

## Jackson, Garcia May Be Front Runners In Race For Starting Job

## Harris Putting Quarterbacks Through Paces

By JEFF RAPP

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

After just a couple of days of spring practice, Ohio State quarterbacks coach Walt Harris addressed the impending battle at QB by saying, "I'm more interested in consistency than putting an outstanding talent out there."

On the surface, such a statement might not bode well for redshirt junior Stan Jackson, an athletically blessed performer whose career to this point could be termed erratic.

But that was the old Jackson, the popular teammate who simply had trouble hanging in the pocket or following up a good play with another. The new Jackson seems to be taking the same scholarly approach as his three-year predecessor, Bobby Hoying.

"Stan is a much more disciplined football player within the concept of the system," Harris said. "I'm real, real proud of Stan."

"That's how you get out of the joint — let the system do the job for you instead of having to make the big plays yourself. He's bitten into that."

"To me, he's a lot different human being. He's really committed to trying to be a quarterback and not be a guy that's up one minute and down the next in terms of what he does on the field. Now he's the executioner. He understands the importance of applying what we're teaching and sees what it did for Bobby," he said.

Jackson, once a promising recruit from Paterson (N.J.) Catholic High School, said he entered the month with the mind-set that the job is his to lose.

"It's definitely different," Jackson said. "Last year at this time, Bob was the main objective and the other guys would get a few reps here and there. Now it's a pure competition. I think it's challenging and fun, and I try to step up to a challenge."

"Spring ball, a lot of it is fun and a lot of it is learning. I try not to let the

pressure build on me because right now there really is no No. 1."

If anyone is to unseat Jackson for that honor, it figures to be newly signed JUCO transfer Mark Garcia, even though Tom Hoying and Joe Germaine are returning veterans.

Harris, offensive coordinator Joe Hollis and head coach John Cooper have all been impressed with Garcia's arm strength in drills. (For more on Garcia, see his profile on page 7.)

"There are times when he really lets it go," Harris said. "I mean, that ball's moving."

But as previously stated, Harris isn't going to be won over on sheer ability. In his year on the OSU staff, he's already proven to be a stickler for the system as much as a fine developer of talent.

"I put a lot of stock in Walt Harris," Cooper said. "I think Walt's done a great job."

Cooper said position evaluations with his offensive staff will be done daily, just like always, but he did admit there is a keener sense of importance in viewing the QB candidates these days.

"I think it's the most important (position) every year," Cooper said. "Without Bobby, there's no question it will be."

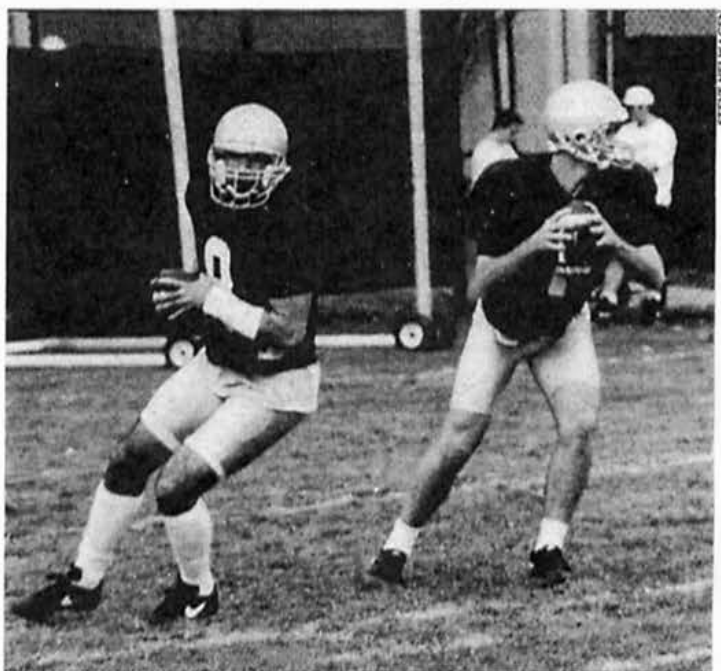
"The offense won't change much, but we're not going to go out there with whichever one of them as a quarterback and ask him to do something he can't do."

What the winner can do will go a long way in determining the team's outlook. The shoes, of course, are large as the elder Hoying was among the nation's passing leaders last year by tossing for 3,269 yards and 29 touchdowns, which crushed school records.

So far, none of the QBs has dared point to those marks.

"We're just all trying to get better right now, and we're helping each other do that," said Germaine, a redshirt sophomore from Scottsdale (Ariz.) Community College.

