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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

May 2012



JOSH WINSLOW

PADS POPPING – A pregame edition of 'The Circle Drill' – highlighted by a battle between quarterbacks Braxton Miller (5) and Kenny Guiton (13) – was one of the more notable events April 21 during Ohio State's annual spring game. Guiton appeared to win the battle, but Miller won the war by leading the Scarlet team to a 20-14 win over Guiton's Gray squad.

Meyer Brings Change To OSU

Buckeyes Cap Their First Spring Under New Head Coach

By MARCUS HARTMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The final tally was not as high as Urban Meyer had hoped for, but the Ohio State football coach was happy to see 81,112 fans inhabit Ohio Stadium for the spring football game April 21.

The Scarlet took a 20-14 victory against the Gray thanks in large part to a 7-yard touchdown run by Rod Smith and an interception by Christian Bryant in the fourth quarter, but that was not of much consequence to the people who filled the stadium with scarlet on a day the weather was mostly gray.

After reading for nearly four months about Meyer's impact on the 122-year-old program he grew up adoring and discovered adrift after a year of NCAA turmoil, they wanted to see for themselves the changes the state's native son had put in place as head coach.

Meyer did not leave them waiting long.

Before the game began, he gathered the entire team at midfield, where they formed a circle around the Block "O" at the 50-yard line.

Standing amid them in the white Ohio State pull-over that is rapidly becoming his trademark, Meyer called for pairs of players to step forward into the middle to face off. Each physical, *mano a mano* match seemed to get the players and by proxy the crowd more and more excited until the exercise culminated with an unexpected pairing.

Meyer called quarterbacks Braxton Miller and Kenny Guiton into the middle and let them go at it, a brief exchange that saw Guiton get the better of Miller by bull-rushing him from the circle.

The infusion of competition Meyer has brought to the program was on display for all to see, and it was met with a roar of approval from the crowd as well as the players.

"That was real fun," said Guiton, a junior who will back up the sophomore Miller this fall. "We do that before practice almost every day to get hyped up. I thought it was good that we both got called in there today."

Miller sounded surprised to hear his number called for the drill, but he was fond of it despite the result.

"Man, it was fun," he said. "It was competitive just to get the crowd into it. We're good friends. We just competed. No problems. We were just laughing at each other like, 'We're really in the circle drill together? That's crazy.'"

Meyer wanted to inject energy into the team and the stadium and to prove a point.

"Our quarterbacks are just like anybody else," he said. "You've got to be able to go and put your nose on people."

Some of the energy from "The Circle Drill" appeared to carry over to the Scarlet offense as Miller led a crisp eight-play, 65-yard drive that culminated with a Carlos Hyde touchdown run of 1 yard. The march took only 2:17 as the Buckeyes unveiled an uptempo, no-huddle attack courtesy of offensive coordinator Tom Herman.

The action on that side of the ball was not as smooth the rest of the day, but it was a hint of the capabilities of the new system the staff worked to install at a breakneck pace in April.

Continued On Page 6

Fans Get First Look At Ohio State Under Meyer

Continued From Page 1

Change was apparent on both sides of the ball.

The offense lined up exclusively in the shotgun. Not only did most plays involve three receivers, they featured a variety of screens, crossing patterns and other wrinkles designed to get the ball to players on the move so they can use their athletic ability. There was precious little of the famous option plays Meyer's offense is known for, but a tricky reverse pitch to wide receiver Chris Fields drew a fan reaction even though it went for a gain of only 6 yards.

On defense, the changes were less obvious but still there. Of course there was the usual array of new faces throughout the stop units of both the Scarlet and the Gray squads, some presences courtesy of graduation and others of injuries that piled up as the three weeks of spring ball wound down.

With defensive coordinator Luke Fickell in charge of the unit full time for the first time and new co-coordinator Everett Withers adding his input, the defense played more of its base 4-3 alignment than last season or most recent ones when it often switched to nickel against three-receiver sets. Meyer, however, confessed to limiting what Fickell could do by requesting blitzes be kept to a minimum because of depth concerns on both offensive lines.

Nonetheless, change was as present in the air as the chill of the occasional wind gusts on a 50-degree day that saw no peeks of the sun to warm things after early morning precipitation.

The difference could have been greater had Meyer not scaled back the offense for practical reasons. He wanted to see his quarterbacks get passing repetitions and protect them from unnecessary hits.

"We did some things offensively that are not who we are," Meyer said. "However, I wanted to get something done."

The coach referred to the 66 pass plays compared to 27 runs (after accounting for nine sacks), a 70.1 percent rate of called pass plays compared to the roughly 45 percent his teams at Florida put up from 2005-10.

"We're going to be a very balanced offense," Meyer said. "That was very imbalanced. However, it was done for a reason."

By that he meant working on a passing game that ranked 115th out of 120 teams in Division I-A last season.

"You're taking one of the worst passing teams in America a year ago and we've got to find out if we can (improve)," Meyer said. "We can't be unbalanced next year. You can stop the run game. People have shown that if that's all you can do. We know we can run the quarterback. We didn't run them one time today. What we don't know – and unfortunately after the spring game I still don't know – is if we can throw the ball."

Although he made clear he still needs to see much more from the passing game, Meyer seemed satisfied overall with how the offensive unit progressed in April. That went for the players as well.

"It was a lot of fun," Guiton said. "It was exciting. New beginnings, new ideas and everything else. Everybody is out there anxious to get going and everything so it's a lot of fun. It was a lot more physical, especially with circle drill."

Miller agreed.

"The first spring practices are kind of tough for everybody," he said. "We're trying to learn the plays and trying to get the pace down. Right now, we're feeling pretty good."



JOSH WINSLOW

MAIN ATTRACTION – Fans were quick to try to get photos of new head football coach Urban Meyer when he took the field April 21 for Ohio State's annual spring game.

"We accomplished a lot. Coming from the bowl game against Florida, we worked

on a lot of things like body fat, getting stronger in the weight room and conditioning and getting in the film room also. We're learning things."

Meyer was often critical of the offense early in the spring but seemed to soften later as the group grasped more and more of his concepts and plays. The defense still got the better of more of the competitive "winner/loser" days, but the offense held its own more consistently as April wore on.

"The first couple of practices we were going out there and the defense was caving us in a little bit, but one day it just started clicking and we were completing passes and moving the ball and seeing what it can be like," said junior Jack Mewhort, a starting guard most of last season who moved to left tackle this spring. "It was a lot of fun when we started completing passes and moving the ball in the right direction."

A Happy Homecoming

Prior to the spring game, Meyer said he did not expect to have to pinch himself when he took the field as head coach of the Buckeyes for the first game of any kind. That might be necessary when the first real game rolls around Sept. 1 and Miami (Ohio) comes to town, but not this time around.

However, he admitted to feeling something special about his return to the Ohio Stadium sidelines, where he was a graduate assistant on head coach Earle Bruce's staff for two seasons in the mid-1980s.

"It felt great," said Meyer, who spent the season opener last season in the press box as a television analyst for ESPN. "It

Players On The Spot

• **Braxton Miller, quarterback** – Everyone already knew Miller could run. We were more interested to see how the young quarterback would respond throwing the ball in an entirely new system. Judging by the comments from his head coach, he seems to be on an upward glide path. Miller continues to struggle with accuracy – a problem nearly every young QB has to overcome – but his release and arm strength are fine. It appears the more experience Miller gets, the better and better he becomes.

