

BUCKEYE SPORTS BULLETIN



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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

March 31, 2012

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SONNY BROCKWAY

ONE GOAL DOWN – Jared Sullinger (0), Lenzelle Smith Jr. (32), William Buford (44), Evan Ravenel (30, right) and head coach Thad Matta (foreground) celebrate as they near the end of Ohio State's East Regional final win.

Meyer Ready To Start His First Spring

By MARCUS HARTMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Time and change will be more than part of the Ohio State alma mater this spring as the Buckeyes take their first on-field steps toward becoming the 123rd football team in school history.

The majority of the starters – and members of the 2011 two-deep, for that matter – return from the disappointing 6-7 campaign of a year ago, but that might not mean much given the changes throughout the rest of the program.

2012 Spring Football Preview

Urban Meyer took over as head coach in late November and used the phrase "culture shock" when describing what the players are in for during his first spring on the job in Columbus.

For 15 work days from March 28 through the annual spring game April 21, the Buckeyes will learn Meyer's spread offense and the tempo at which he wants them to run it.

Defensively the changes might not be as stark, but players on both sides of the ball can expect to learn plenty about the expectations Meyer and his new staff have for them.

The tone was set during a grueling two months of workouts under new strength and conditioning director Mickey Marotti, a time that saw plenty of players impress their new bosses even as they told people they had never been through anything so difficult in their young lives.

The Buckeyes new and old will not have much time to waste getting acclimated, however, as Meyer expects to leave spring practice with his starting lineup set. He hopes to do as little tinkering as necessary to the lineup when the team reconvenes in August, putting a premium on picking up the nuances of the new coaches' systems as quickly as possible.

Potentially complicating matters further could be the lack of familiarity between the members of the coaching staff itself. Six of Meyer's nine assistants – defensive coordinator Luke Fickell, co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers, cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs, defensive line coach Mike Vrabel, offensive coordinator Tom Herman and offensive line coach Ed Warinner – will be

Ohio State Wins East Regional, Punches Its Ticket To Final Four

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Ohio State was labeled a 2012 Final Four team long before even Thad Matta knew what to expect. When the head coach finally got a good enough look at his team to come to his own conclusions, he disagreed with the overwhelming sentiment from the public.

That's because the view Matta had was an intimate one. He watched the team intently in practice, a time when the Buckeyes were more than just how the public viewed them. They weren't just a team with an All-America big man, a dangerous senior scorer, and one of the best on-ball defenders in college basketball.

Matta saw them as a collective unit. The weaknesses were glaring, though he never spoke about them publicly.

"As I watched them unfold, we struggled early in terms of mental toughness in practice – finishing out a two-hour practice with the intensity it needed to be," Matta said. "That prompted me to say in

mid-December, 'This is the worst practice team I've ever coached.'

"I said, 'Fellas, right now, you're a round-of-32 team. That is what it is. We're going to be out in the round of 32 unless some things change.'"

It's a wonder, then, that second-seeded Ohio State is fresh off a 77-70 win over top-seeded Syracuse, a March 24 victory that has the 31-7 Buckeyes on their way to the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans for the Final Four.

That's because things didn't change – at least not immediately.

Remember, a stretch in February during which the Buckeyes lost three of five games happened after Matta was blunt enough with his team to elaborately point out its deficiencies. If the coach was concerned about the way his team was practicing in December, the public blunders that developed into concerning losses down the stretch of the regular season had to keep him awake at night.



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COVER STORY

Sullinger's National Title Dreams Remain Alive

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"Things weren't always good with this team," sophomore Deshaun Thomas told BSB. "We had our issues, we had problems, and we lost because of it. But the season wasn't over and that's what we kept telling each other."

Before the February slump happened, things looked good for the Buckeyes. Ohio State was on track to achieve the goals outsiders figured were foregone conclusions before the season started – Big Ten regular-season and tournament championships followed by a deep NCAA Tournament run.

Then the Buckeyes lost on their home floor to Michigan State on Feb. 11 – snapping a 39-game Value City Arena winning streak – and the Spartans drew even in the conference race. Afterward, star player Jared Sullinger said his team played like "spoiled brats" during the loss.

