might be surprised to find out that Fickell has become the 23rd head coach at his alma mater is the teen-aged version of the man himself.

"Actually I had no intentions of ever being a coach," Fickell said. "It's funny because obviously we hired (new linebackers coach) Mike Vrabel, and since I met him he'd always told me he was going to be a coach. We were college roommates and I'd say, 'Ah, I'm not going to be a coach.' I was going to be a doctor or optometrist or something."

But a funny thing happened on the way to working in a doctor's office – a trip to one.

Fickell suffered a torn ACL in 1997 while playing with the New Orleans Saints, sidelining him for what turned out to be his only professional season. While he was going through rehab, he was hit by the reality of the situation.

"I remember just laying there in New Orleans and thinking, 'I don't know if this football thing is going to make it,'" he said. "It was kind of taken away before I wanted it to be taken away."

From there, life lessons took over. Fickell immediately thought about his father, Pat, who spent nearly two decades loading cars at Conrail.

"It wasn't a bring-your-son-to-work type of job," Fickell said, looking back on the career that hardened his father. That toughness was passed on to Luke, who won three state championships as a wrestler at Columbus DeSales and is still

thought of as one of the best prep grapplers in the history of the state.

"I just remember back to my dad telling me, 'Whatever you do someday, do what you love to do,'" Fickell said. "I saw him get up to go to work and just be miserable going to the railroad every day when I was a kid, just hating it. But he had to do it because that's what he did for our family."

"Those kinds of things hit me as I lay there hurt thinking I'm not going to play football anymore. I reflected back on who had a lot of impact on my life and I kept thinking about the coaches I had. It kind of just started to hit me (that) the next best

thing to playing is coaching."

The rest, as they say, is history. Looking back, it seems like the easy part for Fickell was getting to where he is now. Now comes the true test – how will he do leading a program in which excellence is the only standard?

Making It His Own

Of course, there's no manual for Fickell to follow as he prepares to lead Ohio State into the 2011 season, which starts Sept. 3 in Ohio Stadium vs. Akron. He takes over after the Buckeyes' greatest sustained run of success in three decades – and yet inherits a program that needs to be patched back together in many ways.

After 10 excellent seasons that included one national championship and seven Big Ten rings, predecessor Jim Tressel was shown the door May 30 after a scandal that threatened to bring down the program. Tressel did not report possible NCAA violations to his superiors or the NCAA, a breach of his contract and the rulebook of the collegiate sports oversight body.

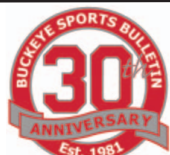
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OPINION

Truth More Important Than Rumor In OSU Case



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Charter Member

Nearly every year since becoming BSB editor, I have used this space in our annual Football Preview issue for predictions and prophecies regarding the upcoming Ohio State season. However, because of what has happened to the program over the past few months and because this fall is so radically different from any other I have experienced during my many years covering the Buckeyes, I feel the need to get something off my chest before we go any further.

Ohio State finally got its day in NCAA court Aug. 12 when athletic director Gene Smith, deposed head coach Jim Tressel and a team of university legal eagles traveled to Indianapolis to meet with the NCAA Committee on Infractions.

Since you are reading this, I will assume you know why the Buckeyes faced the NCAA inquisition, but on the off chance you have been on safari this summer, taken a trip to Mars or take for gospel some of the mud that has been slung over the past six months, here in a nutshell is what has brought us to this point.

Several Ohio State players traded some personal items – championship rings, jerseys, etc. – for tattoos and/or in 2009. Under normal circumstances, that would be no big deal since many young men today seem intent upon decorating their bodies with colorful graffiti. Unfortunately, that sort of bartering is frowned upon by the NCAA. Worse yet, the players' tattoo parlor of choice was under FBI surveillance in a federal drug trafficking case.

In April 2010, Tressel received e-mails regarding the incident, and because he did not forward that information to Smith or share it with the NCAA, many observers deemed him the cheating/cheater who ever cheated and the coach was forced to resign/retire.

Despite the breathless hand-wringing of most of the media covering the incident, that's pretty much it. No more, no less.

One of the players, quarterback Terrelle Pryor, had other issues that ran afoul of the NCAA, and Ohio State was likely going to suspend him for the entire 2011 season. Even before that, however, Pryor had decided to leave the program and make himself available for the NFL via the supplemental draft.

Meanwhile, OSU tailback Dan "Boom" Herron, offensive tackle Mike Adams, wide receiver DeVier Posey and defensive end Solomon Thomas remain and will sit out the first five games of this season, a spate of contests that includes a crucial road game Sept. 17 at Miami (Fla.) and the Big Ten season opener at home Oct. 1 against Michigan State.

One of the winningest coaches in the history of the program has been shamed, the three-year starting quarterback has been run off and three other offensive starters on what could be considered a national championship contender will be unavailable for nearly one-third of the season. Add vacating the entire 2010 season, including a Sugar Bowl victory over Arkansas, as well as an ongoing period of NCAA probation and the penalties seem a lot more than a mere slap on the wrist. Yet, it's not nearly enough for the sanctimonious lot that predicted Draconian penalties and now want their pound of flesh as vindication.

They want nothing less than bowl bans and scholarship reductions. Never mind the discretions committed by Tressel and his players do not rise to the level of that type of punishment. Never mind that no school facing the allegations Ohio State is facing has ever been levied a postseason ban or a reduc-

tion in scholarship numbers. Nevertheless, the poison-penned critics and those of their ilk live in their own reality, one where they are king and they make the rules. In their kingdoms, nothing less than bringing the Ohio State football program to its knees is good enough.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK Mark Rea

This isn't anything new, of course. Others have tried to bring down the program. Thankfully, it happens only about once every 50 years.

One of the first attempts came in 1901. During a 6-5 home victory over Western Reserve, OSU star performer John Sigrest suffered a serious neck injury and died two days later in a Columbus hospital.

In the wake of the tragedy – Sigrest is the only player ever to die from injuries sustained during an Ohio State football game – a large portion of the faculty and student body favored abolishing football at the university. It wasn't until Sigrest's brother, Charles, who was the team's right tackle, strongly defended the game and urged the sport be continued that university officials relented and voted to continue fielding a football team.

Sixty years later, Alumni Association secretary Jack Fullen suggested Ohio State give up any pretense of amateurism, hire a professional team and control it under a bureau of football. He also made no bones about his opinion that Woody Hayes was borderline insane and was not to be entrusted with the molding of young men.

That notion may seem ridiculous now, but at the time Fullen had more than his share of supporters. Following the 1961 season, when Ohio State could have gone to the Rose Bowl and perhaps won a consensus national championship, the university's 44-member Faculty Council voted to deny the Buckeyes their trip to Pasadena under the guise that athletics was overtaking academics on the campus.

The university's Board of Trustees – as feckless then as it is today – refused to overturn the Faculty Council's vote, but there was such a huge public uproar that no Rose Bowl invitation extended to the Buckeyes has ever been turned down since. It is also worth noting that after their 1961 showdown, Fullen lasted only six more years on campus while Hayes coached another 17 seasons.

Fast-forward to today and the "cause" has been joined by several different factions. Some are disgruntled, some are misguided and some are simply trying to cover their own backsides. The foundation for all of the venom, however, seems to have been championed mostly by the self-serving Entertainment and Sports Programming Network of Bristol, Conn.

It is anyone's guess why a behemoth such as ESPN – a company whose entire being is inexorably married to big-time sports – would want to take down one of college football's elite programs and thereby diminish what must be one of the network's biggest moneymakers.

Supposition has been offered that ESPN is simply doing what every other big business entity tries to do – crush the competition, which in this particular case is the Big Ten Network. Unfortunately when you are in the news business, trying to crush the competition often means you must manufacture

stories, rely upon questionable information provided by less-than-reliable sources and even massage the truth to keep the train moving in the direction you want it to move.

Less than a week before Ohio State was to meet with the NCAA's Committee on Infractions, ESPN curiously provided a regurgitation of old news on its "Outside the Lines" program. Then, less than 72 hours before OSU was to meet with the NCAA, the network fired one final salvo when college football writer Pat Forde reported that according to multiple sources, the NCAA had notified Ohio State by letter that it was still investigating other issues involving the football program and the result could be a second notice of allegations and a second trip through the NCAA justice system.

Forde alluded to allegations against Pryor as well as a Columbus Dispatch report that scrutinized dozens of automobile sales to OSU athletes and family members from a pair of Columbus-area dealerships.

It apparently didn't matter that Pryor was long gone and that the "Great Car Scam" had pretty much been debunked by no less an authority than the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles. Like the playground bully or jilted lover, ESPN continually screams, "This isn't over until we say it's over!"

Why Ohio State? Why the sheer volume of vitriol directed at one particular program? That is anyone's guess. Imagine for a moment that Troy Smith's family had been given money and housing worth six figures during the Heisman-winning quarterback's college career and then the school stonewalled the NCAA investigation for years. Imagine if during his recruitment Pryor's father had shopped the quarterback's services for \$180,000. Imagine if the Buckeyes had been caught paying a couple of guys nearly \$30,000 for "recruiting services." Imagine how ESPN would have covered those scandals, and then compare it with how the network has actually covered the investigations involving USC, Auburn and Oregon.

In hindsight, we really shouldn't be surprised. ESPN's dogged determination to keep this story going is rivaled only by the way the Worldwide Leader backed up its truck of righteous indignation in 2003 during the Maurice Claret ordeal. I can only surmise that somewhere along the line Tressel crossed swords with the higher-ups in Bristol and they swore vengeance.

Unfortunately, that vengeance was not satisfied by Tressel's departure. With its 24-7 presence and constant drumbeat that the Ohio State football program deserves severe punishment or the NCAA is nothing more than a paper tiger, ESPN long ago stripped itself of any pretense of impartiality.

In the end, it all comes down to a handful of kids being kids – knowing right from wrong but choosing the wrong path anyway. When all is finally said and done, the Ohio State football program will survive. It will be bloodied but it will survive.

But what of those who have made it their own personal crusade to hinder that survival? Expect no embarrassment or pensive introspection when the NCAA decides the punishment already suggested by Ohio State indeed fits the crime. Like Don Quixote, another tilter at windmills, said, "I perceive everything I say as absolutely true, and deficient in nothing whatever, and paint it all in my mind exactly as I want it to be."

Fortunately for the rest of us, in this particular case, reality is about to trump perception.

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Ohio State Faces NCAA's Music, Waits For Ruling

By MATTHEW HAGER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Months of scandal resulted in a hearing that lasted approximately four hours.

Now the waiting game begins.

Two major violations that resulted in the resignation/retirement of Ohio State football head coach Jim Tressel and the departure of quarterback Terrelle Pryor for the NFL were addressed in an Aug. 12 meeting between Ohio State representatives, Tressel and the NCAA Committee on Infractions at an Indianapolis hotel.

The hearing began at 8:30 a.m. in the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown's Indiana ballroom and ended near lunchtime. Ohio State president Dr. E. Gordon Gee, athletic director Gene Smith and Tressel each released written statements following the meeting, and Smith was the lone person to meet with the media, reading his statement in the media workroom following the hearing.

Smith's statement contained the biggest piece of news of the day, the announcement that Ohio State would forfeit the university's share of its Big Ten payment for having played in the Sugar Bowl, a total of \$338,811. That decision was added to OSU's self-sanctions that were unveiled July 8. Those punishments included vacating the entire 2010 season, including the shared Big Ten title and Sugar Bowl victory over Arkansas, and putting the football program on two years of probation.