• **Br'onte Dunn, tailback** – The pre-spring hype appears to have turned into the truth as the 6-1, 214-pound freshman turned more than a few heads. Technically, Dunn remains behind such veterans as Jordan Hall, Carlos Hyde and Rod Smith on the tailback depth chart, but nearly no one expects that to be the case in the fall. Best of all, Dunn not only showcased his running ability this spring, he also proved his skill as a receiver. The freshman has all the makings of a lethal weapon in Meyer's up-tempo attack.

• **Wide receivers** – Before spring practice drills began, we said the time to step up for the young receivers was now, and it appears several of them took that advice to heart. Devin Smith, Corey "Philly" Brown and Chris Fields each had flashes, while freshman Michael Thomas put on a spring-game show with 12 receptions for 131 yards. Will the 6-2, 196-pound Thomas become a viable target in 2012 or just another spring sensation like Taurian Washington or Bam Childress? Stay tuned.

• **Brian Bobek, center** – The 6-2, 275-pound sophomore entered the spring with a shot at earning the starting spot vacated by Mike Brewster. However, junior Corey Linsley seemed to take a stranglehold on the position early on while Bobek had to battle injuries as well as the emergence of true

freshman Jacoby Boren before Boren was sidelined following shoulder surgery.

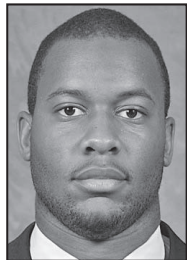
• **Reid Fragel, offensive tackle** – Fragel was another veteran tasked with fighting off the advance of a true freshman. The 6-8, 280-pound former tight end not only had to learn a new position at right tackle, he also had the highly touted Taylor Decker breathing down his neck on the depth chart. In the end, Fragel earned the right to claim the No. 1 spot coming out of spring drills, but his position battle with Decker will undoubtedly continue in fall camp.

• **John Simon, defensive line** – To say Simon has rapidly become one of Meyer's favorite players is not overstating things. The 6-2, 260-pound senior-to-be has embraced the new regime and it has embraced him. The new coach went so far as to declare he expects Simon to be one of the team captains this fall and explained Simon's absence from the spring game simply as the D-lineman had nothing more to prove.

• **Curtis Grant, linebacker** – A pinched nerve kept Grant from competing in the spring game, but he had evidently done enough in earlier drills to claim the starting spot at middle linebacker. Grant will still face a challenge in the fall from returning senior Storm Klein, who missed most of the spring with a knee injury.

• **Christian Bryant, safety** – Bryant fought through some minor injuries to have himself a solid spring. Best of all, the final picture the coaching staff will have of the 5-10, 190-pounder is the game-clinching interception he made for the Scarlet in the annual spring game. Bryant entered the spring looking to become more consistent and appeared to accomplish that mission.

– Mark Rea



Curtis Grant

COVER STORY

felt great being down there and I told our players don't ever not appreciate a group of people coming to watch you play on a 45-degree, rainy day."

The coach told them they should look up to Fickell, defensive line coach Mike Vrabel, athletic conditioning specialist Jeff Uhlenhake and offensive quality control assistant Kirk Barton, all former Buckeyes now employed at their alma mater.

"They played here so they're part of a group of guys who made this stadium what it is," Meyer said.

Earlier in April the new head coach talked of his desire to see the 102,329-seat stadium full for the spring game, but he sounded happy with those who did brave the elements to see what his team had been up to since hitting the practice field for the first time March 28.

"Eighty-thousand fans - I really appreciate that," Meyer said. "It was not a very pretty game or scrimmage, but we had to get some things accomplished. We had to evaluate some skill players and I think we did that. I want to start out by saying thank you to them and thank you to the best band in the land. (Listening to) 'Hang On Sloopy' was kind of a touching moment to watch that after growing up watching that."

He also thanked the players, some of whom played through bumps and bruises to give them enough bodies to stage a game instead of a controlled scrimmage.

"To have a scrimmage in front of a big stadium, that's not right, so for our guys to come out and just tough it out and go was

a good day," Meyer said. "It wasn't very pretty at times."

The players also were appreciative of the support from the fans.

"It was really weird because I saw rain on the forecast, but there's nothing fair weather about Ohio State fans so it was great to see everybody come out in the rain," Mewhort said. "It was like 40 degrees out there, but it was great to see Buckeye Nation come out and support us and the band. It was just great to be back. It was a great welcome back to the stadium."

While change was a major theme of the spring and the day, it concluded with a familiar sight.

After the last seconds ticked off the clock, Meyer led the players and coaches in a jog to the south end zone where the band and many fans waited to sing "Carmen Ohio," the school's alma mater. Jim Tressel began the practice when he took over as head coach in 2001 and Fickell continued it last season as he served as interim coach in the wake of Tressel's dismissal for violating NCAA rules.

No one had explicitly addressed whether it would continue with Meyer in charge, but he made it sound like there was never much doubt.

"This is a school where you don't have to create a lot of tradition," Meyer said. "We're honored to be able to keep the tradition I believe Coach Tressel started. I loved it. I asked Kirk Barton, 'Where do I go? What do I do?' He said, 'Park it right here and look at the scoreboard.' It was great."



Urban Meyer

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Scarlet Takes Win In Meyer's First Spring Game

By MARK REA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Managing Editor

Urban Meyer put a few wrinkles of his own into Ohio State's traditional spring game, and it's safe to say Buckeye Nation wholeheartedly approved.

An Ohio Stadium crowd of 81,112 braved chilly and damp conditions April 21 as Meyer brought his first spring as OSU head coach to a successful close when the Scarlet team scored a 20-14 victory over the Gray.

But the proceedings turned into more than just a glorified scrimmage between a pair of cobbled-together rosters. Pregame festivities included a midfield version of "The Circle Drill" where two players square off against one another while their teammates form a circle and cheer them on.

It was equal parts wrestling match and bullfight with an amped-up Meyer serving as ringleader.

"I just wanted some energy," the new coach said afterward. "I think it was fun for fans, and I know the players came out of their shoes when we did that."

Later, Meyer acknowledged the pluses and minuses of his first spring camp with the Buckeyes and immediately cast his eye toward the future.

"We identified our issues and we also identified our strengths," he said. "I told them it has to be the best offseason in the history of college football. It has to happen. And it starts Monday."

Meyer put several stipulations in place for the game ahead of time, including 10-



JOSH WINSLOW

HE'S WATCHING – New Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer (background) kept close tabs on the action during the annual spring game by standing behind the offense and observing the play of quarterback Braxton Miller (5) and the rest of his new charges.

minute quarters and a running clock in the second half. Additionally, he vetoed any contact for quarterbacks Braxton Miller and Kenny Guiton. That conspired to keep the teams from completely showcasing their new spread attack with Miller later admitting

only about 30 percent of the playbook was on display.

But that also allowed the QBs a chance to show off their arms to the tune of 57 combined throws. The resulting passing game statistics blew away anything the Buckeyes accomplished last year when they finished 115th nationally in pass offense.