"It's tough because everyone here has been the starter before and we know



STEVE BELWAGEN

**BACK TO PASS** — OSU junior Stanley Jackson (left) and sophomore Joe Germaine drop back to hurl a pass during a drill at spring practice. Jackson and Germaine, along with juniors Mark Garcia and Tom Hoying, are battling for the starting job.

there is only going to be one guy. But we're all team players."

Germaine admitted he's just trying to keep up with the others after laboring on the scout team last year as a redshirt. Tom Hoying, who waved off an interview request, has drawn praise for his attitude and insight on the practice field, but he may be running out of time. The junior from St. Henry, Ohio, has had his moments but currently doesn't exude the same presence as Jackson or Garcia.

Jackson expects the competition to heat up as spring presses on, but Day One was more of a reacquaintance with the game.

"Everybody came out with little jitters because it's a real big competition," he said. "But we got the bugs out and we're going to continue to work hard. Whatever happens, happens."

Garcia described his first day as "a little shaky," but his zip on out patterns and coachability have been strong out of the gate. The biggest obstacle, and one that apparently still hinders Germaine, is being able to absorb all that is involved with the offense.

"That's just going to come with reps," Garcia said, "and learning the speed of the defense and the speed of my own players."

And the size. Last year, the 215-pound Garcia outweighed his center at Modesto (Calif.) Junior College. This spring he's taking snaps from All-Big Ten candidate Juan Porter, a 6-4, 285-pound senior.

Still another adjustment is dealing with blustery weather that has dipped into the 40-degree range.

"Snow in April is a little different for me, but the weather comes with the territory," Garcia said. "I just have to get used to it and play with it."

Garcia is adding fans daily while he attempts to work his way up the OSU ladder.

"Mark's a very good quarterback," said Germaine, who will be Garcia's roommate next year. "He's got smarts and a very strong arm and he's picking up the offense well, too. I'm happy for him."

"But Stan and Tommy are both good, too. It's going to be interesting to see how it works out," he said.



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# Garcia Showed He's Not Afraid To Take Chances

By STEVE HELWAGEN  
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

The fact Mark Garcia was willing to take a series of risks to come to Ohio State says a lot about him.

Garcia, a junior college transfer quarterback from Modesto, Calif., could have taken the path of least resistance, 65 miles west of his hometown, and played for the University of California at Berkeley.

Instead, Garcia opted to venture across the country to Ohio State. Certainly, OSU's top 5 finish last year contributed to the decision, but the Buckeyes also had a collection of quarterbacks already in the fold to contend for the starting job vacated by three-year starter Bobby Hoying.

But Garcia didn't let the long distance or the odds deter him when he signed with the Buckeyes.

"The whole atmosphere here is what attracted me," Garcia said. "Football around here is the biggest thing to these people, and I just wanted to be a part of something big."

"At Cal, they had a situation where they didn't have a head coach at the time when I was recruited. Football in the East is a lot different than in California. It's a lot more exciting, and I want to be a part of that," he said.

The 6-4, 210-pound Garcia is one of four quarterbacks fighting for OSU's starting job. Juniors Stanley Jackson and Tom Hoying and sophomore Joe Germaine are also in the mix.

Garcia gives up experience in the OSU system to all three of his competitors, but he is not about to concede the race.

"It's tough not knowing the offense as well as the other guys," Garcia said. "Hopefully, after 15 days of practice this spring, I'll get it down a little better."

"It's going to take a lot of hard work. These other guys are picking up their play and it's going to be a lot of competition," he said.

Garcia caught the eye of OSU's first-year quarterbacks coach Walt Harris after piling up an impressive season as a starter at Modesto Junior College.

There, he led Modesto to a 10-1 mark and a JUCO bowl appearance, racking up 3,260 yards and 31 touchdowns against six interceptions. His passing efficiency rating of 195.0 led the nation among JUCO passers and was second at that level all-time.

But even Garcia knows it is a long jump from the JUCO ranks to the Big Ten. His pair of interceptions on his first day in scarlet and gray at spring practice point that out.



Mark Garcia

"It's a lot more mental," Garcia said. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't have the physical part of it. The whole thing of learning a different speed — it's a lot faster — the reads are a lot quicker and just picking everything up."

So far, Harris likes what he sees of Garcia.

"I like him. I got on him a little bit, but he hung in there and it didn't faze him a bit," Harris said. "I kind of got on him for walking to the line of scrimmage, but it didn't faze him, which is good because a quarterback has to be really resilient."

"I was pleased to see him zinging the ball. There's times he really lets go and the ball is moving. (Defenders) won't be able to break on the ball much, and it's a pretty tight spiral. I think he's throwing the ball well right now," he said.