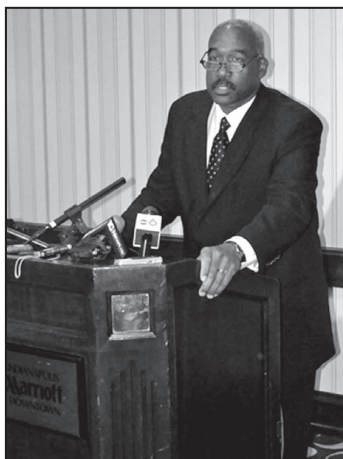
The Committee on Infractions could impose additional penalties when its final report is released, a process that will reportedly take between eight and 12 weeks.

Smith did not take questions after reading his statement but went off script in saying that forfeiting the bowl money made sense.

"Since we had student-athletes play in that game and we ultimately vacated that game, it made sense that we would forfeit the dollars or ... vacate the enrichment that we ultimately realized from that game," said Smith, who added that he came up with the idea while speaking with Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany at a meeting of Big Ten and Pac-12 athletic directors the week before in California.

Smith's statement also addressed an Aug. 10 report by ESPN college football writer Pat Forde that said the NCAA notified Ohio State by letter that it is still investigating issues involving the football program other than the ones that caused the Committee on Infractions hearing.

Ohio State spokesman Jim Lynch denied Forde's report, saying the university had not received any additional allegations from the NCAA. Following the Aug. 12 hearing, Ohio State released its last communication from



MATTHEW HAGER

GIVING AN UPDATE – Athletic director Gene Smith was the only Ohio State representative to speak with the media Aug. 12 after university officials and former head football coach Jim Tressel met with the NCAA Committee on Infractions in a downtown Indianapolis hotel.

the NCAA, a letter sent Aug. 3 from infractions committee director Shepard Cooper to Gee that was simply a copy of the NCAA's case record.

"At no point in time did we receive – our president or I or anyone at our institution – receive a notice from the NCAA on additional allegations," Smith said, again going off the script of his written statement. "We're wrapping up some of the issues that have been raised months ago."

Ohio State did release a copy of a letter NCAA director of enforcement Stephanie J. Hannah sent to Cooper – and copied to Tressel's lawyer and a consulting firm helping OSU – on July 14. The letter detailed a conversation the enforcement staff had with Ohio State earlier that week in which it was discussed that the investigation into the OSU program was still open but that the evidence did not warrant pushing back the Aug. 12 hearing.

"At this point in the inquiry, the available evidence does not warrant additional allegations; however, the investigation remains open," Hannah wrote.

In addition, Hannah's letter notes that OSU has been warned that further proven allegations could result in a charge of failure to monitor or lack of institutional control.

The letters, as well as many other documents related to the scandal, can be found online in the Aug. 16 electronic edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin.

Tressel did not speak to reporters following the meeting, briskly walking through the hotel's lobby and into an elevator without saying a word. His statement was also the shortest of the three.

It read, "I had an open and constructive exchange with the Committee on Infractions. They were well-prepared and will now go about their work in deliberations. Again, I would like to apologize to Buckeye Nation, most especially to the players, staff and fans who remain so dear to me. I have no further statement at this time."

Finally, Gee's statement said the committee treated the OSU delegation fairly and gave the university ample time to share its perspective.

"Throughout, we have been determined to do what is right in responding to the information we discovered," the president's statement read. "As we move forward, I am committed to ensuring that The Ohio State University is a model for other colleges and universities. Our institution expects nothing less."

In addition to Tressel, Gee and Smith, Ohio State was represented by compliance director Doug Archie and new head football coach Luke Fickell, among others. The OSU delegation faced the 10-person committee that included attorneys, college conference officials and university officials from across the country.

The committee will ultimately decide the punishments Ohio State will receive for the two major violations.

The first stems from several members of the 2010 Ohio State football team who received improper benefits – free tattoos and/or money in exchange for memorabilia – from Edward Rife, the owner of a Columbus tattoo parlor. The second violation comes from the fact that Tressel did not inform Ohio State or the NCAA about his knowledge of the situation when he first learned of it in April 2010.

Five players were suspended for the first five games of the season stemming from the allegations – Pryor, running back Dan "Boom" Herron, wide receiver DeVier Posey, offensive tackle Mike Adams and defensive end Solomon Thomas. A sixth, reserve linebacker Jordan Whiting, was suspended for one game, while a seventh left the team after the 2009 season and thus faced no on-field punishment while at OSU.

Those players were included in the original Notice of Allegations that Ohio State received in April, but another player was included on an amended list the university responded to in July. That player – who sources tell BSB is linebacker Dorian Bell – received tattoo discounts and must appear before an NCAA reinstatement committee. Bell faced a season-long suspension from OSU and transferred to Duquesne.

Tressel lost his job after admitting he did not tell university officials about potential NCAA violations committed by two of his players. In addition, Tressel signed a compliance form declaring he knew of no potential NCAA violations regarding his program and then played a number of players he knew were likely ineligible. He was initially suspended for two games and fined by the university. His suspension was later extended to five games before Tressel ultimately resigned on May 30.

Agreement On Penalties

The OSU hearing with the Committee on Infractions lasted only four hours –

extremely short in comparison to other such hearings – but that was not entirely unexpected.

The first hint that the meeting might not be tumultuous came July 22, one day shy of seven months after the university announced the initial player suspensions. On that day, the NCAA enforcement staff declared in a 15-page letter that it had essentially agreed with Ohio State and Tressel on the facts of the case. Ohio State had released its response to the NCAA's Notice of Allegations on July 8.

The July 22 letter from the NCAA stated that the parties were "in substantial agreement as to the facts of both allegations and that those facts constitute violations of NCAA legislation. There are no remaining issues regarding either allegation."

The hearing with the COI went on as scheduled, however, because the NCAA said "the enforcement staff believed that a hearing was appropriate, rather than a summary disposition report, due to the nature of unethical conduct involving the head football coach."

The most important news stemming from the July 22 letter was that the NCAA did not hit Ohio State with a failure to monitor charge. The governing body did not feel it was appropriate because OSU adequately educated the players on the legalities of selling their bowl gifts and team equipment.

Although university officials did not specifically inform the players until 2009 that they were barred from selling their school memorabilia – such as the Gold Pants charms awarded for wins over Michigan – the NCAA enforcement staff did not believe that such an omission rose to the level of failure to monitor.

Ohio State essentially pleaded guilty to the two major NCAA violations it had been accused of in its formal response to the NCAA on July 8. The university announced its self-punishments at that time.

"We are fully cooperating with the NCAA and we look forward to working together to bring a resolution to these current matters," Smith said. "Throughout the entire process since we discovered possible infractions, Ohio State has consistently acted to investigate any allegation, self-report its findings to the NCAA, communicate transparently about its findings, and take necessary remediation steps."

Ohio State's letter explained why it felt the self-punishments were enough. In a section headlined "Mitigating Circumstances," the university points out that it self-reported the violations involving "a very successful coach in a very popular sport in a very short period of time" and that it has been working cooperatively with the NCAA in the matter.

Additionally, the response notes that institutional responsibility is limited, that Tressel did not commit the initial violation, that tattoo parlor owner Rife was not a booster or donor to the school, that the school was not charged with failure to monitor or lack of institutional control and that the university has imposed significant penalties, including "seeking and accepting the resignation of Tressel," upon itself.

Ohio State also noted in its response that it could be subject to repeat violator punishment after a 2006 investigation into men's basketball recruiting, but the university argued it should not be subject to such penalties because of the dissimilar nature of the two situations.

Tressel bore the brunt of the blame in



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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

the OSU response.

"The institution is embarrassed by the actions of Tressel in this matter," the letter read. "The university sufficiently educated him (and all coaching staff members) pertaining to a coach's responsibility under NCAA legislation to report information concerning potential violations of NCAA legislation and the means for this to occur."

Tressel also released his own statement July 8, his first public comment since his resignation.

"I take full responsibility for my mistakes that have led to the ongoing NCAA inquiry and to scrutiny and criticism of the football program," he said. "I am grateful for this opportunity to retire from the university that I so deeply respect and that I will continue to support."

Tressel was required to release his own formal response to the NCAA allegations that he did not report his knowledge of possible violations committed by his players when alerted in a string of e-mails in the spring of 2010 by Columbus-area lawyer Christopher Cicero.

Tressel listed the same reasons for his actions as he did when an original suspension and fine for the head coach were announced in March – that he feared for the safety of the student-athletes, that he did not want to interrupt a federal investigation into Rife's drug trafficking activities and that he respected the confidentiality requested at one point by Cicero.

However, not reporting the e-mails to Smith, the athletics department compliance officer or anyone else at the school was a violation of his contract and NCAA bylaw 10.1. In Tressel's response, it was noted the coach "acknowledged the serious mistake he made in not reporting information concerning potential violations of NCAA legislation" and "should have taken the matter to officials at Ohio State."

Also announced July 8 was the agreement between Ohio State and Tressel that turned the 58-year-old's resignation into a retirement. The university noted the agreement resolved any issues arising out of his employment with the school, and it removed the \$250,000 fine Tressel was facing before his resignation.

Changes On The Way

In addition to the self-sanctions

announced July 8, the university also discussed several changes it will implement in hopes of preventing a similar scandal from happening in the future. Ohio State will keep some apparel and prohibit the purchase of other memorabilia that previously was handed out at the conclusion of each season until the end of each player's career, and the school will require proof of possession for previously disbursed items.

Change is also coming to Ohio State's compliance office. The full-time staff will be increased from six members to eight, and a compliance staffer will accompany the football team on all road trips.

Ohio State's formal response to the NCAA also stated the university will continue its efforts to educate both student-athletes and the local business community about avoiding illegal benefits players receive through preferential treatment. Those efforts began in the fall of 2009, after the time in which a number of the OSU violations originally occurred.

In the letter to the NCAA, it was noted that a few of the players who sold memorabilia did not know that such actions were violations of NCAA rules.

"Prior to 2009, the institution verbally discussed extra benefits and awards generally at ... student-athlete meetings but did not explicitly state that it was impermissible for student-athletes to sell athletic awards or institutionally-issued apparel," the letter read. "Beginning in the fall of 2009, the (Athletic Compliance Office) enhanced its educational efforts in the areas of preferential treatment and extra benefits."

The university's board of trustees has announced an inquiry into whether the compliance office should be moved out of the athletic department and into its office of legal affairs. In addition, Smith has talked about how compliance will be more active when it comes to monitoring the car deals of high-profile athletes and will keep a closer eye on the pass lists for games, both of which were questioned in media reports in June.

"Consistent with the direction set by our board of trustees, we are taking a very hard look on our own at all aspects of our athletic programs to identify and implement improvements designed to ensure that we uphold the highest ideals of honor and integrity," Smith said.

The board also reviewed the university's compliance protocol – including athletics, research and the medical center – in a July 22 meeting. With the help of outside consultants, the board plans to take inventory of its current practices and gather outside examples of alternative methods to be presented to trustees for discussion no later than Nov. 15.

The board plans to move to a more centralized compliance model to be implemented by Jan. 1.

The board previously reviewed the athletic compliance department's handling of the tattoos and memorabilia scandal and found no further issues while concluding the department's "process and decision-making were fundamentally sound," board member Robert H. Schottenstein said.

Much Ado About Nothing

Ohio State received some good news when all but one of the players named in a June 6 Sports Illustrated cover story released shortly after Tressel announced his resignation had been cleared of allegations of being involved in the trade of items and/or autographs for cash and discounted tattoos.

Bell is believed to be the player who was not cleared.