Miller led his Scarlet squad to the victory by completing 24 of 31 passes for 258 yards with no touchdowns and one interception. The quarterback never attempted more than 25 passes in a single game last season.

Wide receiver Michael Thomas was Miller's favorite target as the true freshman gathered in 12 catches for 131 yards. Had the performance come during a regular-season game, it would have been the fourth-highest total in program history.

Redshirt freshman tight end Nick Vannett complemented Thomas with five receptions for 52 yards, and junior receiver Chris Fields added four catches for 58 yards for the Scarlet. Sophomore wideout Tyrone Williams chipped in with three receptions for 17 yards.

Meanwhile, Guiton connected on 17 of his 26 attempts for 191 yards, one touchdown and one pick for the Gray. The junior QB has attempted only two regular-season passes during his entire career – both of them in 2010.

Seven of Guiton's completions went to junior wideout Corey "Philly" Brown for 90 yards while fifth-year senior walk-on Taylor Rice had three catches for 18 yards.

As a result of all the throwing, neither team eclipsed the 50-yard mark in rushing. Sophomore tailback Rod Smith was the game's leading rusher with 47 yards and a touchdown on eight carries for the Scarlet. True freshman Bri'onte Dunn paced the Gray, carrying seven times for 32 yards. Dunn also added three pass receptions for 27 yards.

Defensively, fifth-year senior cornerback Orhian Johnson led the Gray with seven tackles, all of them solo stops. Sophomore defensive back Adam Griffin and senior linebacker Etienne Sabino added six tackles each. Griffin, the son of two-time Heisman

Trophy winner Archie Griffin, also snagged an interception while Sabino was credited with a sack.

Sophomore linebacker Ryan Shazier led the Scarlet with eight tackles, including two for loss and a sack. Redshirt freshman Conner Crowell and fifth-year senior walk-on linebacker Stewart Smith had five tackles each for the Scarlet.

Sacks were prevalent because of the run restrictions placed on the quarterbacks. The Gray squad piled up seven, including two by sophomore end Steve Miller and a 1½ from junior end Adam Bellamy. Meanwhile, the Scarlet had two – one each from sophomore end Michael Bennett and Shazier.

Scarlet Draws First Blood

The crowd-pleasing frenzy from "The Circle Drill" had barely died away before the Scarlet took the game's opening possession 65 yards in eight plays for a touchdown.

Miller completed all four of his pass attempts on the drive, including being aided by a leaping, twisting grab by Fields that was good for 25 yards. Four plays later, junior tailback Carlos Hyde, who finished the game with 14 yards on four carries, bolted over from the 1 for the touchdown.

Junior kicker Drew Basil added the extra point to give the Scarlet a 7-0 lead at the 7:43 mark of the opening quarter. Basil was originally slated to miss the game with a gimpy ankle but wound up doing the placements for both teams.

Basil made it 10-0 for the Scarlet with a 41-yard field goal at the 9:47 mark of the second period, a kick that began an unusual sequence at the behest of Meyer. After the successful field goal, the coach – who was a constant presence on the field just behind the offense the entire afternoon – instructed Basil to attempt another three-pointer ... and another after that ... and another after that.

In all, Basil attempted seven field goals from varying distances. He was good twice from 41 yards, had a 45-yard blocked before nailing a second try from that distance, blasted home a 53-yard bomb and then was short on a pair of attempts from 58 yards.

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL



JOSH WINSLOW

UP AND OVER – Scarlet tailback Carlos Hyde (34) started the scoring by reaching the end zone – and avoiding teammate Jack Mewhort (74) – at the end of an eight-play, first-quarter scoring drive.

Despite all of that kicking, only the first 41-yarder counted on the scoreboard, and the tally remained 10-0 until Guiton connected with sophomore receiver Devin Smith on a 28-yard touchdown pass with 37 seconds to go before halftime.

Smith finished the game with two catches for 40 yards, and his touchdown completed a 51-yard drive that encompassed only three plays as well as a 15-yard face-mask penalty against the Scarlet defense on a third-and-2 play that would have resulted in an incomplete pass.

Basil added the PAT after Smith's touchdown catch to make it 10-7 and then tacked on a 32-yard field goal for the Scarlet on the final play of the half to make it 13-7 at the break.

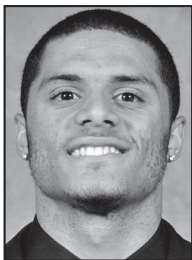
That final scoring drive featured another 4-for-4 passing performance from Miller, who started with a 10-yard completion to Thomas before connecting with Vannett on back-to-back passes good for 11 and 15 yards. The QB then found Thomas again, this time for 14 yards to put Basil into field-goal range.

The Gray took its only lead of the contest with a short touchdown drive late in the third quarter. After senior punter Ben Buchanan – who kicked for both sides in the contest – shanked a 14-yard punt for the Scarlet, Guiton engineered a four-play, 22-yard drive that included a 5-yard toss to Rice and a 9-yard flip to Brown.

Two plays later, Guiton capped the mini-march with a 4-yard touchdown run that apparently circumvented Meyer's no-contact rule for the quarterbacks. After Basil's point-after kick, the Gray enjoyed a 14-13

advantage with 0:08 showing on the third-period clock.

But Miller rallied the Scarlet, thanks in part to a crucial penalty on the Gray defense.



Devin Smith

On a third-and-5 play at the Gray 46, Miller's pass intended for Thomas bounced off the receiver and into the arms of fellow freshman Tyvis Powell with 6:40 left in the game. But the Gray was whistled for a hands-to-the-face penalty, wiping out the turnover and giving new life to the Scarlet.

Two plays later, Miller hooked up with Thomas for a 23-yard gain and Rod Smith followed with a 7-yard touchdown run. Basil added the PAT to push the Scarlet back into the lead at 20-14 with 5:29 to go.

The Gray still had a chance to pull out the victory, but Guiton was intercepted by Scarlet safety Christian Bryant near the goal line with 2:55 remaining and the Gray never got the ball back.

Game Notes

- Offensive coordinator Tom Herman served as the victorious head coach of the Scarlet team with assistance from co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers, defensive line coach Mike Vrabel and tight ends coach Tim Hinton. Team captains were fullback Zach Boren and offensive lineman Jack Mewhort.

- Piloting the Gray squad was defensive coordinator Luke Fickell with a staff of cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs, offensive line coach Ed Warinner, running backs coach Stan Drayton and wide receivers coach Zach

Spring Game Box Score

Scarlet 20, Gray 14

April 21, 2012 — Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio

Score by Quarters	1	2	3	4	F
Gray	0	7	7	0	14
Scarlet	7	6	0	7	20

First Quarter

SCARLET — Hyde, 1 yard run (Basil kick), 7:43; 8 plays, 65 yards, 2:17 TOP.

Second Quarter

SCARLET — Basil, 41 yard field goal, 9:47; 12 plays, 56 yards, 4:58 TOP.

GRAY — D.Smith, 28 yard pass from Guiton (Basil kick), 0:37; 3 plays, 51 yards, 0:45 TOP.

SCARLET — Basil, 32 yard field goal, 0:00; 5 plays, 50 yards, 0:37 TOP.