Two years ago, Garcia was a lightly regarded 6-2, 180-pound quarterback coming out of Modesto's Grace Davis High School. Spending a year in the weight room — combined with the good luck of growing a couple of inches — helped make him the player he is today.

And above everything else, Garcia knows the window of opportunity to claim the quarterback job will only be open for so long. But it seems like he wouldn't want to have it any other way.

"Coach Harris said that after the first three days, he'd like to have a good idea of who he wants to spend more time with and give more reps to," Garcia said.

"They're looking at consistency, completions and trying to make good decisions at all times."

"It's a lot of pressure, but that's what I'm here for," he said.

## The Garcia File

NAME — Mark Garcia

HIGH SCHOOL — Modesto (Calif.) Grace Davis High School

JUNIOR COLLEGE — Modesto (Calif.) Junior College

POSITION — Quarterback

HEIGHT, WEIGHT — 6-4, 210 pounds

40-YARD DASH TIME — 4.6 seconds

VITAL STATISTICS — Garcia passed for 3,260 yards and 31 touchdowns against just six interceptions as a sophomore at Modesto JUCO. He led his squad to a 10-1 mark. His passing efficiency rating of 195.0 led the nation among JUCO players and was second at that level all-time. Played backup quarterback and punted as a freshman. Was lightly regarded coming out of a run-oriented offense in high school, but after growing two inches and gaining 30 pounds he was suddenly a major-college prospect. He was rated as the 29th best junior college/prep school player by *The National Recruiting Advisor* and 31st among JUCOs by *SuperPrep*. He has three years left to play two, but a redshirt seems unlikely.

COACH'S COMMENT — "I think he trusts that we're trying to help him get where he wants to go, which is real important. I am pleased to see the way he is zinging the ball." — OSU quarterbacks coach Walt Harris.

SCHOOLS INTERESTED IN — Signed with Ohio State over California and North Carolina State.

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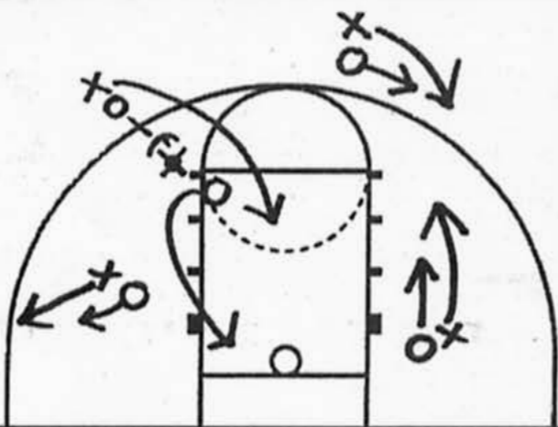
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## Buckeyes Working With Plethora Of Running Backs

## Pearson Primed To Assume Tailback Role

By JEFF RAPP

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

No, there is no Heisman Trophy candidate in the Ohio State backfield, no clear-cut phenom who is sure to ramble for 1,500 — or more — yards.

However, despite the good feelings at this time about Eddie George, there wasn't one last year, either. George simply vaulted into another stratosphere when the 1995 football season beckoned, and the results and all the hardware are now well-documented.

His fairy tale season was not one even the boldest coach would have dared to predict. But that doesn't preclude OSU head coach John Cooper from showering praise on George's likely successor, junior Pepe Pearson.

"I've got a good feeling about Pepe," Cooper said. "I like Pepe — I like his work ethic, I like his quickness. You think of Pepe as some 180-pounder, but he's about 200 pounds. And you look at what he did last year. . . . when we put him in the game last year, he produced."

Pearson, actually listed this spring at 193 pounds, usually entered games well after George had wearied defenses, but he didn't relent, netting 385 rushing yards in just 83 attempts (4.6 per tote). The former Euclid (Ohio) High School track star also was no stranger to the big play. His five receptions last year netted 95 yards, and he busted a 24-yard run vs. Iowa in one stellar relief appearance.

In the first week of spring practice, Pearson showed he still has a penchant for the big-gainer, even though he has added 20 pounds of strength to his frame since arriving on campus in 1994.

"I like what I'm seeing," running backs coach Tim Spencer said. "The other day we were in a zone blocking scheme and he misread the block and still went the distance. I was like, 'No, no, no, cut in. . . . go, go, go.'"

"Coach Cooper and I just sort of looked at each other like, 'wow.' Pepe just has unbelievable quickness and speed."