In another report, WBNS-TV of Columbus dropped a potential bombshell on July 22 when it reported Tressel told university officials of his knowledge of possible violations in December during the initial investigation of the players rather than January, as previously reported by the university, admitted by Tressel and accepted by the NCAA.

That report was quickly denied by the school in a statement that read, "The

University's filings to the NCAA; Coach Tressel's formal, written response to the NCAA's Notice of Allegations on July 8; and the NCAA's own Case Summary received (July 21) all make clear that when Coach Tressel was interviewed by a number of people within the institution on Dec. 9 and Dec. 16, he did not share his knowledge about the NCAA violation.

"As we have previously stated to the public and the NCAA in our filings, Coach Tressel only sought advice from the University in January 2011 – after the university had discovered e-mails that showed that he had knowledge of the matter and in contradiction of his statements to the university the previous December. That sequence of events is summarized clearly by the NCAA in its Case Summary.

"The university categorically denies anything to the contrary, and such allegations are inconsistent with the conclusions of the NCAA and the university.

"Any attempt to characterize events differently would be unnecessarily damaging, inaccurate and entirely misleading."

Schottenstein also voiced his displeasure that the story aired at all after the July 22 board meeting.

"The NCAA's Case Summary unequivocally agreed with our assessment that we had no prior knowledge," Schottenstein said. "I categorically deny it. I think it's wrong, I think it defames Ohio State University and the individuals who are mentioned, and I deeply regret that the story has come out because I just do not believe that it's true."

BSB staff writers Marcus Hartman and Jeff Svoboda contributed to this report.

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COVER STORY

Fickell Hits Ground Running After Tressel's Departure

Continued From Page 1

Soon after Tressel's departure, quarterback Terrelle Pryor – one of the players named in the original scandal that included selling OSU memorabilia and receiving discounted tattoos – left amid further NCAA investigations and a media frenzy that threatened to swallow the entire program.

Once everything subsided, Fickell was left overseeing a program without its beloved head coach and its face-of-the-program quarterback as well as the prospect of beginning the season with three other offensive stars suspended for five games because of the scandal.

On top of it all, the new head coach must deal with the uncertainty that he might not get more than one year at the helm. Though Fickell's interim tag officially has been removed by the university, the school still plans to conduct a full coaching search at the end of the season and there is no guarantee he will receive the job.

The task might have seemed overwhelming at first, but Fickell said that has actually helped him get to work.

"Everything happened pretty fast," he said. "The greatest thing I guess I could say is I had no time to sit and think. I had no time to feel sorry of any sort, to have a whole lot of emotion. The situation arose and obviously I had to stand up.

"I think that's what's been best for me – not to have the ability to sit down and think about the situation that's ahead but hit the ground running, do what I know how to do

best, and that's compete and obviously learn along the way. It has been exciting and challenging, but I think that's what you get into this field for."

Fickell said he has talked to numerous people and coaches for advice since taking over and the overwhelming sentiment has been simple – be yourself.

Through the practices open to media, that's exactly what Fickell has done. A noticeable increase in practice intensity was observed from the opening day of training camp. Team meetings have been made shorter with more teaching done visually and on the field.

The kick scrimmage, which was staged once each spring and fall under Tressel, was reduced in scope while more emphasis was placed on pressure-packed live reps. The traditional scoring system for the jersey scrimmage, the all-important live battle each camp between the offense and defense that determines who gets to wear the coveted scarlet jerseys all season, was done away with for a grading system based on turnovers and toughness.

Fickell has been more open to talking to the media than Tressel, at the same time remaining loath to talk about individual players or any distractions the team might be facing. A new team slogan appearing on shirts and promotional items – "The Men of Action" – comes from an inspirational book Tressel had the team read during the spring at Fickell's urging.

"He's doing a great job," Heacock said. "I know all of the assistants and everybody's



MATTHEW HAGER

OFF ON RIGHT FOOT – New Ohio State head football coach Luke Fickell has received good reviews from his players and assistant coaches.

together and the team's together. I think he's done a good job of keeping everything solid and together in there. I think the players really respect him and he's a players' coach."

Junior Storm Klein, who spent the past two seasons under Fickell's tutelage of the linebackers, confirmed that fact.

"He's the right guy for the job, so we're ready to go," Klein said. "He'll do anything to win and he's always calm, cool and collected. He's a great coach and an intense guy. He's a fireball, man, but he's got us going."

Fickell has admitted it hasn't been the easiest transition when it comes to moving

from position coach to head man. Instead of being in charge of putting a small group of players through the paces of a two-hour workout, Fickell has had to come up with an overall organizational plan for the entire 104 players in camp.

According to Mark Dantonio, Ohio State's defensive coordinator from 2001-03 who is now the coach at Michigan State, that's one of the biggest adjustments a coach can make.

"The initial thing I had to learn was that I was no longer a defensive coordinator," Dantonio said. "I have to be responsible for every aspect of the football program from

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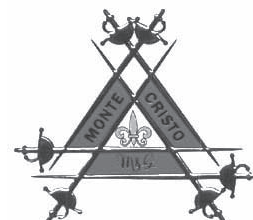
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COVER STORY

what kind of socks we're wearing to meeting with the alumni. I always felt like I had a to-do list when I come in and I still do. These are the things I want to get done today.

"The problem is I'm on 15 other peoples' to-do lists, so you get sidetracked. You get pulled out of a defensive meeting and you're asked to make decisions on discipline. The buck stops with you, so you have a much bigger scope of things you have to deal with."

Getting used to those decisions was going to take time, but Fickell was doing his best to stay in the moment. However, there have finally been moments in which he realized the scope of the situation as well. One of those came Aug. 20 when he oversaw the team's jersey scrimmage in Ohio Stadium.

"It's a little bit real now," Fickell said. "I've had a couple of months here to think about it and to see it, but it was a big day for me. I think the first time being in the 'Shoe and actually coaching in a little bit of a different light, that was maybe one of the first real times that I've kind of looked around and it made me realize the situation for a split-second."

'A Beautiful Challenge'

Fickell will not be alone as he tries to deliver a successful season in the wake of controversy.

Ohio State boasts a senior class of leaders of varying scope. Some, such as center Michael Brewster, are going into the fourth year of starting. Others, such as quarterback Joe Bauserman, are moving into major roles for the first time. Still others are somewhere in between, but all want to put the football program back in a positive light.

The No. 1 way to do that, they say, is to win.

"It's not all about us," Brewster said. "I think the big thing is we want to help the program move forward and leave it better than we found it. It's going to be a struggle but we feel like a good season can really do that. It's going to be a beautiful challenge."

Brewster's words were emblematic of a determination to overcome the scandal and the media firestorm that seemed to envelop the team early in the summer.

For those seniors who were part of the scandal – running back Dan "Boom" Herron, receiver DeVier Posey, tackle Mike Adams and defensive end Solomon Thomas – they had to listen to claims that their actions helped to bring down a proud regime.

Others who had no role in the situation watched as the program was dragged through the mud nationally, often by accusations that were proved to be baseless. It's fair to say it did not sit well.

"This is a big year for us," Moeller said. "This is going to define us for a couple of years to come. We have a little more fire under ourselves and – I don't want to say pressure – but we're kind of pissed off. We want to make a statement out there this year."

To accomplish that, the team put in some of its hardest work during the offseason. Most admitted the summer months included more work than any they have seen since arriving at Ohio State and the uncertainty around the program served as an inspiration.

"We've really rallied around each other, kind of used it as fuel to the fire," Brewster said. "I feel like people think we feel sorry for ourselves or that we're in confusion or don't know what to do, but if anything we know exactly what to do. We had a great summer."

"If someone trained harder than us this summer I'd like to meet them because I don't think that would be possible."

Fickell likes that his charges are so fired up, but the man of action himself was also sure to point out that talk doesn't always amount to much. This edition of the Ohio State football team will have to prove itself on the field to its coach.

"Come Sept. 3, we want to see what they can really do," Fickell said. "Can you say they're hungry, can you say they're inspired? Yes. But when another adversity hits, that's when you see what your team is really made of. I feel good about where they are. I feel good about where their minds are, where their effort and energy levels are, but we're not crowning anything until we actually see it."

Still, that's not going to stop Brewster from being full of his trademark confidence.

"I feel like we can do something pretty special this year by overcoming what's happened," he said. "It's going to be a really nice opportunity. Maybe this will be a really nice way to send us out."

Feeling Disrespected

After a run of six straight Big Ten championships – the last of which was vacated by the school – the Buckeyes face the odd situation of entering the season as neither league favorites nor national title contenders.

The Associated Press has the Buckeyes ranked 18th in its preseason poll, the team's lowest opening rank since beginning 2001 at No. 22.

Appropriately, that was the last time OSU went into a campaign with a new face calling the shots on the sideline. But while that team was still pulling itself out of a two-year slide, this one believes its championship pedigree

and talented roster will allow it to contend again.

"As a team, we know how we can play," junior tight end Jake Stoneburner said. "We feel we're going to be one of the best teams. The voters might not agree with that, but I guess we're just going to have to prove them wrong."

"That's kind of our mind-set during camp – 'It's just us.' We're the only people who believe how good we're going to be, so we're just going to have to show people."

Even Fickell, who has done his best to make it clear he and his team should think little of any opinions coming from outside the Woody Hayes Athletic Center and the Hyatt Place hotel the team has stayed in during camp, admitted the lack of national respect can be used to the team's advantage.

"You can ask me a million times – I'd much rather be criticized than be praised," he said. "I don't handle praise very well. I don't like it. I would rather have people saying negative things and doubting you because I think that's a motivation."

But the fact of the matter is Ohio State is Ohio State. Even if the national poll voters aren't expecting as much, the fan base from Ashtabula to Athens and Toledo to Thornville wants big things, first-year coach or not.

Fickell – born and bred in Columbus and a part of the Buckeye program for almost half of his 38 years – has made it clear he expects nothing less.

"I think this team has a chance," he said. "We have a lot of things to prove, though. We'll let our actions speak for us. That doesn't mean we change what our expectations are. Again, we feel like they'll live up to what we expect of them. Now they have to do it."

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE OVERVIEW

Heacock Is Looking For Leaders On Defense

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

Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Heacock thinks about more than numbers when he looks at replacing seven starters from a 2010 unit that finished in the top eight in the nation in six major statistical categories.

Heacock is not so much concerned with the 396 tackles, 43 tackles for loss and 17½ sacks that went out the door after a Sugar Bowl victory in January.

The coach's No. 1 worry heading into this season is finding players who will lead the defensive unit as linemen Cameron Heyward and Dexter Larimore, linebackers Brian Rolle and Ross Homan, cornerbacks Chimdi Chekwa and Devon Torrence and safety Jermale Hines did last year when the Buckeyes led the Big Ten in rushing defense, passing defense, turnover margin, total defense and scoring defense.

So while fans were penciling in another top-notch unit, Heacock was sweating more than just the late-summer central Ohio heat as the Buckeyes went through preseason camp.

"We've got a little more work to do than we usually do," he said Aug. 21 during Ohio State's annual Photo Day. "We lost seven guys and they were a unique group from the standpoint of the character of them. If you take those seven guys out of there that's a little bit of personality (drain). Each one of

them was a little different but they were a neat group. I really enjoyed coaching those guys."

Chekwa, Heyward, Hines, Homan and Rolle were each drafted by NFL teams in April while Larimore and Torrence joined them in fighting for jobs during training camp after signing free-agent deals. But talent is not usually an issue when it comes to molding effective defenses at Ohio State.