Those comments became more glaring when the Buckeyes went on to trade wins for losses the following two weeks, a time during which Sullinger publicly expressed concern about the way referees were officiating Ohio State's games.

As the team prepared for Wisconsin on Feb. 26, Matta saw the same problems in practice that he had witnessed in December. This time, though, they were magnified to the point that he couldn't stand to watch them anymore.

So he threw his team out of the gym.

The Badgers did what Matta expected as a result – they delivered what seemed to be the knockout punch when they dealt Ohio State

a home loss on Senior Day. The defeat put the Buckeyes two games behind Michigan State in the Big Ten race with two games remaining. OSU's Big Ten title dreams were all but dead.

"Everybody on the outside said we didn't have a chance," junior Evan Ravenel said. "It was hard not to believe that at times, but we somehow stayed together."

There's no telling what Matta was thinking at that point. Maybe he would have taken a deal with the devil to get the Buckeyes into the Sweet 16, the round each of his last two teams couldn't get past.

Then something crazy happened and Ohio State was given CPR. Indiana knocked off Michigan State in Bloomington and suddenly the Buckeyes were in control of their own destiny again. All they had to do was win two games – both of which were on the road – to achieve at least a share of their third consecutive Big Ten regular-season title.

"What turned the corner for me was that night when we realized we had a chance to win a share of the Big Ten championship," Matta said. "It seemed like it sort of came together there."

Given another crack at achieving something the team thought was lost, Ohio State went to Northwestern and Michigan State and earned victories to grab a piece of the Big Ten title.

Both games were won on the Buckeyes' final possession, including a buzzer-beater in East Lansing by senior William Buford to lift the team in a way that couldn't have been scripted before the season started.

For the first time all season, the Buckeyes were the team they were supposed to be.

"We went soul-searching and we found our soul," Sullinger said. "Now we're competing for a national championship."

Here the Buckeyes stand – two wins away from winning only the second national championship in program history and the first since 1960. And Ohio State looks stronger than it ever has, especially given the way it advanced past top-seed Syracuse to win the East Regional final.

The Orange followed the blueprint to beat Ohio State. Syracuse got the Buckeyes in foul trouble – both Sullinger and Ravenel picked up two whistles in the first half – and Buford didn't play particularly well.

Given Syracuse was one of the best teams in college basketball – they were 34-2 before falling to the Buckeyes in the Elite Eight – the Orange would probably have liked their chances if told before the game that Sullinger would be a nonfactor in the opening 20 minutes.

But it didn't matter. Ohio State got contributions from myriad players, whether it was sophomore shooting guard Lenzelle Smith Jr. or seldom-used freshman big man Amir Williams, who gave his team nine valuable minutes to keep it in the game with Sullinger in foul trouble.

Now when Final Four opponent Kansas turns on the film, the game plan for stopping the Buckeyes won't be quite as cut and dry. Ohio State is deeper, it is confident and it is getting contributions from players who were often afterthoughts during the regular season.

"We're a scary team right now," Thomas said. "Every single person on this team can be the best player on the team on any given night. It's hard to game-plan for us when we're feeling like this. We're playing great basketball right now, and you have to honor every single player on this team as a weapon."

Outsiders were right about the team when predicting it would be in the Final Four. Matta, however, got an inside look at what it took to get to this point.

"I think one of the biggest challenges this team had to overcome is that they were cast into a light before the season even started of

what they were going to be," the OSU coach said. "And it was unfair in my mind because you lose three starters and you had so many unknowns."

"To their credit, I think they understood the importance of all the little things, and that was always the challenge for me – to get them to understand the little things. They've done the work. They've done the job and they've put us in this position."

Sullinger Captures Dream

Satch Sullinger has taught a lot to his son Jared, whether it is about the game of basketball or how to find fulfillment in life. When the younger Sullinger was facing the hardest decision of his life last year – whether to go to the NBA or stay at Ohio State – he heard his father's voice in the back of his head.