Third Quarter

GRAY — Guiton, 4 yard run (Basil kick), 0:08; 4 plays, 22 yards, 1:43 TOP.

Fourth Quarter

SCARLET — R.Smith, 7 yard run (Basil kick), 5:29; 8 plays, 65 yards, 4:31 TOP.

Att. — 81,112.

Weather — 50 degrees, overcast, light rain; wind, N 10 mph.

Team Statistics

	GRAY	SCARLET
First Downs	11	21
Rushing	4	3
Passing	6	15
Penalty	1	3
Rushes-Yards	13-42	23-48
Passing Yards	191	258
Passes (Comp.-Att.-Int.)	17-26-1	24-31-1
Offensive Plays	39	54
Total Net Yards	233	306
Third Down Efficiency	2-7	4-9
Fourth Down Efficiency	0-1	0-0
Punts (No.-Avg.)	3-35.3	3-27.7
Fumbles-Lost	0-0	0-0
Penalties	4-57	2-30
Time of Possession	18:03	21:57

Individual Statistics

RUSHING (Att.-Net Yds.) — **GRAY:** Dunn 7-32; Guiton 6-10. **SCARLET:** R.Smith 8-47; Hyde 4-14; Fields 1-6; B.Miller 10-(-19).

PASSING (Comp.-Att.-Int.-Yds.-TD) — **GRAY:** Guiton 17-26-1-191-1. **SCARLET:** B.Miller 24-31-1-258-0.

RECEIVING (Rec.-Yds.) — **GRAY:** P.Brown 7-90; Dunn 3-27; Rice 3-18; D.Smith 2-40; Stoneburner 2-16. **SCARLET:** Thomas 12-131; Vannett 5-52; Fields 4-58; T.Williams 3-17.

PUNTING (No.-Avg.-Long) — **GRAY:** Buchanan 3-35.3-43. **SCARLET:** Buchanan 3-27.7-36.

PUNT RETURNS (No.-Yds.) — **GRAY:** None. **SCARLET:** None.

KICKOFF RETURNS (No.-Yds.) — **GRAY:** None. **SCARLET:** None.

FUMBLE RECOVERIES (No.-Yds.) — **GRAY:** None. **SCARLET:** None.

INTERCEPTIONS (No.-Yds.) — **GRAY:** Griffin 1-0. **SCARLET:** Bryant 1-15.

SACKS — **GRAY:** S.Miller 2.0-4; Bellamy 1.5-8; Carter 1.0-6; Goebel 1.0-6; Sabino 1.0-2; Roberts 0.5-3. **SCARLET:** Shazier 1.0-7; Bennett 1.0-6.

TACKLES FOR LOSS (No.-Yds.) — **GRAY:** S.Miller 2.0-4; Bellamy 1.5-8; Carter 1.0-6; Goebel 1.0-6; Sabino 1.0-2; Roberts 0.5-3. **SCARLET:** Shazier 2.0-8; Bennett 1.0-6.

TACKLES (Solo-Asst.-Tot.) — **GRAY:** Johnson 7-0-7; Griffin 4-2-6; Sabino 3-3-6; Roberts 0-5-5; Roby 3-1-4; Carter 2-2-4; C.Brown 2-1-3; S.Miller 2-1-3; A.Reed 1-2-3; Bellamy 1-1-2; Dunn 1-0-1; Goebel 1-0-1; Powell 1-0-1; Sarac 0-1-1; Britt 0-1-1. **SCARLET:** Shazier 6-2-8; Crowell 3-2-5; S.Smith 3-2-5; D.Grant 3-1-4; Moore 0-3-3; Bennett 2-0-2; McCary 0-1-1; Farris 0-1-1; Hale 0-1-1; Tanner 0-1-1.

Smith. Sabino and defensive lineman John Simon served as team captains.

- Several players sat out the contest due to injuries including defensive tackle Johnathan Hankins (arthroscopic knee surgery), running back Jordan Hall (ankle), linebacker Curtis Grant (pinched nerve), receiver Evan Spencer (shoulder), defensive back Jamie Wood (arm), linebacker Storm Klein (knee), safety C.J. Barnett (thigh) and tight end Jeff Heuerman (undisclosed). Defensive back Zach Domicone, linebacker Nathan Williams and receiver Verlon Reed each missed the entire spring while rehabbing knee injuries.

- Simon was also held out of the action, but Meyer explained the senior-to-be had nothing to prove by playing.

- The announced crowd of 81,112 represented the second largest for an Ohio State spring game. The all-time attendance record was 95,722 at the 2009 contest.

- The smallest crowd for a spring game in recent memory was the estimated 2,000 that squeezed into the Woody Hayes Athletic Center for an offense vs. defense scrimmage in 1999. That move had been necessitated by the renovation project at Ohio Stadium.

- Over the past 15 springs, it has been more advantageous to play for the Scarlet team. This year's victory marked that squad's second win in a row and ninth since 1998. The games during that period have also been relatively close with seven of them decided by eight points or fewer.

- The spring football game was preceded for the fifth straight year by an Ohio State men's lacrosse game. An announced crowd of 19,213 saw the Buckeyes take a 14-4 victory over Air Force in the fifth annual "Showdown in the Shoe." The 2010 contest, a 10-6 win over Air Force, drew a crowd of 31,078, a national on-campus attendance record for the sport.



John Simon

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Offense Progresses Slowly But Surely

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For the first time in more than a decade, the Ohio State football team had to learn a new offense during spring's 15 practice sessions.

That means new terminology, new plays, new strategies, new coaches and a new tempo – a calculus complicated by the fact the offense new head coach Urban Meyer, offensive coordinator Tom Herman and the staff have put together is not an easy subject to tackle.

"This offense takes a while," running backs coach Stan Drayton said midway through the spring. "This is not an easy offense. It's a very complicated offense. They have to know a lot, and right now they're still playing the game thinking. Once they get it, you'll start to see the speed improve."

Add in the fact that Ohio State stumbled to a 6-7 record a season ago with an offense that checked in at 107th in the nation in yards gained and it was fair to expect the Buckeyes to struggle this spring on that side of the ball.

It did exactly that through the first few sessions, and Meyer even used the phrase "clown show" to describe some facets of the team's hit-or-miss sessions in late March and early April.

But by the time the spring game came around, it was fair to say there had been progress for the Ohio State attackers. The offense beat the defense on a winner/loser day for the first time April 11 and then tied the defense – thought to be a more veteran, more consistent unit – a week later in front of the media.

The spurts of competency continued into the April 21 spring game. The offense averaged 5.8 yards per play, an increase of 0.7 from a year ago, quarterbacks Braxton Miller and Kenny Guiton were efficient, and a few more skill position players began to show they have the ability to threaten defenses.

All in all, it was hard to argue that each position didn't get better during spring, and excitement was not in short supply.

"I think it's really exciting being out there

knowing the guy running your offense is Coach Meyer and anything can happen at any time," offensive lineman Jack Mewhort said. "I feel like it's a little more explosive and fast, that at any time we can bust one for a lot of yards."

Through the midway point, Meyer had seen enough from the perimeter run game to feel that the Buckeyes had a good handle on what the team was trying to accomplish in that realm, allowing the offensive staff to spend the last half of the spring trying to work out the kinks in the aerial attack.