"If we do a good job recruiting, you're going to have players, but it's a matter of getting some leadership," Heacock said. "That's going to be crucial this year. You don't have Cam out there to get them in the huddle and say, 'Let's go.' Jermale was always a guy who stepped forward when it got tough. Brian Rolle was Brian Rolle. Homan never said much, but if he did, they'd listen. We're going to need somebody to step up and take over those roles."

On the bright side, the new lineup figures to have a fair amount of age considering how many new starters it will contain.

Only two projected new starters – sophomore defensive lineman Johnathan Hankins and redshirt freshman cornerback Bradley Roby – have less than three seasons of experience in the program. Safety C.J. Barnett is a third-year sophomore, linebacker Storm Klein is a true junior and cornerback Travis Howard, defensive lineman Garrett Goebel and linebacker Etienne Sabino are all fourth-year juniors.

Of course, Heacock is looking for his

returning starters to take charge. That group includes two seniors – linebacker Andrew Sweat and Leo end Nathan Williams – and a pair of juniors in lineman John Simon and safety Orhian Johnson.

"You would assume it would be the guys who have played quite a bit," Heacock said when asked which players will play leadership roles. "Sweat is a natural. Unfortunately he is a guy who hasn't talked a lot so it's a little different for him, but he's going to have to step up. Nate Williams has been around long enough that he's got to step up. John Simon is a young guy who seems to enjoy the leadership role. He might be a natural leader for you."

"To be honest with you, I really don't know yet. That's what we're waiting to see. I hope it hurries."

None of the returning starters was surprised to hear such expectations from their coach.

They are just as eager to prove to him they can lead as they are to show the outside world that despite the NCAA problems that plagued the program throughout the offseason, they are still able to play at the same high level fans have grown accustomed to over the past six years.

"Every year a senior leaves you ask the juniors to step it up, so it's expected that a coach would come up to me and ask me to step up," Williams said. "I think everyone has a little more weight on their shoulders to get the job done this year. Everyone needs to cut loose when they're out there and know that if they do that then we'll do whatever it

takes to get the job done and make our goals for the end of the season."

Strong Up Front, Fresh In Back

How the base defense winds up working depends on how the staff utilizes some unique talents it finds at its disposal.

The staff would like to see the 270-pound Simon evolve into a versatile end with the speed to beat tackles on the outside as a pass rusher and the strength to hold the point of attack against the run.

They hope Hankins, a 335-pound dancing bear, can wreak similar havoc inside, and they want both players to be able to switch roles from snap to snap if necessary.

If those two can do that, Goebel will be asked to tie up blockers inside to give Klein and Sweat room to operate at the second level.

The third member of the linebacker corps is supposed to be Sabino, a junior who sat out last season to further develop his skills and knowledge of the game. He suffered a setback when he broke a bone in his left hand Aug. 20 but he is expected to be ready to go for the season opener.

"He didn't play last year because of the redshirt, and anytime you sit out a year like that you put your career on hold for a while," Heacock said. "He's getting back into it and he's been playing pretty well. He's got to continue to improve for us to be really good."

Heacock was eager to see Klein start to accumulate snaps as well after the former four-star recruit missed much of last season and spring practice with injuries.

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: DEFENSIVE OVERVIEW



JOSH WINSLOW

ONE MORE TIME – Senior Tyler Moeller (26), seen here with mother Amy (right), is back for a sixth season and will again man Ohio State's Star position, better known as the nickel back.

"So many of these guys just need reps," Heacock said. "That's the thing in a lot of cases where we are lacking. Storm was hurt all last year and then he didn't play much in the spring. This is as many reps as he has had since he's been here, so we have to have a good week and hopefully get those guys polished up in their roles. We're still a ways away from where we need to be."

Sweat looks primed for a huge year back at his more natural position of weakside (Will) linebacker after he was a starter at the strongside (Sam) spot Sabino is expected to fill this season.

"I think the coaches implement a great scheme," Sweat said after the defense stuffed most of the offense's attempts to run the ball in the annual fall camp jersey scrimmage. "We play downhill. There were a couple of runs that squirted out, but we played a couple of different shifts with the D-line and it just squirted through."

He gave credit to new linebackers coach Mike Vrabel for helping his group grow.

"Coach Vrabel is doing a great job coaching the linebackers," Sweat said. "We've learned a lot from him, and the D-line is eating up blocks so we can flow."

Overall, Williams has liked what he has seen from the entire front seven.

"We've improved over the last two weeks and done a great job of staying healthy on the front line," he said Aug. 21. "The injury to Etienne is unfortunate, but I think he's going to be able to play through it."

"I think the maturation is important since we lost seven starters and being that everyone says we're not going to do this and that. We'll see when everyone puts the pads and helmets on and it's game day, we'll see what everyone says after they see us play."

Nicked Up? Try The Nickel

Of course, calling the Buckeyes' base defense a 4-3 alignment has bordered on incorrect in the past few years, and that could be the case again this year.

Although the number of teams running full-out spread offenses on the schedule has declined, the best alignment Ohio State can put together this season likely includes Tyler Moeller, the sixth-year senior who is slated to play the nickel back position, also known as the Star.

Pound-for-pound, the 6-0, 210-pound Moeller is one of the best players on the team. He possesses an uncanny knack for making plays and a motor that runs wide open at all times.

"Tyler is Tyler," safeties coach and co-

defensive coordinator Paul Haynes said. "He's going to fly around and give 110 percent. He's going to give great effort and I think the whole team thrives from that, not just the defense. He's going to give you what he's got and that's what he's been doing."

The coach confirmed Moeller is the type of player the defense could be built around.

"But that's what we stress from everyone," Haynes said. "I think it's natural to him to give 110 percent, and we need him to make sure that wears off on everybody else. Tyler just being out there giving that effort will do that."

Now the coaches just have to worry about how to keep Moeller healthy after he missed more than half of last season with a torn pectoral muscle, although their second option at the Star position is not too shabby.

That would be sophomore Christian Bryant, who is also a backup safety.

The 5-9 dynamo from Cleveland Glenville has an aggressive approach and finds his way to the ball with great frequency.

"When I talk about Christian I talk about a football player," Haynes said. "I think he's just a raw, instinctive football player, kind of like Jermale. He has a knack for the ball, has a knack to get to the ball. We've just got

to make sure he continues to play low and becomes a student of the game."

The rest of the secondary is relatively new but promising.

Howard has been waiting in the wings for three years for his time to be a starter, and that is at hand.

His fellow 2008 signees pegged him a sleeper of the nation's fourth-ranked recruiting class, but the Miami Dr. Krop product was unable to prove them right his first two seasons in Columbus as he battled nagging shoulder injuries.

With those finally behind him last season, Howard eventually worked his way into a regular role as the team's third cornerback. His impact included an interception return for a touchdown against Penn State and a pick that short-circuited a Michigan possession while the game was still in doubt.

Howard is confident in himself and his fellow new starter, Roby, who was one of the preseason surprises as he used his long arms and nose for the ball to beat out Dominic Clarke for the starting role.

"I always tell people that Ohio State recruits the best athletes in the country," Howard said. "When someone leaves or someone goes down, we have guys to step up. I feel like this defense is great. We've got good chemistry. We play together. We've been here for a while and we've seen the guys who did it before us. We take after what they did. We're going to carry on the legacy here and the tradition at Ohio State."

At safety, Barnett stepped into the starting lineup on the first day of camp and showed no ill effects of a knee injury that wiped out the last 11 games of the 2010 regular season for him. A heady player with good instincts, he was throwing his 190 pounds at ball carriers and wide receivers even before the practices had officially become full-go in August.

Next to him on the last line of defense, Johnson turned in a positive offseason after looking shaky at times when he took over after Barnett went down last season.

"Definitely there were ups and downs since it was my first time getting a chance to start a couple of games and getting out there on the field for an extended period of time," Johnson said of last season. "It was a learning experience. I tried to grow from each and every one, be it positive or negative, and just try to fix the negatives."

Johnson has the size and speed to cover a lot of ground, but he admitted he wants to be more of a playmaker this season.

"I definitely want to feel more comfortable coming into the box, work more on my ball skills, understand routes and understand the game a lot more," he said.

Safety also looks deep with Bryant and sophomore Corey Brown having worked their way up to the second team after a fierce battle with junior Zach Domicone and sophomore Jamie Wood.

"I feel like with this defense the coaches are going to put the best 11 on the field," Johnson said. "Those guys have all been working hard, and the safety room is probably the best it's been since I've been in there as a whole just because of the fact we're a smarter group this year. We actually understand the defense, understand the game, and I feel like the sky is the limit for us."

Expect Competition

While there were spirited battles throughout camp, Haynes said they might not be over before the team opens the season Sept. 3 at home against Akron.

"We evaluate it every single day," he said. "The film doesn't lie. We keep evaluating it. The competition is the best thing to me. It makes both of those guys, whatever spot they're in, better because they know the guys behind them can play."

"It could be a week-to-week thing as to who performs the best. The bottom line is production. We've got to get production from those guys."

While expectations are high within the Ohio State fan base for its defense to be dominant again, the players feel like they are being short-changed by the outside world.

"You get that from all the stuff that goes on, but we don't even pay attention," Williams said. "Everyone who pays attention to it are haters. We look to do our thing. It's a year-in and year-out tradition here at Ohio State to win games, and that's what we're going to do."

"Last year we lost one, which was unfortunate, but this year we're going to look to improve that record and the only way to improve it is to go undefeated. We're just going to win games and try to come out and knock someone's head off as best we can."

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: OFFENSIVE OVERVIEW

Offense Has High Hopes Despite Changes

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Jim Bollman sure has seen a lot happen in his place of work over the past few months.

First, the Ohio State offensive coordinator lost longtime wide receivers coach Darrell Hazell, a highly respected teacher in his field who had also reportedly taken a more active role in game-planning and play-calling over the past few seasons, to Kent State as the Golden Flashes' new head coach.

Then head coach Jim Tressel, an offensive coach by trade who readily admitted he spent most of his X's and O's time working with the offense, retired May 30 after his part in covering up NCAA violations went public.

A few days later, Bollman watched explosive quarterback and three-year starter Terrelle Pryor exit the program, a big blow considering Pryor's elusiveness had helped overshadow breakdowns at other spots and spearheaded the 2010 offense, one of the most dangerous attacks Bollman has had during his decade-long tenure.

Add in five-game suspensions to three other important offensive starters – two of whom in running back Dan “Boom” Herron and left tackle Mike Adams were first-team All-Big Ten choices last season – and it would be easy to see why Bollman would finally be as cantankerous as his mustachioed visage and occasional scowl suggest.

Yet when approached during Ohio State's Photo Day on Aug. 21 to discuss the upcoming season, Bollman was all smiles. Could it be because he thinks he's got some pretty good pieces in place for the 2011 season?

“Exactly,” he said with a chuckle. “I feel great about the guys.”

Ohio State fans might be worried about the offense in 2011 but it's plain to see that Bollman doesn't share such an outlook. Where others see holes that need to be filled, Bollman sees opportunities – and players racing to fill them.

His faith was rewarded Aug. 20 at the team's jersey scrimmage. Though Ohio State offered no official score, the offense held on to the scarlet practice shirts after scoring three touchdowns and committing only one turnover against the vaunted “Silver Bullets” on the other side of the ball.

“I feel pretty good right now,” Bollman said after the scrimmage. “Not that we're where we want to be. I don't mean that. But I think the guys, their focus, their determination, their work ethic, their toughness, I think all those things are headed in the right direction.”

“Is the job done? No. Am I optimistic? Yes.”