"His goal of winning a national championship at Ohio State was within the realm of their reality," Satch told BSB. "It wasn't a goal that was unrealistic. It was a realistic goal. He's always been raised to know that if you have a dream you have to participate in your own dream."

The life the younger Sullinger turned his back on is an intriguing one. The NBA could have been his home this year, where basketball meets a glamorous lifestyle filled with endless money, unmatched fame and anything imaginable for a 20-year-old kid.

Sullinger knew what he was turning down when he opted to return to Ohio State for a second season. He thought about what he would be leaving in the balance, but it all seemed unimportant when compared to another chance at NCAA Tournament success.

It was a tough decision, needless to say. The boyhood dream for every basketball star is to reach the NBA and enjoy the privileged life that comes with it. There was one major con that couldn't be overcome by Sullinger, though – Ohio State's stinging loss to Kentucky in the Sweet 16 a year ago.

He said he hasn't thought about the NBA since returning to the Buckeyes.

"No," Sullinger responded when asked if he ever thought twice about his decision not to go to the NBA after his freshman season. "I love this school too much and I knew this basketball team had a chance to win."

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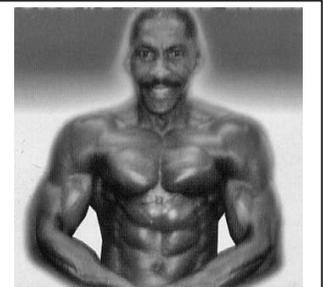
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COVER STORY



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NEW HARDWARE – Ohio State head coach Thad Matta (left) and sophomores Aaron Craft (center) and Jared Sullinger (right) celebrated with the East Regional trophy after the Buckeyes beat Syracuse on March 24.

Sullinger had a piece of the net from Ohio State's win over Syracuse tied to his Final Four hat when he answered the question. Ahead of him is a career in the NBA no doubt, but a stop in New Orleans now will come first.

"He's got that winning mentality – that refuse-to-lose mentality," OSU assistant Jeff Boals said while describing Sullinger. "His goal is to win a national championship and he's won on every level. He has an unbelievable will to win."

Even when his will to win didn't seem strong enough – think February – the two-time All-American kept at it. His mind could have been in the clouds, dreaming about the NBA and the big payday that comes with it.

He isn't ashamed to admit he was reading press clippings, especially when Ohio State wasn't playing up to its expectations. Sullinger could have checked out – the June NBA draft isn't that far in the future after all.

Instead, doubt is what fueled Ohio State's NCAA Tournament run.

"I appreciated everyone that doubted this basketball team," Sullinger said. "Everyone said we were the underdogs, we weren't good enough, not mentally strong enough, not physically strong enough, mentally immature – we heard it all."

"When we were going through that slump in February, everybody was saying this team was kind of on the downhill. We heard the negative comments. I want to thank you all because through all the adversity, we constantly pushed through that."

The storylines were all over the place during the team's Big Dance run. Thomas had a stretch of games good enough to join Sullinger's NBA talk, sophomore point guard Aaron Craft continued to play top-notch defense, and Smith has come on of late as a big scoring threat.

Sullinger remained consistent through the ups and downs. Whether it was foul trouble or foot pain – he admitted to suffering through lingering issues with a painful plantar fasciitis condition down the stretch of the regular season – the Buckeyes knew they were going

to get somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 points and 10 rebounds out of their big man.

"And it's not over yet," Sullinger's father said. "This is just another step into the process of the journey. If they're satisfied getting to the Final Four, then it is over. But this is just another obstacle in the way of their goal – which is the national championship."

"Jared has been raised that there are only three things you have total control over: what you think, what you say and what you do. He has done that and that's part of the reason why he and this team are in this position."

Final Four ... Finally

It has been 20 years since Chris Jent had a chance to make a 12-foot baseline jumper to send Ohio State to the Final Four.

It was 1992 when Jent misfired on the biggest shot of his playing career, leaving the Buckeyes with a 75-71 loss to Michigan's Fab Five in the Southeast Region final in Lexington, Ky.