After the spring game, Meyer said he still wasn't sure if the team could throw the ball consistently, but there were at least positive steps forward.

"I have a better opinion of some guys now after more reps," Meyer said. "Throwing a football is just like anything. As often as you can throw it, you can get better and better and better because you teach off videotape."

When it came to the search for game-breakers, Meyer rattled off a top-five ranking headed by running back Jordan Hall, who also has the ability to step out and play some wideout to bring versatility to the attack. He was followed by tight end Jake Stoneburner, who can also split out wide, running back Carlos Hyde and wideouts Corey "Philly" Brown, Michael Thomas and Devin Smith.

Meyer added that tight ends Nick Vannett and Jeff Heurman also have playmaking ability but made it clear he still wasn't ecstatic about the depth in that arena.

Still, it's fair to say the developments of the spring created some anticipation both among the fan base and the players.

"I think everybody enjoys it," Drayton said. "It's a fast tempo offense. It's definitely outside the box of what they're accustomed to, but we're dealing with great kids who all want to win football games. They've bought into what we're teaching to them and what we've brought to them."

What follows is a breakdown of each position group on the Ohio State offense and its progress during the spring.

Quarterback

When Meyer was hired in November, it was thought that the marriage between the offensive guru and the multitasking Miller would be a match made in heaven. Spring did little to change that opinion.

The coach who has mentored standout quarterbacks Josh Harris at Bowling Green and Alex Smith at Utah as well as Chris Leak and Tim Tebow at Florida did little to hide how enamored he has become with Miller's tremendous tool chest of skills and intangibles.

"I'm very impressed with Braxton, first of all just as a person," Meyer said. "The guy is a worker. A great work ethic, which is very important obviously at that position, but the thing that is the most important characteristic of a quarterback is the competitive spirit, and he has that. I was talking to our coaching staff just a minute ago and said enjoy every minute you've got coaching guys like that. He's picked it up fairly well."

The sophomore showed improvement during the spring in a variety of ways, the most noticeable being in the quality of pass he throws. During Miller's freshman campaign, especially in tough weather conditions, his ball tended to wobble or knuckle, but it was clear he had put a lot of time into refining that delivery during the offseason.

His 24-for-31 performance (77.4 percent) in the spring game also showed an improved

efficiency after he completed only 54.1 percent (85 of 157) of his passes a season ago.

"He can pass the ball," Meyer said. "Release, I give him an A. He has a very good release. Arm strength, I'll probably say a B, but I'm very critical. Accuracy, a C or a B. We've got to get him more accurate, but he's getting better. He had a very good spring, a very productive spring."

The offense also seems tailor-made to showcase Miller's skills. His decision-making ability, quick acceleration and ability to make people miss is suited to running the zone-read option, Ohio State's new base run play, and the passing game overhaul has resulted in more quick reads, screen passes and crossing routes designed to get the ball to open receivers with room to operate.

"It's just a different type of offense," said Miller, who compared it to the offense he ran in high school at Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne. "It's all spread with the plays coming in quick – no huddle and just keep it moving. It's more fun. It's just like high school back at Wayne – all signals, get the ball in and make the best plays you can."

While the progress of Miller was one of the most discussed topics of the spring, one of the pleasant surprises had to be the development of Guiton. Meyer tipped his hand about his thoughts on Guiton's skills late during one press conference, following a comment about Miller's ability to make plays in broken situations by making sure he complemented Guiton's similar skill.

"Having a quarterback that makes something out of nothing is every coach's dream and we've got one," he said before pausing a beat. "We might have two."

Guiton had a solid spring game, completing 17 of 26 passes with a touchdown pass and a scoring run. He also threw an interception, which led to one Meyer critique.

"Kenny Guiton is a much improved player," the coach said. "His arm strength is there, but he doesn't let it go for some reason. His accuracy is not bad, but he doesn't let it go. We have to figure out why. That's why I was talking to him on the field. He threw a pick today, but if he lets it go it wouldn't have been a pick. Those two guys had very good springs."

Guiton, a late addition to the 2009 recruiting class out of the Houston area who has seen only small playing time to this point in his career, agreed.

"I think I came a long way," he said. "I'm going to work hard and come back next season ready to go."

Early enrollee Cardale Jones was limited in his reps and looked as though he needs continued refinement to become more consistent in his accuracy.

Running Back

Between the abilities of Miller and the depth at tailback provided by Hall, Hyde, sophomore Rod Smith and true freshman Bri'onte Dunn, Meyer was pleased with the development of the run game through the spring.

The coach was clearly impressed with Hall, who has always shown impressive quickness and vision but has never truly added a game-breaking component to his game. In fact, one could argue he was a disappointment in 2011, following an 87-yard performance in his first game at Miami (Fla.) with only 321 rushing yards the rest of the campaign.

Meyer noticed, describing in March Hall's career to this point as decent but not good.



JOSH WINSLOW

GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION – Starting quarterback Braxton Miller (5) impressed new head coach Urban Meyer during spring practices.

The coaching staff asked the Jeannette, Pa., product to improve on the field, in the classroom and as a leader during the offseason, and Hall took notice. Drayton said Hall has increased his GPA, has started mentoring teammates and also looks good with the ball in his hands.

"Once he gets the ball, his first step when the ball is in his hands is as good as I've ever seen," Drayton said. "He's tough to tackle. He's so quick, so to not get him in space, we've got to be dumb coaches, right? We're going to do the best we can to showcase that ability."

Hall has also caught four touchdown passes in his career, and Meyer said his abilities in that area will allow the Buckeyes to split him out wide if necessary as he takes on more of a hybrid role.

The senior-to-be was being followed closely in the pecking order by Hyde, who led Ohio State with 5.3 yards per carry a season ago while adding six touchdowns on 106 tries. Hyde continues to be an intriguing combination of size – he is listed at 6-0, 235 pounds – and speed with the ability to take the ball to the house if he does hit the open field.

"Carlos Hyde has had a good spring as well," Meyer said.

Smith is third on the depth chart. This spring, he started to show some of the quickness and power that made him one of the most talked-about players on the team while he took a redshirt in 2010. That should be a confidence boost after a tough 2011 season that included only 116 rushing yards, two lost fumbles and a short position switch to linebacker.

Lastly, Dunn enrolled early and turned enough heads even while battling a knee injury that Meyer expects him to be part of the running back rotation come the fall.

"He's putting all kinds of effort in all over the place and I'm really excited to see his progression in the spread," Drayton said.

The fullback position promised to be used in a variety of different ways. Fourth-year starter Zach Boren quickly became one of Meyer's favorite players because of his

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JOSH WINSLOW

TOP TARGET – Freshman Michael Thomas (83) was impressive during the spring game, catching 12 passes for 131 yards.

toughness and work ethic, and the reward in spring was more access to the ball than he had seen in years past.

Sometimes lining up in the backfield and other times as an H-back, Boren was a target in the passing game through swings and shovel passes while receiving the occasional handoff, a new development in his time at OSU.

Wideout/Tight End

One of Meyer's biggest goals during the spring was turning around a passing game that finished 115th in yards per game last season, and to do that the coach made it clear he needed to see improvement out of the wide receiver corps.