He was joined in that feeling by Ohio State's offensive players, who to a man said the unit had been clicking under quarterbacks Joe Bauserman, Braxton Miller, Kenny Guiton and Taylor Graham.

“Really, the whole camp on offense, we feel like we've been moving the ball pretty well,” junior tight end Jake Stoneburner said. “(We've been) finding our reads, running the ball well, blocking well, protecting when Joe or Braxton needs to pass it.”

Perhaps one reason for the preseason success is the fact that, despite all of the turnover, not much has changed. Ohio State is using the same playbook it was under Tressel while Bollman, running backs coach Dick Tressel, quarterbacks coach Nick

Siciliano and tight ends coach John Peterson remain the core of an offensive staff that has worked together for several years.

“It's pretty much the same offense,” Stoneburner said. “Coach Bolls and Coach Sis, they all came down from Coach Tressel. They're just basing it basically on what they learned from him, I would say. I can't really tell a difference at all. Running the ball, it's the same plays. Passing, it's the same way.”

That means a fair share of under center and I-formation football mixed with shotgun snaps and some designed quarterback runs. Ohio State also hasn't been shy to use two tight ends in a formation during camp, but often one of those – especially Stoneburner – has been split into the slot. The running backs have also shown an ability to catch the ball, and junior Jordan Hall should see time this fall as both a back and a slot receiver.

All are tweaks Ohio State has fiddled with in the past, but tweaks seem to be about as far as OSU will go when it comes to editing the offensive plans. Stoneburner said he sees no reason for major changes.

“It won us so many games over the years – the Rose Bowl, Sugar Bowl, we beat Michigan all those years with that same offense,” Stoneburner said. “I don't see why it would change too much. Maybe little things but nothing too great that people are like, ‘Wow, it's really a different scheme they have out there.’”

It helps that Bollman has been given a vote of confidence from new head coach Luke Fickell. Unlike Tressel, who was a

quarterback in college, Fickell comes to the top job after playing on the defensive line and then coaching linebackers for seven years at his alma mater.

As a result, the new boss is more willing to stay out of the way and let his assistants on that side of the football do what they do – until solicited.

“I have the utmost confidence in Coach Bollman and what they do on that side of the football,” Fickell said. “It's kind of a different perspective. We sat there (Aug. 20 and 21) talking about things and he said, ‘Hey, I just like to hear what you have to say from a defensive perspective – how we're attacking you and what you guys are doing.’”

“But to be honest with you, I'm not worried about that.”

The one thing Fickell's hiring – as well as the addition of the energetic Stan Drayton as Hazell's replacement – has brought to the offense is a sense of urgency.

“Everyone is running around a lot more,” junior fullback Zach Boren said. “Coach Fickell, he's an energetic guy. He brings something to the team that we haven't really had. When there was an interception today, the whole offense was running after the guy with the ball. We haven't had that before. It was kind of nice being able to see that, and we get that attitude instilled in the offense.”

Of course, the good vibes will disappear quickly if the Buckeyes don't put up numbers close to those of 2010. Last year with Pryor at the controls and Tressel helping

with the play-calling, the Buckeyes placed 11th in the country in scoring offense (38.8 points) and 20th in yardage gained (448.6 per game).

Many would have thought expecting such numbers again coming into camp would have been absurd, but there have been good early returns – the best of which has been a happy Bollman.

“I think he is (pleased) just because we have progressed a lot more than we normally have during camp,” Boren said. “In the past everyone has seen it take a couple of games to finally get everything going, but this year through camp right now we're all jelling and that's something that I haven't seen since I've been here. That's nice to see.”

Personnel Report

While it's not hard to think about what (or whom) Ohio State will be missing – especially in the first five games – Bollman would rather think of what the team has back.

“(Quarterback is) a new position and wide receiver is a new position,” he said. “Other than that, there are a lot of veterans. There are a lot of veterans at running back. They are newer but they've been in there some. There's a lot of experience at tight end and there's a lot of experience in the offensive line.”

“It's not all that young, but the quarterback and receivers are guys that have to continue to develop and are working pretty hard and doing a pretty good job I think.”

It's no coincidence the experience Bollman mentioned is especially deep in the running game. A year after rushing for 220.1 yards per game, good for 14th in the country, Ohio State has a cast of characters who should help the team move the ball on the ground with some proficiency.

That starts with the guys toting the rock.

Hall is the most veteran of the group that will be available for the opener, and he has shown quickness, elusiveness and the ability to wriggle free from tight situations while rushing 85 times over the past two seasons for 409 yards and three touchdowns. He also worked as a kick returner a season ago.

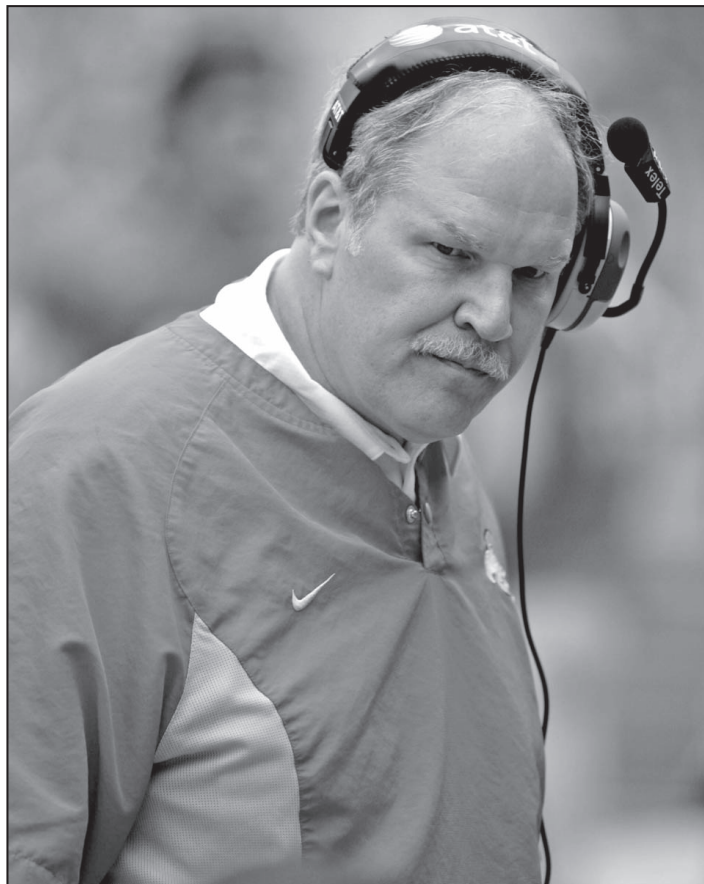
Sophomore Jaamal Berry has many of the same skills – including nice quickness and moves – but has more of an ability to break off long runs as evidenced by his 8.3-yards-per-carry average a season ago.

Then there are Carlos Hyde and Rod Smith, two bigger backs who can carry the mail when a sledgehammer is needed. Hyde, a sophomore, checks in at 238 pounds but still has quick feet and got some experience a year ago, while Smith (6-3, 230) appears to be the total package and drew rave reviews a season ago while taking a redshirt.

Herron should provide a boost upon his return Oct. 8 vs. Nebraska. The senior topped the 100-yard barrier three times in the last four regular-season games, scored a touchdown in each of OSU's last 12 games last year and has been the most vocal of leaders during fall camp.

“All of them have impressed me,” Boren said. “They've all been competing well and competing hard, and it'll be fun to see what they can do this year.”

The guys blocking aren't too shabby either. Michael Brewster returns for his senior season at center after earning All-America honors in 2010, while right tackle J.B. Shugarts is also a senior with plenty of experience. Adams will be missed early but his replacement, sophomore Andrew



FILE PHOTO

FEELING GOOD – Despite an offseason full of change, Ohio State offensive coordinator Jim Bollman is confident his offense will perform well in 2011.

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: OFFENSIVE OVERVIEW

Norwell, was a five-star prospect coming out of high school and has impressed.

Meanwhile, the two sophomores penciled in to start at guard – Jack Mewhort on the left side and Marcus Hall on the right – were highly rated four-star talents coming out of high school who have waited their turns.

Ohio State also boasts a dominating edge blocker in junior tight end Reid Fragel and one of the best fullbacks in the country in Boren.

"I think it's something that we'll have to rely upon and make sure that we make good use of," Bollman said of the running game. "We have good running backs. We'll have a pretty good offensive line. We have good tight ends. We have a really good fullback. We have some things you need to have a really good running game, so we want to make sure we work hard enough to get that where we want it."

As for the passing game, there's no doubt there is a lot to replace. Pryor spent three years under center and tied the school record for touchdown passes in a career, while the team's leading receiver, Dane Sanzenbacher, has moved on to the NFL after graduation.

Add in the loss of senior DeVier Posey for five games because of suspension and it seems like a large hill to climb, but Bollman said he's been happy with the early returns.

That's especially true at wide receiver, where the offensive coordinator said the team could be deeper than it has been in years. Sophomores Corey "Philly" Brown and Chris Fields as well as redshirt freshman Verlon Reed all have stepped up, while Posey – who has 124 career catches – looked almost impossible to cover during the spring and should add a boost at the midway point.

"I'll be honest with you," Fickell said of the position. "I've loved what I've seen."

Those players should be helped out by a competent group of backs and tight ends who can catch the football. Ohio State fans often wondered during Tressel's tenure when those players would become a major part of the passing game, and 2010 was the year with backs and tight ends grabbing 96 passes – an average of 7.4 per game – for 924 yards and 10 scores.

Many of those weapons return again, starting at tight end. Stoneburner snagged 21 passes for 222 yards and two scores a year ago despite fighting off an early ankle injury, and the team has used him in the slot during spring and fall to create mismatches against opposing defenses.

Meanwhile, Fragel has shown he can catch just about as well as he can block. At 6-8 and 280 pounds, Fragel is an imposing target going down the middle and in the red zone. True freshmen Jeff Heuerman and Nick Vannett also have shown they can be dangerous and sure-handed receivers.

Though OSU suffered the graduation loss of Brandon Saine, who had 23 grabs for 195 yards and five touchdowns last year, there are some pass catchers remaining in the backfield. Herron snagged 19 balls a year ago for 180 yards while Boren had 10 catches for 68 yards, and Hall could be the next coming of Saine.

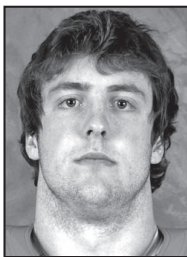
"If he continues at the rate that he's going right now, I believe that he can be one of the most versatile players in college football," said Drayton, who put Percy Harvin and Jeff Demps in similar run-

ning back/receiver roles while coaching at Florida.

Of course, much will rest on just how the quarterbacks adapt to the spotlight. As camp was winding down, Bauserman and Miller appeared to be moving ahead of Guiton and Graham.

Bauserman, a fifth-year senior, brought experience to the table and has had his best camp, while true freshman Miller is bursting with talent both in his arm and legs and has shown rapid progress in directing the offense since arriving in January.

Those two quarterbacks took the lion's share of the snaps during the team's Aug.



Reid Fragel

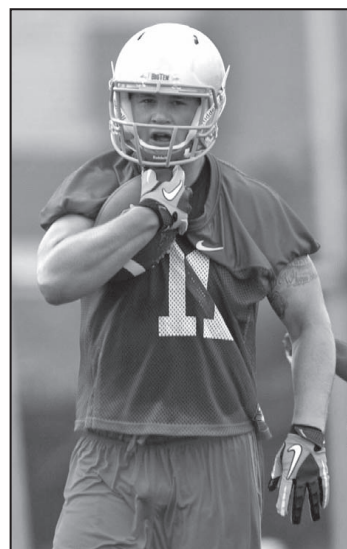
20 jersey scrimmage, splitting time with the No. 1 offense and combining for three touchdown passes – two by Miller and one by Bauserman – and a lone interception by Bauserman.