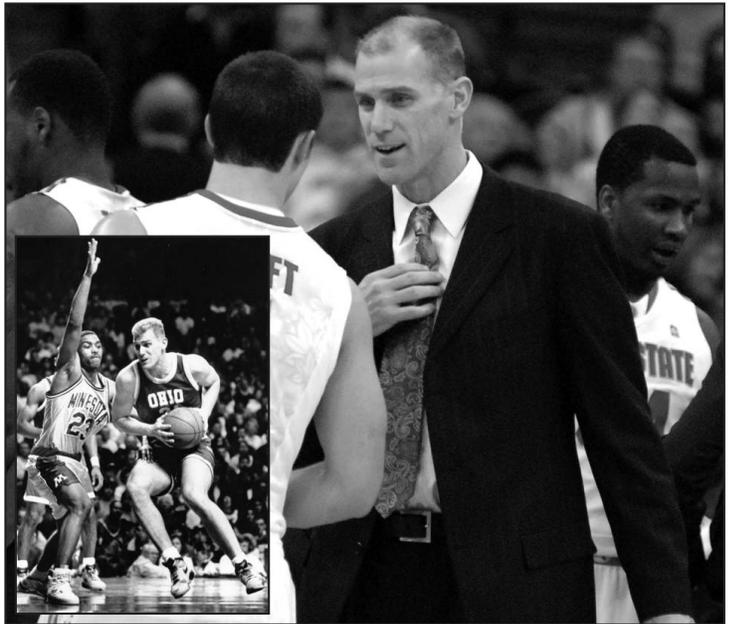
Memories of the tears Jent shed in the postgame locker room are still fresh, and the now 42-year-old remembers the moments leading up to the shot as vividly as what he just ate for breakfast.

Now a first-year Ohio State assistant coach, Jent is taking the trip to the Final Four he never got to make 20 years ago. It isn't redemption, but it is a dream come true for the lifelong Buckeye.

"I have tried to put the past aside," Jent told BSB. "I just told myself the only time I'm going back to a Final Four is if I am a part of Ohio State and a Buckeye again. Obviously, we have great love and passion for Ohio State, and that's what brought me back into the fray."

Jent left Ohio State two decades ago and became quite accomplished in the game of basketball. A former interim NBA head coach with the Orlando Magic, Jent is probably best known for his time as LeBron James' shooting coach with the Cleveland Cavaliers.

When Matta brought Jent out of the NBA to be an assistant with the Buckeyes, some viewed it as a demotion for the coach. Jent



KEVIN DYE; FILE PHOTO (INSET)

HE MADE IT – Twenty years after losing to Michigan in the Elite Eight as an Ohio State standout (inset), OSU assistant coach Chris Jent, seen here with sophomore Aaron Craft, is finally going to the Final Four.

saw it as an opportunity to be something he's always been – a Buckeye.

"I was hoping we'd get to this point and I knew we had the talent to do it, but I never dreamed this would happen, especially this quickly," Jent said. "It is really hard to explain how I feel right now because you reflect a lot on those negative emotions you had years and years and years ago."

"Like I said before – I would never go back to the Final Four unless I was with this team. Now, to be here, is phenomenal."

Rock, Chalk, Jayhawk

The Final Four teams are quite familiar with one another. In one game, there's a bitter in-state rivalry and both feature a rematch of a game that has already been played this season.

If anything, New Orleans is going to be interesting.

The games kick off March 31 in the Superdome, starting when Kentucky plays in-state rival Louisville at 6:09 p.m. Eastern. UK beat the Cardinals 69-62 in Lexington on Dec. 31.

Approximately 30 minutes following the conclusion of that game, Ohio State will get another shot at Kansas. The Jayhawks scored a 78-67 win over the Buckeyes in Lawrence on Dec. 10, but Sullinger missed the game because of back spasms.

The winners of the two games will face each other two days later with the national title at stake.

"We caught a break the first time when Jared didn't play and we were kind of finding

ourselves," Kansas head coach Bill Self said. "We knew they were a team that could make a run and win a national championship. They have so many pieces that are so good. It starts with Jared."

The Jayhawks dealt Ohio State its first loss of the season, and All-America forward Thomas Robinson led his team with 21 points. Kansas never trailed despite a second-half surge by the Buckeyes when Buford scored 17 of his 21 points after the intermission.