Now the key, Pearson says, is making sure the coaches know he doesn't plan on relying on his God-given talents. He entered camp intent on showing coaches he was a consistent running back and gave an all-out effort in winter conditioning.

"I'm just trying to get better and better every day," he said. "Hopefully, if I do that I'll set myself apart from everybody else."

"I'm thankful of everything I went through in the winter. To come out here and see if I improve, that's something I wanted to do. If I stay healthy and hang onto the ball and do everything that I'm told, there's no reason why I shouldn't be No. 1."

But with that label comes the daily pressure to succeed at the highest level, both on the field and off. After all, former tailbacks such as Archie Griffin and George are still town icons.

"There are a lot of expectations and pressures that go with being the starting tailback at Ohio State," Pearson said. "That's something I have to handle and deal with."

Of course, there is also the matter of holding off the competition, which right now mainly consists of fellow junior Jermon Jackson.

"Coach (Spencer) told us whoever is the best is who's going to be put out there. He doesn't care who it is," said Jackson, a 5-11, 198-pound burner from Ironton, Ohio.

Jackson was the team's third leading rusher last year with 169 yards, but he remains a mystery man to Buckeye fans.

"The hard thing for me is picking up all the blocks," he said. "That's what I've got to get better on. I'm starting to feel everything's coming now, though."

But unless Pearson slides, he figures to be the main man. If he does secure the job, the next step will be proving he can carry the mail like George did. That's not an easy task when considering George's 328 carries — and minuscule number of fumbles — helped give him the opportunity to claim the Heisman.

"I don't know if I'll see it as often, but I hope I will," Pearson said. "Hopefully, I can do just as well as he did."

For Pearson — or any ball carrier for that matter — to run roughshod over the competition, the blocking will once again have to be in place. It's a team effort that starts up front, often includes the tight end, and certainly relies on the



LOGJAM AT RUNNING BACK — OSU redshirt freshman Charlie Sanders, pictured here catching a pass in a drill, has been moved to fullback for spring practice. There he is competing with Nicky Sualua, Matt Calhoun and Joe Montgomery.

other running backs as well.

At fullback, OSU is blessed with the dual return of the powerful Nicky Sualua and the hard-nosed Matt Calhoun. But Spencer wants even more talent to emerge and is taking a look at redshirts Joe Montgomery and Charlie Sanders at the position.

"We don't necessarily want to take carries away from the tailback, but we definitely want to give the ball to our fullbacks a little more," Spencer said. "We've got a couple of guys who could probably run it 10-12 times a game."

Still, the move did not sit well with Montgomery when he reported to the first day of camp.

"You guys (media) and the coaches made it out so I would play fullback. That's all I can see," said Montgomery, clearly miffed.

"I'm not naturally a fullback, but I've just got to learn to adjust. That's all I can do."

Montgomery said he entered camp weighing 224 pounds, right around his

playing weight as a senior at Oak Lawn (Ill.) Richards High School, in hopes of working in at tailback.

Spencer, who was converted into a fullback during his NFL career, is trying to sell Montgomery on improving his value at FB.

"Our goal is to get the best two guys on the field for that particular play, and he's probably more suited for that position," said the coach. "Plus, we're trying to equal out the numbers."

"Obviously, Joe's technique there needs some work, but I just see him as an in-between back. Besides, it would behoove him to try to do more things on the field."

Montgomery has a golden opportunity since Sualua will spend much of the spring on the sidelines.

"We know what Nicky can do," Spencer said, "and we're not satisfied with the shape he's in. He needs to concentrate on academics and cutting his weight down to 250."

Redshirt freshmen Sanders (5-9, 215) and Matt Keller (6-0, 200) are virtual unknowns, but Spencer sees potential in both. Currently, Sanders is sticking to fullback while Keller, who hails from Cincinnati, is working in at tailback. Those roles could be changed in the fall when several more talented youngsters enter the fray. But for now, Sanders and Keller are just happy to be taking handoffs.

"I like the way both of those guys work," Spencer said. "We're trying to get them more reps so they can learn to think on the run. Matt's a gifted runner and Charlie is strong and very quick. He's probably only a half-step slower than Pepe."

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL

# Running Back Could Be By Committee In '16

By **TIM MOODY**  
 Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When Tony Alford arrived at Ohio State in the spring of 2015, he didn't have to worry about who the workhorse in the running back room would be.

Sure enough, in Alford's first season as the Buckeyes' running backs coach, Ezekiel Elliott powered his way to 1,821 yards and 23 touchdowns on the ground while his backup, Bri'onte Dunn, carried the ball just 14 times for 91 yards and a score. Heading into 2016, Elliott is off to the NFL, leaving Dunn – a fifth-year senior – and redshirt freshman Mike Weber as the only scholarship running backs on the roster who were in Columbus last season.