Afterward, Fickell was impressed with what he saw as the unit went live against the defense.

"They looked like they were in control," the OSU head coach said. "I didn't see any horrible decisions as far as guys being covered and throwing it right to the defense, and that's probably one of the biggest things – to go live, to throw that upon them, to know that they're not protected with a black jersey on."

"Do we really want to hit them? No, but we do want to give them a mental test to see how they would handle it. That was the biggest thing. I think I was impressed with what I saw."

Though any concrete plans on how the quarterbacks would be used had not been



JOSH WINSLOW

SOLID TARGET – Junior tight end Jake Stoneburner (11) caught 21 passes for 222 yards and two touchdowns in 2010 and could be a bigger part of the offense this fall.

divulged by the coaching staff, Bollman did say he expects at least two to see time when the season begins.

"I think based on what we've done in the past, we have to have two quarterbacks ready, especially early in the year," he said. "We've always played a couple of guys so I think right now we would follow suit in that direction."

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

Battle To Replace Pryor Comes Down To Wire

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When Ohio State started fall camp Aug. 8, four quarterbacks were in the running for the one spot under center against Akron in the Sept. 3 opener.

By the time camp reached the pivotal jersey scrimmage 12 days later in Ohio Stadium, it appeared two men had emerged in the battle to replace Terrelle Pryor.

However, efforts by local media to confirm that senior Joe Bauserman and freshman Braxton Miller had pulled ahead of Kenny Guiton and Taylor Graham wouldn't be confirmed by the OSU coaching staff.

"We have not made up our mind yet," first-year head coach Luke Fickell said. "Obviously there is an order and you saw the number of reps guys took, but to me the biggest thing we want to do is challenge them."

Added quarterbacks coach Nick Siciliano, "I don't know. It's changed daily so I wouldn't want to say anybody is a leader right now but those two guys had some more of the reps (at the scrimmage). It doesn't mean it's going to stay that way or it's been that way every day."

What reporters could determine, however, appeared to be a thinning of the herd. The four quarterbacks split reps – each working at times with the No. 1 unit – during the opening week of camp before Bauserman and Miller appeared to pull away in week two.

Those two took the bulk of the reps – including all snaps with the top offense – during Aug. 16 and 18 practices open to the

media as well as the jersey scrimmage while Graham and Guiton were left working with the second and third teams.

As a result, the safe bet seemed to be that Bauserman and Miller were the two likeliest choices to take the first snap from center Michael Brewster when the Zips come to town. How things would be broken up from there, though, remained to be seen.

"I still see it as a competition," Fickell said Aug. 21 as the team staged its annual Photo Day. "I think we're going to have a competition for a very long time. I think everybody did some good things (in the jersey scrimmage), but we have to test them in front of 106,000 fans."

"I don't know that you'll ever truly know until they get on the field to see who really takes over and see what they can really do."

As the days counted down to the opener, there was likely to be even more movement on the quarterback front. A number of offensive coaches admitted it would be prudent to cull the field to two main options – both of whom would need to be ready, offensive coordinator Jim Bollman said.

With game prep looming, there would be the need to install a game plan for those expected to play while one or two quarterbacks would be needed on the scout team. As a result, the team was trying to figure out the best use for each signal caller.

"To me, the biggest thing right now as we move forward I think is really trying to focus in on what we think they do well," Fickell said. "We threw as much at them as we could right now, but I think as we go into two weeks before a game, it's really trying to

figure out what they do well, what gives us the opportunity to be great on the offensive side of the ball."

That meant different things for each player. Bauserman has the most experience of the group, feels he can make the throws and is mobile enough to be moved around the pocket, while Graham has the best pocket presence and arm of the group. Guiton boasts mobility and is second on the team in experience, and Miller can be electrifying but is still getting the playbook down.

"As things are going, what talents do those guys have?" Bollman said. "Are some guys better runners than others? Do you structure a quarterback running game? How good are they at what different types of passes? Maybe they're better at outside or inside throws or swings, etc."

Intangibles would also be important in sorting out the group. Siciliano pointed to toughness as among the key traits his quarterbacks must have while Fickell had a few similar attributes in mind.

"To me, it's confidence and leadership," the OSU head coach said on the opening day of fall camp. "You can lead in different ways. You don't have to be the vocal guy but you've got to have confidence. You've got to exude confidence. Guys have to believe in you, and I think that's the thing we're trying to develop."

One thing does seem for sure. Age likely won't be the determining factor, meaning Miller will get as much chance as anyone else.

"I think we're comfortable with whatever this team needs, whatever this program

needs," Fickell said. "We're going to stick with it. Whether it's a 25- or 26-year-old guy out there or an 18-year-old guy out there, we need to do what's best for the team."

Senior, Frosh Move Ahead

The most tenured quarterback and the man who has taken the first rep each day with the first team is Bauserman, who entered OSU in 2007 after a professional baseball career before spending four years in the background.

Bauserman's most extensive playing time with the top unit came during an ill-fated cameo at Illinois last year. During that game, which wound up as a 24-13 win for the Buckeyes, he threw an interception in a tight game while subbing for the injured Pryor. Nevertheless, that seems far in the past as Bauserman has turned heads for much of fall camp.

"I think he's done a great job," Fickell said. "His confidence level is up. He has the ability to do a lot of different things, but I think the biggest thing is his confidence. That shows in the huddle as well as just emotionally. He's been pretty solid."

Despite the trouble at Illinois – a game in which he had a quarterback rating of minus-45.8 – Bauserman still had the best season of his career in 2010. He finished the campaign 16 for 22 (72.7 percent) with two touchdown passes, just that one interception and a quarterback rating of 160.1. Pryor completed 65.0 percent of his passes and his QB rating was 157.9.

Bauserman has built on that success and has had a solid fall camp that has impressed his teammates and coaches.



JOSH WINSLOW

ELDER STATESMAN – Fifth-year senior Joe Bauserman (middle, with football) was the first quarterback to take reps during preseason practices and scrimmages open to the media in August.

FOOTBALL PREVIEW: QUARTERBACKS

Bauserman Making Most Of Final Shot

"He has a really good arm, he has a quick release and like anyone else, the more and more work he gets, the better and better he gets," Bollman said. "He's working at it. He's doing well. You can see it on film. You can see it at practice. Guys are getting balls with good accuracy and timing and all of those things we're looking for. He's doing a good job."

Bollman added that the 6-1, 230-pound senior has solid wheels, allowing him to buy time in the pocket when necessary.

For his career, Bauserman is 25 for 47 (53.2 percent) for 320 yards, two touchdowns and one interception. He also has 27 rushing yards on 20 career attempts.

"I feel like I want to be consistent," he said. "I feel like I can make a lot of plays, make all the throws. I hope I can run the offense as well as they want me to."

While Bauserman enters the season as the old hand at 25, Miller is nearly the polar opposite as an 18-year-old true freshman. However, he comes with much more hype after leading Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne to the Ohio Division I title game and earning a five-star rating from Scout.com.

He has impressed on big stages since enrolling early in January. Miller led scoring drives on three of four possessions in the annual spring game, going 7 for 12 with a touchdown, before tossing two scores against no interceptions in the fall jersey scrimmage.

Though Miller boasts a quiet, reserved personality, he seems to be at his best when the lights go on.

"When it's game time with the fans out there, be ready, it's time to go," he said. "There's no holding back. You can't be tight when it's game time. You have to win. No holding back."

There aren't many who will question Miller's credentials coming out of high school. He took over as the Warriors' starter as a freshman, going 31-7 over four seasons and accounting for 34 touchdowns – 17 on the ground, 17 through the air – as a senior while dealing with a leg injury.

The 6-3, 210-pounder boasts an uncanny pocket sense that allows him to evade rushers plus the ability to keep his eyes downfield while scrambling. His biggest issue might be learning the playbook. Miller has admitted he's been overwhelmed at times with the transition and was attempting to learn four passing plays per day in camp.

"We've always talked about walking the line of how much you do," Bollman said. "How much do you throw at guys? How much can they keep learning before they hit the wall and things start sliding off? He's steadily grasping more, improving more. Obviously when you watch him, he's a very good athlete so we'll have to give him some chances to use his athleticism."

Many people expected Miller to contend for the starting role right away, and the quarterback himself was pleased with how far he had progressed heading into the homestretch of camp.

"I feel like I'm on track," he said. "It feels like I'm learning a lot each and every day, and I just go in after practice to see what I did wrong and critique myself with the coaches and the players."

A Pair To Spare

While Miller and Bauserman have seen their shares of the reps go up, Guiton and Graham have fallen into the background.

For Guiton, that's a familiar feeling. He earned a starting role in high school only because of injury before becoming a three-year starter for Texas power Houston Eisenhower. Despite solid prep credentials, he was set to go to Prairie View A&M before

For four years, Joe Bauserman was essentially an understudy with little hope of a promotion.

Bauserman, who arrived in Columbus the year the patient Todd Boeckman finally ascended to the starting role, took a redshirt season in 2007 as Boeckman directed Ohio State to the precipice of the national championship.

Then Bauserman watched as Ohio State won the sweepstakes to land the services of five-star wunderkind Terrelle Pryor, who emerged as the starting quarterback by the fourth week of his college career and held the job for three seasons.

In the meantime, Bauserman earned a total of 47 passing attempts in the three campaigns. Though it was never said, there was an understanding that he would see the field only in the case of calamity or in mop-up duty.

As such, one can see why Bauserman came to Ohio State's 2011 camp with a new lease on life.

"It's a different perspective when you come to camp and you know it's an open spot and you have a chance to win it," said Bauserman, who has added a new look this

year as well with a neatly trimmed beard. "You definitely come out here with more of an attitude."

The change has been one for the good.

Quarterbacks coach Nick Siciliano said the 25-year-old has had his best camp since arriving at Ohio State and his performance has him squarely in the race to become the starter along with the Buckeyes' newest five-star signal caller, Braxton Miller.

"It's a little different when you have a light at the end of the tunnel for anybody," Siciliano said. "Joe sees that light and he's preparing well. He's been playing well through camp. I think (he's improved in) everything. He's increased his urgency in everything he's done. It's really been a good thing for the team to see Joe practice the way he's been practicing."

Bauserman said the increased reps in practice have helped. He began camp as the first signal caller to get reps in each drill – just as he did during spring practice when Pryor was out with a foot injury – and as a result has seen the most work with the No. 1 unit in his career.

"It's great," he said. "You get the timing of the receivers, you get the feel of the line,

you just kind of know where everybody's going to be and it just works out a lot better."

The No. 1 unit has responded under his command, starting in the summer when senior center Michael Brewster said he first noticed Bauserman stepping up his efforts.

"If anything, I've seen Joe working a lot harder," Brewster said as offseason workouts drew to a close. "I'm sure it was a hard time being behind Terrelle when you're an older guy and you know Terrelle is going to be the starter. Joe's really brought his workouts to a new level."

As a result, Siciliano said he has seen Bauserman emerge as a leader in his final campaign. That's a key factor on a team with three senior offensive starters suspended for the first five games and no one else older than a sophomore in the quarterback room.

How the rest of the competition with Miller falls remains to be seen, but Bauserman said he's having fun just being part of it.

"I came into camp and I wanted to do the best I could, put everything out there, and that's all I could do," Bauserman said. "I can't do anything other than that, and whatever happens, happens."