This time the matchup should be dramatically different. It isn't in Lawrence and the Buckeyes will have the services of Sullinger, who has played perhaps the best basketball of his career in recent weeks.

Kansas senior point guard Tyshawn Taylor, who scored 22 points in the Jayhawks' 80-67 regional final win over North Carolina to seal the rematch with the Buckeyes, understands it is a whole new test.

"I think it's going to be good game," Taylor said. "The last time we played them, they had their best player on the bench and it was a home game, so it's definitely their chance to get back at us."

"But we feel like we didn't play our best that game, either. I didn't play my best individually that game, and I'm sure Thomas is excited to play against Jared, so I think it's going to be an exciting game."

Sullinger agreed. "Hopefully it's not our last game," he said. "We're just trying to play hard and play smart, and not going down to New Orleans for a vacation. It's a business trip."

COVER STORY

Offense Looking For New Faces To Emerge This Spring

Continued From Page 1

coaching with him for the first time. Running backs coach Stan Drayton and wide receiver coach Zach Smith worked with Meyer during his stint as head coach at Florida from 2005-10, but he last shared a staff with running backs and tight ends coach Tim Hinton when the two were graduate assistants at Ohio State in 1986.

Prior to the start of spring practice, Meyer said he liked the direction the acclimation process had taken so far.

"It's great," he said before describing regular early-morning meetings in which members of the coaching staff taught each other what they would be doing with their position groups.

"The most underutilized resource on a staff is each other, and I'm not going to let that happen," Meyer added. "I'm going to use everybody. There are a lot of good coaches on this staff. They've been a lot of good places with a lot of great ideas. Let's use them. By noontime I'm ready to go jump out a window. I'm tired of sitting in meetings with coaches, but it's been very good."

Needless to say, the spring of 2012 figures to be a busy one for the Ohio State football program.

Offensive Holes To Fill

The heavier graduation losses hit the Buckeyes on the offensive side of the ball, but Meyer can look forward to a returning starter at the most important spot in his innovative offense.

Quarterback Braxton Miller is back after taking over as the starter in the fourth game of last season. The freshman endured some growing pains but still completed 85 of 157 passes for 1,159 yards and 13 touchdowns with only four interceptions. Opponents had more reason to worry when he pulled the ball down to run, however, as Miller left countless defenders in his wake en route to running for 715 yards on 159 carries. He also scored seven touchdowns on the ground and was named Big Ten Freshman of the Year at the conclusion of the season.

Junior Kenny Guiton returns as the likely backup with true freshman Cardale Jones and walk-ons Justin Siems and Ross Oltoirik also looking for reps. Oltoirik is in his second tour of duty with Ohio State. The Cincinnati Moeller product, who began his college career as a Buckeye, transferred to Arizona before returning to Columbus for his senior season.

Though Miller's 2011 numbers were impressive, they would have looked better if not for taking 39 sacks that cost him 207 yards. Some were the fault of blocking breakdowns, and others came when he held the ball too long.

How much help he gets from the big guys up front remains to be seen as the offensive line was the spot on the team hit heaviest by graduation. Three multiyear starters – center Mike Brewster and tackles Mike Adams and J.B. Shugarts – exhausted their eligibility, and Meyer has expressed some displeasure with what he found left in the cupboard upon his arrival.

The line could be configured any number of ways by the time spring practice is over, but Andrew Norwell and Jack Mewhort give Warinner two solid blocks to build around. Both started every game last season as sophomores and have the ability to play guard or tackle, though Mewhort seems better suited inside.

Norwell is expected to slide back outside to left tackle, where he started the first five games last season before moving to left guard to make way for the return of Adams from a season-opening suspension, while Mewhort could end up at right tackle.

Mewhort started every game at guard but also saw some time at tackle when Shugarts missed a November game with a knee injury and backup Antonio Underwood struggled in his place as a true freshman.