Brown, Devin Smith and Stoneburner tied for the most receptions on the squad a year ago with 14, a total that clearly would not be acceptable to the head coach in 2012.

"One of the first things Urban told us is he is used to guys catching more than 14 passes," Devin Smith said. "He said 14 passes in his offense is called one game."

In the spring game, that turned out to be a prophetic statement. Though true freshman early enrollee Michael Thomas didn't quite get to that total, he did haul in 12 passes for 131 yards while providing a pretty positive introduction for himself.

"About the first scrimmage, he started to come on," Meyer said of the Californian who spent last year at Fork Union (Va.) Military Academy. "Unfortunately he's going the wrong direction at some points in time, but he's very talented. He's a kid that is working nonstop. He's our most dedicated receiver as a true freshman. I'm not surprised he had that type of day today."

Thomas boasts excellent size at 6-2 and 196 pounds and isn't afraid to sky for the ball with his excellent leaping ability.

He was named one of the top receivers of the spring by Meyer along with Brown, who caught 205 yards' worth of passes a season ago including a touchdown in the Michigan game. Brown has always boasted excellent straight line speed but has had a rocky transition to a full-time role at wideout after splitting time as a back and receiver in high school at Springfield (Pa.) Cardinal O'Hara.

Smith, who spent most of camp working with the first unit, is right behind after leading Ohio State with 294 yards and 21.0 yards per catch a season ago while scoring four touchdowns, most among the receivers.

No one has doubted Smith's speed since he won Ohio's prep 100-meter dash title in 2011, but receivers coach Zach Smith said the Massillon Washington product needs to play as fast as he is.

"Obviously with speed you can get past DBs, but it's not all about long balls. There's the short game and intermediate passes and making a move," Devin Smith said. "That's one thing (Meyer) talks about. Making a defender miss is one thing he really likes skill players to do."

Sophomore Evan Spencer was starting to show signs of breaking out before suffering a broken bone in his shoulder midway through camp. After catching just three passes last year, the son of former OSU running back and assistant coach Tim Spencer was excelling on the field and putting in the work off the field expected of a coach's son.

Tyrone Williams has always been a red-zone threat at 6-6 but struggled catching the ball his first two seasons at Ohio State, a skill he seemed more adept at this spring.

"I know Coach Meyer expects a lot out of us, so at the same time he's saying that he knows we have talent and we just have to prove it every day," Spencer said. "We did feel like we had to step up. At the same time, we know we're talented and know what we can do so it's just up to us to show what we can do."

While the wideouts were showing progress, the tight ends were confirming they will be a big part of Meyer's first offense at Ohio State. That starts with Stoneburner, who caught seven touchdowns a season ago and figures to be more involved in the passing game considering the past success Meyer and Herman have had at developing pass-catching tight ends.

"In practice I'm noticing how and why we're able to get open," Stoneburner said. "We still have to go out there and do it, but as long as I keep running the routes, getting confidence with Coach Meyer, and Braxton and I get confidence with each other, my numbers will definitely change from last year."

Though he might not be quite the game-breaker that Stoneburner figures to be, Heuerman showed the ability to both block and catch passes throughout practice sessions and games a season ago and continued to develop in the spring.

Vannett also has the speed and size (6-6, 248) to be an elite receiving tight end,

though position coach Tim Hinton said the redshirt freshman was still adjusting mentally to the offense.

Offensive Line

Meyer was dissatisfied with both the depth at offensive line and the shape the big men were in when he arrived on campus, but the head coach told Ohio State's high school coaches clinic April 20 that the offensive line was the most improved position throughout the spring.

He saw the gains both on and off the field, noting that linemen were not exactly disciplined when he first arrived.

"Three or four missed my first team meeting and unfortunately I had a couple miss the second team meeting," Meyer said. "That led to the 5 a.m. workouts for a whole week because for some reason we couldn't get to meetings on time. I'm proud to say they don't miss meetings anymore."

By the end of the spring, Ohio State seemed to have settled on a starting five that included two players fairly new to the position of tackle. Newly installed left tackle Mewhort – who quickly established himself the leader of the group – had dabbled at the position before this season but started all 13 games at left and right guard a season ago. On the right side, Reid Fragel was getting used to the position after spending his first three seasons at OSU as a blocking tight end.

Left guard Andrew Norwell – who started all 13 games between left tackle and left guard last season – was still a mauler in the run game while right guard Marcus Hall returned to a starting role at that spot after beginning the 2011 season there.

Coaches raved about Hall's rededication to the sport this spring, and the same could

be said of center Corey Linsley, who moved over from guard and put a firm grasp on his new position.

"I'm really proud of the way guys responded," Mewhort said. "There's a tough crew out there. Reid Fragel is a hardworking, lunch-pail type of dude, same as Marcus Hall. You guys know Andrew Norwell is one of the toughest guys I know, so it's a tough group and I know that coming in Coach Meyer wanted us to change and adapt and I think we did that. I'm proud of how it happened."

One of the biggest surprises of camp was true freshman tackle Taylor Decker, a four-star prospect from Vandalia (Ohio) Butler who split reps on the left and right sides during camp and even made a cameo or two as the starting right tackle.

"He's as smart as anybody in my room football-wise," offensive line coach Ed Warinner said. "He has a bright, bright future."

Another early enrollee, center Jacoby Boren of Pickerington (Ohio) Central, turned heads with his standard-issue Boren cussedness before undergoing shoulder surgery near the midway point in an effort to make sure he's healthy before fall camp. Sophomore guard Antonio Underwood also was showing the ability to contribute.

"They've done a good job," Meyer said of the line. "Their bodies are changing a little bit, their attitudes are changing. Jack Mewhort leads the crew. Corey Linsley right now is a fine player. He's the first one to tell you he wasn't a fine player a year ago. His complete commitment to Ohio State wasn't there a year ago. It is now. Marcus Hall is another guy who really has come a long way. I really like him right now."

"There's a unit being built there."



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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

Defense Hopes To Continue Silver Bullet Tradition

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Perhaps the reason the hiring of Urban Meyer was so exciting for Ohio State fans – other than the fact that he won two national championships at Florida – was that he's become known for always possessing a creative and diverse offensive playbook.

So it wasn't a surprise when Ohio Stadium filled more than 80,000 seats with eager fans waiting to see that new offense April 21 during the annual spring game.

But if the Buckeyes are going to win the way Meyer hopes they will, the head coach understands it is more contingent on whether his team will be able to keep up the tradition of Ohio State's prominent defense.

"I expect (our offense) to get very close to Ohio State's standards here real soon," Meyer said.

In six practices during which Meyer set the offense and defense in direct competition, it was the defense that posted a winning 3-1-2 record. Meyer, of course, mentioned he hoped the defense would be the more efficient unit, specifically because the offense is undergoing a transformation in its scheme.

The defense likely would have been the better unit either way when looking at what it returned this year. The Buckeyes lost only two players from their starting defense a year ago in defensive back/linebacker Tyler Moeller and linebacker Andrew Sweat, and the squad returns what should be the most talented defensive front in the Big Ten.