– Jeff Svoboda



Joe Bauserman

a late offer from Ohio State in the class of 2009.

"I do feed off of it," Guiton said of being overlooked. "It motivates me. I know that if people aren't saying your name, it's like motivation because you see that you don't have anything to lose. They're not expecting anything out of you anyway, so I just go out there and play every day."

The 6-2, 195-pounder got off to a solid start in camp and provides another dual-threat option should the Buckeyes need one. One of the most popular players on the team, Guiton also provides leadership in the huddle.

"He's got great leadership, he has great communication, he is very consistent in what we're asking him to do," Siciliano said.



JOSH WINSLOW

LOOKING AHEAD – Freshman Braxton Miller (5) worked during preseason camp to try to impress head coach Luke Fickell (background) and win the starting quarterback job.

"Kenny has shown to be a tough kid. We're right on task with where we need to be right now."

On the field, Guiton redshirted his first season and was the third-string quarterback in 2010 behind Pryor and Bauserman. He got into five games, completing 1 of 2 passes for 5 yards but throwing an interception. On the ground, he ran four times for 21 yards and scored a 15-yard touchdown late in a rout against Eastern Michigan.

Graham faces the uncertain prospect of being a pocket passer in a group of players who can move around the pocket when things break down and also make plays on designed quarterback runs.

The son of former OSU quarterback Kent Graham, Taylor possesses a 6-4, 225-pound frame and is by far the least mobile of the group. On the other hand, he boasts a strong arm, possesses a good command of the offense and has the presence one might expect out of a pocket passer.

"If you come in and take charge, you have my respect," fullback Zach Boren said in July. "Taylor Graham did a little bit (in spring) just because he knows everything. He was out directing people and stuff like that, which was a breath of fresh air, especially with a young guy like that."

After an injury-plagued prep career, Graham redshirted last year while dealing with another injury, meaning the Buckeyes think his potential is yet untapped.

"Taylor is a young guy that has great leadership qualities," Siciliano said of the former three-star prospect from Wheaton, Ill. "We're still working on some little things with him just because he hasn't been here as long as he missed part of the year last year. We're still building with Taylor but he's still doing a great job for us."

Ohio State also has redshirt sophomore Justin Siems (6-2, 209) of Charlotte (N.C.) Providence at the quarterback position. Siems has not thrown a pass in his OSU career and has not been taking reps in full-team scrimmaging in practice but is a key member of the team that relays plays to the field.

OPINION

Fickell Has Chance To Stake Claim To Coaching Job

The dog days of summer will soon be replaced by the decision days of fall for first-year Ohio State head coach Luke Fickell.

Nearly as much as wins and losses, Fickell's decision-making will go a long way toward shaping the direction of the program and his perception among OSU fans.

Everyone in the Buckeye Nation is an armchair quarterback and knows what's best for the team, so when Fickell ultimately names his starting quarterback – and that shouldn't be too much longer – he'll please one faction while upsetting another.

Since quarterback is the highest-profile position on most teams – and more so this year for the Buckeyes since incumbent Terrelle Pryor is no longer around – the very fate of the program hinges on which young man Fickell chooses to lead the team. Maybe that's overstating it a bit, but not much.

THE FACTS MAN Mike Wachsman

"The biggest thing I want to do is challenge them," the new head man said after the Aug. 20 jersey scrimmage. "Whether we move them from second to third (unit) or second to first or first to third, I want to see how they handle things and how they react."

The reaction of the quarterbacks will be important, but it will be the reaction of the fans that will be almost as interesting to watch.

The smart money says senior Joe Bauserman will be under center in the opener against Akron, though at some point freshman Braxton Miller will win the job because he's the most talented of the bunch. Miller's head was swimming a bit early in camp, but once he gets the mental part of it down he should be ready to go as he already has the physical tools.

Quarterback isn't the only position that will be intently watched, though.

The group that quarterback throws to will also be under the microscope, more so since top pass catcher DeVier Posey will be suspended for five games. That means the early going should feature a true collective effort.

Corey "Philly" Brown probably has the most natural ability but hasn't shown consistent hands yet. Verlon Reed has sizzled in camp and has taken to receiver after transitioning from quarterback in high school. Chris Fields has been a big-play guy, and youngsters Devin Smith and Evan Spencer have also shown flashes.

While it would be nice to have a go-to guy from the outset, the Buckeyes might be able to get by with what they have, especially if hard work equals results.

Defensively, I'll be interested to see how the linebacking corps shapes up. Andrew Sweat is a burgeoning star in the mold of Ross Homan, and the unit has more than enough talent to go around.

The D-line is young but talented, and the secondary has a mix of familiar faces and neophytes. It should add up to, at the very least, an exciting campaign and one in which you really may not be able to tell the players without a program. (The older readers will get that reference.)

Ohio State isn't getting much attention nationally, showing up in the lower reaches of the preseason rankings for the first time in ages. That's probably a good thing, though,

as out of sight could mean out of mind and given everything that's happened in Columbus since spring football ended it's all just as well.

If the Buckeyes can focus solely on football and put the recent past in mothballs, there's no telling what this group can accomplish. I'll go on record as saying it's good enough to win double-digit games and contend for a BCS bowl bid. The schedule isn't nearly as difficult as people are making it out to be with Wisconsin and Nebraska looking to be the only real impediments to what would otherwise be a fabulous season.

Whether 10 or 11 wins is enough to keep Fickell as head coach remains to be seen, but that's a decision to be made after the season – and one that Fickell won't be making.

Spotting The Conference

The laugh content provided by the Big Ten's hurriedly produced divisions continues to be sizable but will likely dissipate once the action on the field begins.

Be forewarned, however. This is the only time all year that the divisions will be referred to by their names in this column as such silliness is not something the Facts Man tolerates. Here is one man's view of how the Big Ten race will shape up in 2011 along with a player to watch from each team.

Leaders Division

1. Ohio State – Any penalties that might occur won't affect this year's team, which is still the most talented in the league. New faces at quarterback and running back could impact the early-season results, and a young bunch of receivers need to step up. But the defense, led by star-in-the-making John Simon, will keep the Buckeyes in things until their suspended players return. Player to watch: RB Rod Smith.

2. Wisconsin – It would be easy to think the Badgers will take a step back with the loss of some major components. But getting North Carolina State quarterback Russell Wilson makes this a contending team. The defense might be a little soft, but the offense should be able to score with just about anyone. The Big Ten opener at Nebraska could determine the Badgers' fortunes. Player to watch: DE Pat Muldoon.

3. Penn State – Questions abound for JoePa's boys and they're third in this division due more to the lack of strength top to bottom in the division than to anything the Nittany Lions might have. There are no real playmakers on offense, so it will be up to the defense to set the tone. Penn State will know early where it stands when it welcomes Alabama to town in the season's second week. Player to watch: LB Michael Mauti.

4. Illinois – Sometimes you wonder if Ron Zook has some feline in him because he's somehow kept himself alive for six seasons in Champaign despite less than stellar results (28-45). Nate Scheelhaase is a talented yet inconsistent leader at QB, and the offense will need to run through him for the Illini to be competitive. The defense must find a way to make critical stops or else it could be a long season for the Illini. Player to watch: RB Jason Ford.

5. Purdue – Football in the state of Indiana isn't in great condition right now, and the Boilermakers are one example. Yes, injuries derailed a lot of what Purdue hoped to accomplish last year, but a look at the roster doesn't show a ton of talent. QB is in flux, the skill position guys are questionable and the defense lost pass-rushing dynamo

Ryan Kerrigan. Player to watch: DE Gerald Gooden.

6. Indiana – First-year coach Kevin Wilson is doing what he can to change the attitude in Bloomington, but it won't be accomplished overnight. The Hoosiers don't have a ton of talent or much depth, so it will be up to veteran players to show the way. Running back Darius Willis and receiver Demario Belcher are solid offensive pieces, but if the Hoosiers are to contend they must turn around a unit that allowed 34.0 points per game last year. Player to watch: LB Jeff Thomas.

Legends Division

1. Nebraska – The breath of life the Cornhuskers will give to the stodgy Big Ten will be welcomed as will the fact Nebraska has a team that should be one of the better ones in the country under former OSU player Bo Pelini. There is a ton of history at Nebraska, but the new history begins this year. Nebraska made the Big 12 title game last year and has the horses to do the same in the Big Ten this season. Potential Big Ten defensive player of the year Jared Crick anchors a stout defensive line, and the offense should have just enough passing skill to cause problems for opponents. Player to watch: QB Taylor Martinez.

2. Northwestern – A lot of people think Michigan State will be Nebraska's primary contender for the division crown, but I like the Wildcats for one reason. QB Dan Persa tossed 15 touchdowns and only four interceptions last year (and ran for over 500 yards), and he's surrounded by experienced skill-position players. Pat Fitzgerald was a tough-as-nails linebacker when he played at Northwestern, so he understands what it takes to get things done on that side of the ball. Player to watch: DE Vince Browne.

3. Michigan State – Mark Dantonio has a talented squad at his disposal, but the Spartans have always been a team that buckled under the weight of expectations. We'll see if this year is different. There are pieces in place with quarterback Kirk Cousins and running back Edwin Baker, but five starters have to be replaced on defense, including all-everything linebacker Greg Jones. If MSU can get past tricky early-season road contests with Notre Dame and Ohio State, they could be set up for a nice run and make the Oct. 29 tilt at Nebraska for the division title. Player to watch: LB Steve Gardiner.

4. Michigan – New coach, new attitude, old expectations. With the Rich Rodriguez experiment going down as an abject failure, U-M turned to one of its own to recapture the tradition. Brady Hoke has done and said all the right things, but while talk is one thing, results are another. As long as Denard Robinson is around, the Wolverines can be a handful on offense. It's defense where the team struggled, and that may take a bit of time to turn around. Still, Michigan will be improved from last year – how much remains to be seen. Player to watch: CB Troy Woolfolk.

5. Iowa – This season will test the coaching mettle of Kirk Ferentz, routinely called the best coach in the Big Ten. Quarterback James Vandenberg has shown flashes, and he has solid weapons in RB Marcus Coker and WR Marvin McNutt to work with. But there isn't a lot of depth at the skill positions, so health will be a prime concern. The defense will be a work in progress, though getting LB Tyler Nielsen back after a neck injury is a positive. Iowa doesn't get OSU or Wisconsin this year, so it could be in line

for a bowl trip if Ferentz works some of his magic. Player to watch: DT Mike Daniels.

6. Minnesota – First-year coach Jerry Kill couldn't have known what he was getting himself into, right? Why else would he take a job at one of the Big Ten's worst outposts? There aren't enough Big Ten-caliber players in the program, and the offensive line and defense as a whole are among the worst in the country. Implementing a new offense, one that puts sizable demands on the quarterback, probably won't help things much – at least this year. Player to watch: QB MarQueis Gray.

A Second Chance ... Sort Of

In stark contrast to his time at Ohio State, decision-making seems to be something Terrelle Pryor is doing well now that he's on the verge of being an NFL player in Oakland.

Since leaving the Buckeyes this summer, Pryor has said and done many of the right things, and at his Aug. 19 workout he mentioned that though he wants to get a shot at quarterback, he would be willing to switch positions if it helped his team win. He also said he wasn't going to appeal the misguided five-game suspension the NFL will dole out upon his signing with a team.

The opinions on Pryor are many, which was to be expected since he is the most polarizing figure to come through Columbus since Maurice Clarett. Some thought Pryor should be made an example of since he put OSU in such a bad light and cost Tressell his job. (It doesn't matter that Tressell is the one who cost himself his job by covering up improprieties. That's not something people want to hear.)