Mewhort looks like a lock to be one of the top five when all is said and done, but where he ends up likely will be more determined by the performance of the rest of the line. He could play guard if one of two newcomers to the offensive line room, senior Reid Fragel and true freshman Taylor Decker, can prove

to be quick learners at tackle, but that is a lot to ask either of them.

Fragel was a regular contributor at tight end for the past three seasons but chose to move to tackle with an eye on playing there in the NFL. Decker was a late recruiting steal by Meyer, who sees in the four-star prospect a lot of things to like, starting with his 6-8, 315-pound frame. Fragel also goes 6-8 with a listed weight of 298 that is 18 pounds heavier than last season.

There is no shortage of candidates to play guard. Aside from Mewhort, juniors Marcus Hall and Corey Linsley bring game experience to the table and figure to be ready to play expanded roles. Also in the mix will be Underwood as well as redshirt freshmen Tommy Brown and Chris Carter.

Also joining the mix is Darryl Baldwin, a 6-6, 292-pounder who played seven games on the defensive line last season as a redshirt freshman.

Center is also a question mark heading into spring practice after Brewster started the past 49 games there. Sophomore Brian Bobek is considered by many to be Brewster's heir apparent, but he has limited experience after only one year in the program. If Bobek falters, Linsley or Mewhort could be next in line. Both have repped at center in the past, though Linsley often struggled snapping the ball during practices open to the media last year.

Competition at running back and wide receiver figures to be fierce after the head coach put himself on record as being concerned about what types of assets he has on hand at the skill positions.

"I don't know who is going to catch a pass," Meyer said to reporters. "I'm sure you guys don't either. There's no track record. You go back and watch the film and go, 'I don't know.' I don't know who is going to carry the ball."

Two-year starting tailback Boom Herron is gone to graduation as is wide receiver DeVier Posey.

Senior Jordan Hall could find himself helping to cover for the loss of both in Meyer's offense after rushing for 408 yards

on 100 carries and picking up another 114 yards on 10 catches last season. The 5-9, 198-pound Hall is built like a slot receiver and able to make tacklers miss in space, perhaps making him a better fit in the new Ohio State offense than the old one.

"Jordan Hall has had a decent career," Meyer said. "I would not say good. I would say decent. I watched him compete and he should do better. He's a competitor. I like Jordan. He had a very good offseason – not good, I mean borderline great."

The other three candidates to replace Herron in the backfield are all bigger backs. The 6-0, 235-pound Carlos Hyde ran for 566 yards and six touchdowns on 106 carries last season as a sophomore while Rod Smith (6-3, 230) ran for 116 yards and a touchdown on 29 totes as a redshirt freshman. Both could find themselves in a heated battle with touted incoming freshman Bri'onte Dunn. The 6-1, 214-pound Dunn enrolled in January and impressed his new head coach enough to be included among the top performers on the team when winter workouts concluded.

As for wide receiver, junior Corey "Philly" Brown leads a group that learned mostly on the fly last season while Posey sat out 10 games because of twin suspensions.

"He's a competitor, showed up every day with high energy," Meyer said of Brown, who caught 14 passes for 205 yards and a touchdown last season as he battled an ankle injury off and on. "(He is) a sponge who is always in here trying to get extra work. He shows a lot of ability on the field. I haven't seen him catch, but running the routes and doing things."

Devin Smith led the team in receiving yards (294) last season as a freshman and was listed as the No. 2 wide receiver in Meyer's eyes coming out of winter. He was followed by classmate Evan Spencer, junior-to-be Chris Fields and sophomore T.Y. Williams.

Verlon Reed, a starter for the first five games of last season as a redshirt freshman before tearing a knee ligament late in a 10-7 loss to Michigan State on Oct. 1, is expected to be able to take part in some spring drills but will be limited.

"They're all showing up," Meyer said. "I'm anxious to see what they can do."

Last and certainly not least are the fullbacks and tight ends. In fact, Meyer described the group consisting of seniors Zach Boren, Adam Homan and Jake Stoneburner as well as sophomores Jeff Heurman and Nick Vannatt as the best on the team during winter workouts.

"We're not known as a fullback/tight end offense, but you're going to see some formations of that," Meyer said. "We have to get our best 11 on the field. If they're our best 11, there are creative ways we can get those guys involved."