The Buckeyes also kept Luke Fickell, who served as the team's interim head coach a year ago, on staff. Fickell, who is the defensive coordinator as well as linebackers coach, is expected to keep consistency with the way Ohio State has approached its defensive philosophy in the past.

Meanwhile, co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers, the interim head coach at North Carolina a year ago, will bring new perspectives to an OSU defense that should be rather experienced personnel-wise.

"There are a lot of guys that have one goal in mind and that's to try to win all of the games," Withers said. "That's the bottom line. I believe that each one of us came here or stayed here at Ohio State to win it all."

"We want to play the best defense we

can to try to win it all. The key is that we all believe that if we'll work together that we'll have a chance to win it all."

The following is BSB's look at the Ohio State defense following 15 spring practice sessions with the addition of some analysis.

Defensive Line

It didn't take long for Meyer to identify what will be the strength of his football team this season, and the head coach is comfortable that his Buckeyes will be primed to replicate the defensive success of the past.

Meyer didn't hide his admiration for John Simon from day one at Ohio State and recently hinted the senior defensive end will be one of the team's captains come fall.

Simon didn't let his coach down during spring drills, turning in perhaps the most dominant three-week span of practice by an individual player the team has seen in years. Rarely – if ever – was Simon corralled by the Buckeyes' offensive line, which caused Meyer and the staff to consider holding him out of drills because he was disrupting the offensive productiveness.

"It is a tremendous honor," Simon responded when asked what it was like to be singled out by Meyer as one of the team's elite players. "For someone with his track record to say something like that about me, it's great. But we've got a lot of great guys on this team who are just like me. We go in every day and work hard."

Simon's effectiveness along the defensive line carried to the point where Meyer didn't feel the need to play the senior in the spring game. Simon, who was fully dressed for the game, instead paced up and down the sidelines anxiously wanting to get into the action.

Meyer, however, didn't see the point of Simon participating, saying after the game, "John Simon didn't play because he didn't need to play."

Having a stopper such as Simon on the defensive front most certainly is a tremendous weapon, but that's not where it stops for the Buckeyes at that position group. In fact, that's just where it begins.

Junior defensive tackle Johnathan Hankins could turn into another player who can single-handedly take over a game. Known for his slimmed down but still massive 317-pound frame, Hankins was also unblockable during spring drills.



SONNY BROCKWAY

GOT THE DAY OFF – Senior defensive lineman John Simon (54) did not play in the spring game despite being a Gray team captain with classmate Etienne Sabino (6). Head coach Urban Meyer later explained Simon 'didn't need to play.'

Perhaps what makes him dangerous, however, is the quickness with which he flows to the football. Typically a player of his size and stature is relegated to an interior line role, but the Buckeyes felt comfortable moving him outside last season.

"I'm moving well," said Hankins, who hasn't forgotten that his stamina was the biggest concern before his collegiate career started. "I'm not getting tired anymore. My pass rush is looking pretty good. I feel pretty comfortable where I am right now."

Hankins didn't play in the spring game because he had arthroscopic surgery on his knee two days before the contest. Meyer

wasn't concerned about long-term effects the procedure might have on Hankins, saying he should be fine in the near future.

Ohio State started the spring with the same starters as last year – Adam Bellamy and Garrett Goebel starting alongside Hankins and Simon. However, sophomore Michael Bennett used the spring to impress the new coaching staff enough to seemingly pass Bellamy on the depth chart. Ohio State rotates the players throughout the line positions, but Goebel will primarily play nose guard while Hankins plays tackle and Simon and Bennett play on the ends.

Bennett, who is finally fully recovered from a broken arm he suffered in an all-star game after his senior high school season, was incredibly active on the interior defensive line. He recorded two tackles and a sack in the spring game.

"I feel really good right now," Bennett said. "It is great to be healthy and I think I've made a lot of strides this spring. Last year at first, my arm was kind of weak and I had to wear a splint on it. Early in the spring I took it off to see what I could do, and I feel like I've gotten stronger."

Rounding out the first-string defensive line is Goebel, who enters this season after a serviceable year in the starting lineup last season. He hasn't stuck out so far as a dynamic playmaker, but his prowess tying up opposing blockers has allowed other players on the defense to flow to the ball more easily.

But what makes Ohio State's defensive line a weapon of immeasurable importance is the depth, and players not atop the depth chart will all have impactful roles for the Buckeyes this season.

Bellamy was a more than workable option on the starting line a year ago and will likely

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be an active member of Ohio State's rotation. Bellamy, who recorded a sack and a half in the spring game, arguably has the skill-set to start at other prominent programs but is more of a testament to the vast depth the Buckeyes will sport at the position this year.

Other names hoping to crack the two-deep are Chase Farris, Steve Miller, J.T. Moore and Joel Hale, each of whom made plays during the spring game. Miller recorded two sacks in the contest.

"We're going to play physical and we're going to play square and we're going to play with violent hands," said defensive line coach Mike Vrabel, who is instructing the group after overseeing Ohio State's linebackers a year ago.

"If we do those three things, we'll be graded positively. If we're able to go from point A to point B as fast as we can and find a way to compete for the length of a play, which we talk about as four to six seconds around here, we're going to have a good D-line."

The defensive line added a new member in the form of Chris Carter, a 6-4, 358-pounder who came to Ohio State as an offensive lineman. Given the team's depth issues along the offensive front, Meyer admitted the coaching staff was reluctant to move Carter to the other side of the football.

"We didn't have the luxury to move him over," Meyer said. "But he wasn't progressing on the offensive line, so we decided to maybe give him a shot at defense."

Though Carter is still raw and developing his skills on the defensive line, his massive size has already been a valuable weapon for him. He showed signs of promise in the spring game, making four tackles and recording a sack.

The Buckeyes will have even more help on the defensive front come fall when the team welcomes the arrival of top prospects Tommy Schutt, Noah Spence and Adolphus Washington. Scout.com rated all three players five-star high school prospects.

Freshman early enrollee Se'Von Pittman is one of the promising young defensive linemen but was unable to make strides toward landing a spot in the two deep this spring because of a leg injury.

Senior defensive end Nathan Williams, who took a medical redshirt last season, could also earn back a considerable role if he is fully healthy in the fall. He has been a consistent pass-rusher throughout his career but must come back from microfracture knee surgery.

Linebackers

Ohio State's linebackers group certainly doesn't have the luxury of depth like the defensive line, but the Buckeyes do return what should be proven entities in Etienne Sabino and Ryan Shazier.

Sabino – who was named a captain of the Gray team – will make the full-time move over to strongside (Sam) linebacker this fall. In his junior season a year ago, he had perhaps his most productive campaign, but he admittedly struggled at times with his role as the middle linebacker.

Now returning for his final season with the Buckeyes, a leaner Sabino could be primed for a breakout year. He'll have to put some of the issues that haunted him a year ago in the past. For example, Sabino has been known to overthink the defensive schemes at times, causing him to play slower and take questionable pursuit angles to the ball.

But Sabino, who registered six tackles and a sack in the spring game, has looked quicker in his final spring practice. Perhaps his move to the Sam position is just what

he needs to be more productive – and more importantly more consistent.