Most Buckeye fans I heard from believe that Pryor should have been denied entry into the NFL's supplemental draft.

I thought the whole thing was laughable. That a kid shouldn't have an opportunity for employment in a professional league because some people deem him to be a "character concern" or because he comes off as selfish and arrogant is preposterous. I don't recall such rogues as Lawrence Phillips or Adam "Pac-Man" Jones being held out of the NFL draft for the same reasons.

In actuality, the NFL dragged its feet on this issue when it could have correctly ruled Pryor eligible for the draft from the outset. He isn't the one who inconvenienced the other eligible players, the league is. And whether you like him or loathe him is irrelevant because Pryor should have the opportunity to show if he can hack it in the NFL.

The suspension is also mind-boggling. You're talking about a guy who hasn't even officially entered the league and already he's subject to the tenets and bylaws of the Player Conduct Policy?

That his suspension is five games takes the cake. Ben Roethlisberger was accused of sexual assault and got four games. Marshawn Lynch missed three games in 2009 for having a concealed firearm. Shawne Merriman was sidelined four games for a steroid violation. And Pryor is getting five games for selling his own memorabilia and profiting a little bit from a system that works its hardest to make sure the workers have nothing? That's his crime?

I generally like NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and believe that he usually has the best interests of his league in mind. But this time, in casting his lot with the NCAA – an organization that is at the highest level of dysfunction – Goodell is not only making a mistake. He's also just plain wrong.

OPINION

No Reason Not To Expect Buckeye Success This Season

I may wind up feeling like a complete fool come the end of the season, but I'm really optimistic about the 2011 Ohio State football team.

I'm not suggesting the Buckeyes will win the national championship, but I certainly think they will contend for a spot in the first Big Ten championship game, and after that, who knows?

Why am I so bullish on the Buckeyes?

First of all, I believe all the turmoil surrounding the program has had a greater effect on the fan base than the team itself. Throughout the spring and preseason fall practice sessions, it's been pretty much business as usual – except maybe the Buckeyes have a bit of a chip on their collective shoulder.

"We've really rallied around each other, kind of used it as fuel to the fire," senior center Michael Brewster said of the controversy. "I feel like people think we feel sorry for ourselves or that we're in confusion or don't know what to do, but if anything we know exactly what to do. We had a great summer."

"If someone trained harder than us this summer I'd like to meet them because I don't think that would be possible."

Additionally, no amount of controversy can override the fact that Ohio State's cupboard is hardly bare. The Buckeyes have had consistently strong recruiting classes – among the best in the Big Ten – year after year. Likewise, the players from the other conference programs haven't suddenly gotten better nor have the Buckeyes suddenly gotten worse.

Gone, of course, is quarterback Terrelle Pryor, and that's a huge hole to fill. Don't forget, however, that when Pryor arrived on the Ohio State scene, most of you figured he would be off to the pros after his junior year anyway. In the end, that's what happened – just in a different way than anyone could have predicted.

The bigger question mark surrounds the absence of head coach Jim Tressel. No one knows exactly how Tressel's departure will affect the program. After all, he will undoubtedly (along with Woody Hayes) go down as one of the greatest coaches in school history.

Yet let's not forget that the bulk of the coaching staff returns with the interesting additions of Mike Vrabel and Stan Drayton. Also, all indications are that the procedures and values put into place by Tressel continue under new coach Luke Fickell and the other assistants, many of whom – including Fickell – worked with Tressel for years.

The staff on the defensive side of the ball in particular remains intact with the notable addition of ex-Buckeye and NFL great Vrabel taking over the linebackers from Fickell. The early returns on Vrabel as an assistant have been positive.

The major source of my optimism about the Buckeyes is their continued strength on defense. Not only is the staff pretty much untouched, but there is also – as was almost always the case in the Tressel era – an abundance of talent returning on that side of the ball. The OSU defense is also far less affected by the early-season suspensions.

For all the infatuation among many fans with offense, it is the view from this corner that you still win with defense, something that was proven throughout the Tressel era.

As I have pointed out many times in this space, since Jim Heacock was elevated to defensive coordinator in 2005, the Buckeyes have finished in the top six nationally in scoring defense every year, including 2007 when Ohio State led the country in both scoring

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH

Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

and total defense. Last season, the Buckeyes were fifth in scoring defense and fourth in total defense.

Just as I believe that you win with defense, I also believe football remains a game that is won in the trenches, and the Buckeyes once again feature both depth and talent along the defensive line. They may be a little thin at linebacker and are perhaps inexperienced in the secondary, but the 2011 edition should be another in a long line of outstanding Ohio State defenses.

While there are more questions for the team on offense, I am not throwing in the towel on that side of the ball, either. Pryor may be gone but there is a plethora of running backs to help make up the difference regardless of who the starting quarterback winds up being. And though there have been concerns about the wide receiver position, especially in the first five games without DeVier Posey, the young receivers in reserve look good and hopefully will hold their own until Posey's return in game six.

The abundance of talent at tight end, coupled with inexperience at wide receiver, may even lead the Buckeyes to look toward that position as a receiving option more often than they have since the graduation of Ben Hartsock following the 2003 season.

If you are looking for an area of concern, it might be the offensive line where the talent is there but depth is not. If the Buckeyes can avoid injuries up front, especially in the first five games when left tackle Mike Adams is serving his suspension, things should be fine on that side of the trenches as well.

After years of taking heat from critical fans for lack of imagination in play-calling – calls that were usually made by Tressel – it will be interesting to see what the attack looks like with offensive coordinator Jim Bollman actually at the controls.

Still, a good dose of Tresselball might be in store for the team given the strength on defense and the questions on offense. If that is the case, one player who needs to step up is punter Ben Buchanan.

At first glance, Buchanan's 41.0-yard punting average last season as a sophomore seemed respectable. But look closer and his net punting average ranked just 94th in the country. Also, of his 15 punts that landed inside the opponent's 20, only four were inside the 10 and none was inside the 8. More importantly, Buchanan did not bury a kick inside the 10 in any of the final eight games of the season – the time when contenders separate themselves from pretenders.

For Tresselball to be effective, the punt must be a weapon and Buchanan, while competent, was hardly a weapon last season. Keep your eye on production there.

Let me leave you with this thought.

The last time a legendary Ohio State coach went down in flames was in 1978, when Hayes fired his famous punch in the Gator Bowl. Little was expected of the Buckeyes under new coach Earle Bruce the next season, and all Ohio State did in 1979 was go undefeated in the regular season and come within one point of defeating USC in the Rose Bowl for the national championship.

Will history repeat itself in 2011?

Keep The Ball In His Hands

Back when Pryor was just establishing himself as the starting quarterback at Ohio State, there were those fans who thought that the coaches should move him to wide receiver. I genuinely thought those people were nuts. Why would you want a player of Pryor's ability to touch the ball 10 times a game at most when you can have him handling the ball on every offensive play?

Now, as Pryor moves to the pros, the question again comes up as to whether he can produce more from a position other than quarterback. I still ask the question: Why not have the ball in his hands at all times?

I'm sure NFL scouts know a lot more about this stuff than I do, but I also keep hearing from the nation's Monday morning quarterbacks who insist Pryor will never make it as a signal caller in the pros. Is this all part of the national pastime of Buckeye bashing?

If you want to look at Pryor's skills, remember a two-play sequence at Iowa last season.

Late in the game with the Buckeyes facing a third-and-10 situation, Pryor threw a 50-yard pass to Posey – a beautiful strike as well as Johnny Unitas, Joe Montana or Peyton Manning could have thrown it. Unfortunately, Posey dropped the ball.

Facing fourth down and with his team trailing the Hawkeyes, 17-13, Pryor ran 14 yards for the first down in a way that few other than the former OSU quarterback can do. The Buckeyes went on to win the game, 20-17.

That may be the one thing scouts should not overlook when evaluating Pryor as a quarterback. He's a winner and he wins on the big stage. Think about how he led his Buckeyes to victory at Wisconsin as a freshman. What about the wins in the Rose Bowl over Oregon or against Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl? Some players just have that knack.

With all due respect to Tressel, Bollman and OSU quarterbacks coach Nick Siciliano, Pryor might not have had the best coaching as far as learning his craft while at Ohio State. I'll be eager to see if he improves with more experienced coaching.

At Oakland, he will be playing under offensive coordinator Al Saunders, who as an assistant with the St. Louis Rams helped build "The Greatest Show on Turf" offense that set an NFL record by racking up 442.2 yards of offense a game in 2000. Saunders also served as an assistant in San Diego under Don Coryell, creator of the "Air Coryell" offense, one of the most prolific and exciting passing games in NFL history.

Let's see how Pryor looks after working a while with Saunders.

I Remain Puzzled

There are all sorts of things that I wonder about. Why didn't Tressel tell someone about the e-mails from Christopher Cicero? What happened in the national championship game against Florida after the 2006 season? Why does ESPN seem to have an agenda concerning Ohio State?

But one of the things that really puzzles me lately is why more of our subscribers don't take advantage of our extra 36 issues of Buckeye Sports Bulletin that are free with their paid subscription? Aside from missing

some interesting, timely and entertaining information, I wonder why in these economically challenging times someone would take advantage of less than half of what they pay for.

We had three electronic issues in August that featured a wealth of information about fall camp including analysis of the quarterback battle, which freshmen looked good and all sorts of other things that our staff observed, not to mention the latest in football recruiting. We even reprinted most of the relevant documents from Ohio State's meeting with the NCAA Committee on Infractions on Aug. 12.

Thousands of you took advantage of this free service to BSB print subscribers, but thousands of you didn't. I would think some of you would sign up just to get me to stop writing about this all the time.

In order to start enjoying the extra 36 electronic issues, just send an e-mail to us at subscriptions@BuckeyeSports.com with your name, address, phone number and preferred e-mail address and we'll send back simple instructions on how to access this service. Don't forget, our popular Football Friday electronic editions with staff predictions, the latest injury reports, recruiting news and much, much more start Sept. 2.

Different Feel At Booster Fete

I always look forward to the Buckeye Boosters' annual Kickoff Dinner, held this year on Aug. 23 at the Ohio Union. It's always a great and informative event and gives me a chance to catch up with old friends, some of whom I see only once a year at this banquet.

I was particularly eager to attend this year because I was curious to see how the event would be without Tressel. This was a venue where the former coach was at his best, displaying a sense of humor that he didn't always show in public and always demonstrating an amazing knowledge of and compassion for his players that stretched all the way down to the most little known walk-on. The Boosters' rank and file loved it.

Fickell did just fine in his first appearance as head coach though he was more brief, dry and less interactive with the other coaches and players in attendance than his predecessor.

One of the funniest moments of the event came when Heacock was called on to discuss the OSU defense. Heacock noted the presence on the staff of new linebackers coach Vrabel.

"He's lightened things up in the defensive coaches room a little bit," Heacock said of Vrabel. "We laugh. He's brought a nice change to our room. It's more fun."

"What's that mean, 'more fun'?" Fickell asked when he took the microphone back. "Is that because I'm not in the room anymore?"

Also speaking to the group was Bollman, who held out hope for many fans who have craved change in the OSU offensive strategy for years now.

"It comes down every season to the question about our tight ends being receivers," Bollman said. "Well, this year, they may be receivers."

With Jake Stoneburner and Reid Fragel back at the position, there would seem to be reason to pass to the tight end this year, but Bollman's operative word in that statement could be "may."

For information on how to join Buckeye Boosters or details of their popular road trips, call (614) 326-3300.