Meyer and Herman will work together to combine their versions of spread offense and hope to find some basics on which to rely early on.

"I think all of us have gone through these transition periods as coaches, and I think you have a good idea of, 'Here's who we are, here's our base philosophy,'" Herman said. "Now, what can we be successful doing? How do the pieces of the puzzle fit and jell with each other? Maybe then you adapt and say you have to slow down or keep moving forward. It's a fluid deal as you go through spring practice, but you start with the nuts and bolts and then start to broaden."

Players On The Spot

• **Braxton Miller, quarterback** – With a new coaching staff comes a new offense with new responsibilities. How will Miller adapt from last year's conservative attack to one that has been described as a power spread? It will be an interesting spring on many levels, but Miller's development in Urban Meyer's system will definitely be in the spotlight.

• **Bri'onte Dunn, tailback** – If pre-spring talk is worth anything, Dunn could be the next big thing at running back for Ohio State. The 6-1, 214-pound freshman is joining the Buckeyes for spring drills and could very well emerge as the No. 1 tailback from a talented group of holdovers. Of course, Carlos Hyde, Jordan Hall and Rod Smith might have something to say about that.

• **Wide receivers** – It wouldn't be overly critical to characterize as mediocre the production from last year's receiving corps. Devin Smith, Corey Brown, Chris Fields, Verlon Reed, T.Y. Williams and Evan Spencer combined for 53 receptions last year. In 2010, Dane Sanzenbacher caught 55 by himself. The time to step up is now – right now – for those young WRs.

• **Brian Bobek, center** – Ohio State has been spoiled at the center position for most of the last decade with the likes of LeCharles Bentley, Nick Mangold and Mike Brewster manning the position. The 6-2, 275-pound Bobek would seem to be next in line, and gets a chance this spring to show he deserves the starting nod over such possible challengers as Jack Mewhort and Corey Linsley.

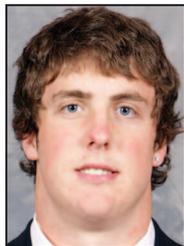
• **Reid Fragel, offensive tackle** – Fragel making the switch to tackle has generated some buzz, most notably from Meyer. Just since the Gator Bowl, the former tight end has added 18 pounds to his 6-8, 280-pound frame and seems intent on making a serious run at the vacant right tackle position.

• **John Simon, defensive line** – While some players such as Fragel have picked up weight, Simon has gone in the opposite direction. Perhaps because he seemed to wear down a bit at the end of last season, the senior-to-be has dropped about 10 pounds and is now listed at 6-2, 260. That would seem to be the ideal size for the defensive end spot opposite the Leo.

• **Curtis Grant, linebacker** – We kept waiting for Grant to make an impact last season and it never happened as the former prep standout never quite got the hang of the OSU defensive scheme. Now, with an entire season of experience, we're looking for the 6-3, 235-pound wrecking ball to have a spring coming-out party.

• **Christian Bryant, safety** – There is no doubting that Bryant maximizes his athleticism in a 5-10, 190-pound package. He finished third on the team last season in tackles, led the Buckeyes in breaking up passes and tied for second in passes defended. But we're looking for more consistency this spring – a lot more consistency – and we're fairly sure the new coaching staff will be as well.

– Mark Rea



Reid Fragel

COVER STORY



MATTHEW HAGER

LOOKING FOR BETTER RESULTS – Co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers will work with defensive coordinator Luke Fickell on improving the Ohio State defense in 2012.

Focused On Improvement

What's in store for the defense is a bit more of a mystery heading into spring practice, but the personnel are more familiar on that side of the ball.

Eighteen of the 22 players listed on the last depth chart of the 2011 season are back, as are Fickell and Vrabel from the coaching staff.

The only regulars to graduate were linebacker Andrew Sweat and nickel back Tyler Moeller, but the returnees are not likely to look much to last season for inspiration as youth, injuries, blown assign-

ments and poor tackling marred a disappointing season.

Fickell was tight-lipped when asked about potential changes in the defense, but Withers indicated a major shake-up is not in the cards.