"I just want to build off last year," he said. "I want to keep playing aggressive and keep having an impact on this defense. I am a senior now and it's crazy. It's been five years. It's been long but short, if that makes any sense. It's exciting, but it's your last go-around."

One of the most promising younger players has been Shazier, who is slated to be the starting weakside (Will) linebacker. After playing in a limited role to start last season, Shazier made plays down the stretch to earn one of the starting spots at the end of the year.

Shazier, who suffered a partially torn PCL in his knee in Ohio State's regular-season finale at Michigan last season, played through the pain in the Gator Bowl. Now fully healthy, he sported the characteristics in the spring that made him one of the team's most exciting players.

Though Shazier has plenty to learn, he hasn't struggled with instincts. He plays incredibly fast and flows quickly to the ball, making him more of a natural playmaker. At the Will linebacker spot, which is generally reserved for the team's most active linebacker, Shazier will be counted on to fill the hole Sweat occupied a year ago.

"I wasn't really surprised because I planned on doing that," Shazier said of his freshman performance. "That's why I (enrolled last spring). I wanted to do whatever I could to help the team. I came in early, tried to gain weight, and I did whatever was possible to help us win."

Shazier seems to be back at it, especially if his spring game performance is any indication of what is coming in his sophomore season. He registered a game-high eight tackles, including two for loss and a sack.

The final spot is up for grabs, but it looks like sophomore Curtis Grant will be the leader to start at middle (Mike) linebacker in the fall. The former five-star recruit has lost some body weight but has grown tremendously during the offseason with the mental part of the game.

Grant, however, was limited in the final week of spring football because of an injury Meyer described as a pinched nerve, hindering what looked like a three-week span during which things were finally coming together.

"He's a big physical kid," Shazier said of Grant. "He can run pretty well for his size. When you have that combination, it's going to be tough for offenses to scheme him up and block him. He's getting a lot better. It's crazy how good he gets day to day. He keeps improving. I'm excited to see what he can do."

The lack of depth at the linebacker position became somewhat alarming at the end of the spring drills. Without Grant in the mix, the Buckeyes found time for redshirt freshman Conner Crowell to get reps with the first team.

Senior linebacker Storm Klein was supposed to be in the hunt for playing time at the Mike position, but his injury-plagued career continued into the spring. He was held out of the spring game for the second consecutive year. Meanwhile, true freshmen Joshua Perry and Luke Roberts both reported in the spring, but Perry was limited with an injury and Roberts is still in the process of getting acclimated to the college game.

Depth at the linebacker position is on its way, though, as the team will welcome Jamal Marcus, David Perkins and Camren Williams in the fall. Those players – each of whom has drawn high praise from Meyer – could compete for positions in the two-deep during their freshman season.

"Honestly, as far as the linebackers, we've always had great competition in the linebacker room," Sabino said. "You could be

the starter for that day, but it can change day to day. I think everybody's going to work hard and fight for a starting spot."

Defensive Backs

The Ohio State secondary looks to be in good shape as it heads into the offseason because it returns both starting cornerbacks and safeties from a year ago. At the cornerback position specifically, the Buckeyes should have one of the best one-two punches in the Big Ten.

If they aren't, they'll hear from charismatic first-year cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs, who has made a habit of voicing – or yelling – his displeasure for poor play during the course of his first spring.

"It's definitely been a great change," senior cornerback Travis Howard said when describing his relationship with Coombs. "I mean, he's a high intensity guy who's willing to make sure we perfect our technique and make sure we work hard at whatever we do."

Howard proved to be a serviceable option as a starter a year ago but often struggled with jamming opposing receivers at the line of scrimmage. When playing off in coverage, he also sometimes had a hard time recovering from the slack given to speedy and efficient route runners.

The senior made strides improving in those areas this spring and hopes to settle in as the team's top lockdown corner in the fall.

"We will press and they're gifted press guys," Coombs said. "They've been doing it here for a while and they're good at it, so we've really focused this spring on being able to play off with vision, and I'm glad to hear they like doing that."

On the other side, Bradley Roby enters his sophomore season and has made perhaps the most considerable strides in a short amount of time of any player on the team. He is an aggressive corner who likes to play physically with the opposing receivers. Also with a nose for the football, he has excelled in helping Ohio State's efforts with run support.

Roby, who had 47 tackles and three interceptions last season, isn't satisfied with the season he had. He said he feels like he's on track for being one of the most prolific cornerbacks to ever play at Ohio State.

"I played pretty well (as a redshirt freshman) but it's not close to my standards," he said. "I feel like the fans and everybody else were OK with how I played and they liked how I played. But to me, I could have played so much better. This year is going to be so much better for me. It's going to be crazy."

Dominic Clarke likely would have been in the mix to compete for a starting spot this season, but he was removed from the program for violating team rules shortly after Meyer was hired and that sapped depth at the corner position.

The third guy in the mix is now sophomore Doran Grant, a highly recruited Ohio prep prospect out of Akron St. Vincent-St.

Mary. Grant jumped into the two-deep quickly last season, but he wasn't able to overcome the stranglehold Howard and Roby eventually placed on the starting spots.

Though Grant seems to be on the outside looking in on the starting lineup yet again, the lack of reasonable depth at the position could have him one twisted ankle away from considerable playing time.

"He shouldn't be satisfied with being the third guy," Coombs said of Grant. "We do have two great ones but guess what, Doran? Don't be satisfied with being the third guy."

Grant could have been a skill position player on offense early in his career, but he said he chose Ohio State because he wanted to play defense. Being a Silver Bullet, he said, has always been a dream, adding that he is confident he can make a difference, especially after he got time with the first-team defense during Ohio State's preparation for the Gator Bowl last year when Howard suffered a minor injury.

"I had some good quality reps," Grant said. "I made a few mistakes, but I also got a little better. I carried that into spring ball and I feel like my spring has been pretty good."

Added Roby, "Doran will be ready. He's a good football player. He's very technique-sound. He's very coachable. He just has to get that attitude that comes along with playing corner. You have to have that confidence."

Starting at the safety spots late in the spring were C.J. Barnett and Orhian Johnson, both of whom held those positions a year ago. Johnson split time starting with Christian Bryant last season. Bryant missed time late in the spring with injury, and the competition with Johnson should carry on into the fall.

Though Johnson struggled in his starting role to start last season, he grew into a more serviceable player as time went on. During spring drills, his play continued to stand out, especially when he intercepted a pass and returned it all the way for a touchdown during an open practice April 14.

Barnett recovered from a serious knee injury sustained two years ago to enjoy his first full season in Ohio State's starting secondary last year. He has earned a reputation as a big hitter, and the aggressiveness with which he plays the game has been perhaps his best feature.

Having heard thoughts that Ohio State could have the best and most complete secondary in the country, Barnett shoved that notion aside this spring.

"You want to be the best, but we'll let everybody decide that after the season," he said. "All we can do right now is focus on ourselves and try to be the best we can be."

Bryant should be a shoo-in as the team's top option at nickelback if he doesn't win a starting spot at safety. Corey Brown, Ron Tanner and true freshman Tyvis Powell, who had a spring-game interception wiped out by a penalty, are the team's top reserves deep in the defensive backfield.

Fellow freshmen De'Van Bogard, Armani Reeves and Najee Murray will join the DB group in the fall.

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