"We have a lot of similar ideas," said Withers, the defensive coordinator at North Carolina from 2008-10 before serving as interim head coach there last season. "As we met a while back when I had a chance to sit down with him, there are a lot of similar philosophies. I don't think it is going to be hard at all. We will be up and running really fast."

He said to expect the Buckeyes to continue to have a base defense with four down linemen with an emphasis on stopping the run first.

"I have a lot of respect for what Coach Fickell has done here at Ohio State with the defense and how hard and passionate they played," Withers said. "I think it is always good when you get a chance to be around somebody else that has done it – is doing it – and you can put ideas together. I always thought two heads are better than one, so I am looking forward to it. It is going to be a great opportunity and a great journey."

John Simon and Johnathan Hankins headline a defensive line that returns six of eight members of the depth chart.

Simon, a 260-pound end, had a team-high seven sacks and 16 tackles for loss last season and earned first-team All-Big Ten honors as a junior while Hankins (three sacks among 11 tackles for loss) enjoyed a breakout sophomore campaign playing mostly tackle. Joining them as returning starters are senior nose guard Garrett Goebel and junior end Adam Bellamy.

They will be pushed by Michael Bennett, who impressed in a part-time role as a freshman last season, and Joel Hale, a rising

sophomore who has dropped 15 pounds from his 6-4 frame to check in at 295 for spring practice.

Also back are sophomores Steve Miller and J.T. Moore while Kenny Hayes and Chase Farris hope to impress as redshirt freshmen.

All indications are that the defense will continue to include a pass-rushing end known as the Leo, but who might fill that role is unclear as senior Nathan Williams will not be available for the spring following knee surgery that kept him out of every game but the opener last season.

Simon filled the role admirably, but he is expected to go back to his more natural spot on the other side.

Miller and Moore tried their hands at Leo last season but proved unready. They could get another shot, but the answer in the short term might turn out to be Se'Von Pittman, a four-star prospect from Canton (Ohio) McKinley who enrolled shortly before the start of spring quarter.

At linebacker, Etienne Sabino and Storm Klein are back after sharing the middle linebacker role to mixed reviews last year as juniors, but sophomore Ryan Shazier could steal the show. He came on late in 2011 after head and elbow injuries knocked Sweat out of the lineup and impressed with his athleticism and natural play-making ability. Shazier had 34 tackles in the last three games despite playing at only around 210 pounds. The 6-1 native of Plantation, Fla., is up to 226 heading into spring ball and has fans excited about his potential.

Spring practice also figures to be a crucial developmental time for Curtis Grant, a five-star recruit from Richmond, Va., who failed to have much impact as a freshman last season after struggling to pick up the

defense in preseason camp. Fickell praised his development in midseason after moving from middle linebacker to the strong side, but his progress never manifested itself in significant playing time.

Also joining the mix for spring ball are early-enrolling freshmen Joshua Perry and Luke Roberts.

All four starters are back in the secondary, but they will be under new guidance.

Coombs inherited a thin but talented bunch at cornerback, where there are only three scholarship players. Travis Howard was expected to have a breakout campaign last season as a junior, but instead it was then-redshirt freshman Bradley Roby who turned heads. Both are back for their second seasons as starters with Doran Grant hoping to build on a freshman campaign that was spent mostly on special teams.

Depth is not a problem at safety, but Withers will look for more consistent play out of returning starters C.J. Barnett and Christian Bryant, both juniors who have flashed big-play ability but inconsistent tackling so far in their careers.

Senior Orhian Johnson, a former starter, provides another veteran option, and juniors Corey "Pittsburgh" Brown and Jamie Wood are waiting in the wings. Wood will be limited by a lingering shoulder problem, and senior Zach Domicone will not take part in spring drills as he continues to rehab a knee injury.

Also looking to earn a spot on the safety depth chart for the first time will be redshirt freshman Ron Tanner and true freshman Tyvis Powell, who enrolled in January.

Where Meyer should have no problem with attrition is in the kicking game as both senior punter Ben Buchanan and junior kicker Drew Basil return.

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