Behind Dunn and Weber is early enrollee Antonio Williams, but there's no guarantee any of those three players will become an Elliott-esque feature back who receives a majority of carries.

"Will we get to that point? I don't know," Alford said.

That sort of one-back system has become the norm in recent seasons, first under Stan Drayton with running back Carlos Hyde and then Elliott leading the way, then under Alford with Elliott continuing his assault on opposing defenses. The last time Ohio State didn't have a 1,000-yard rusher was 2011, when starting running back Dan Herron was suspended for the season's first six games.

If it does come down to having a committee of running backs splitting carries, Alford said he won't have any problem adjusting.

"If we need to, absolutely," Alford said. "We're going to do whatever it takes to win football games. If it's by committee, it's by committee. If it's not, it's not."

Alford went on to stress that running backs at Ohio State have to be complete players. To use Elliott as an example, he excelled as a ball carrier between the tackles and to the outside, as a pass blocker and as a pass catcher.

Even if Dunn, Weber and Williams aren't all excelling in each of those areas just yet, Alford said they have to strive for that kind of complete game every day in practice.



**FRESH FACES** – Redshirt freshman Mike Weber (20) and early enrollee Antonio Williams (3) are both vying for playing time at running back this season.

PHOTOS BY TIM MOODY

"The one thing we have to make sure that we're doing is that everyone always has to be preparing themselves to be complete football players," Alford said. "They can run, they can catch, they can block, they can run routes, they can cut block, they can run block, they can pass block, they can do it all. That's part of the preparation and how you go to work every day."

Alford noted that Weber excels in pass protection while Dunn has taken a leadership role in the running backs room and Williams has displayed the tendency to be a perfectionist on and off the field.

To look at each back individually, there simply might not be a feature player in that group – this season at least – meaning the Buckeyes could revert to techniques head coach Urban Meyer employed at Florida and his other early coaching stops. Before he arrived in Columbus, Meyer had never had a running back rush for 1,000 yards in a season.

"When we had Carlos Hyde and then Zeke Elliott, at Florida I didn't have those guys," Meyer said. "You know, we had to create running with some other guys."

Meyer finished that statement off by saying he expects to see Ohio State's H-backs – including Dontre Wilson and Curtis Samuel, who played as a running back during his freshman year in 2014 – more involved in the running game this year. He noted that Wilson and Samuel have worked with the running backs this spring, though neither is fully healthy.

But even if Meyer hinted that he expects something closer to a committee than a feature back next season, someone still has to take the

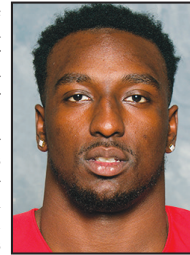
first snap when the Buckeyes open their 2016 campaign against Bowling Green on Sept. 3.

Meyer is on record saying he hopes Dunn rises to the occasion, but the former five-star recruit said he doesn't want that pressure to get to him.

"It's not pressure," Dunn said. "When he says that, I listen but at the same time I stay focused and keep working on everything that I've got to work on, that Coach Alford says I've got to work on. I watch film and want to fix my mistakes quick."

There's no telling just yet if Dunn will fulfill his coach's hopes and start against the Falcons or if he, Weber or Williams will emerge as a lead back this season. The one thing for sure in Alford's running backs room this spring is that Elliott is gone and the current Buckeye backs have a chance to make an impact – whether it be as a committee or not.

"It's their turn to play, and they better step up and play," Alford said. "It's my job to get them ready as the unit leader. Those guys are hungry to play ball, too. It is what it is. It's time to go."



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# Those Who Cross Borders Rarely Switch Back

By RYAN GINN  
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

Jim Harbaugh has finally arrived in Ohio. Although the Michigan head coach brought in three Buckeye State natives in his first recruiting class, two of them had already committed by the time he accepted the job in December 2014.

He avoided the state altogether in the class of 2016 and thus far has no commits in the class of 2017. The Wolverines' lack of a presence in Ohio is in part because Michigan has undertaken a national recruiting strategy similar to the one Harbaugh employed at Stanford, but it also may be because Harbaugh arrived too late to make serious inroads with Ohioans in the class of 2016 thanks to the accelerated nature of recruiting.

Regardless of the reasoning behind his behavior, Ohio State has for the most part not had to worry about defending its in-state prospects from Wolverine overtures. That is no longer the case, however.

Michigan might have raised some eyebrows when it got a commitment from Springfield, Ohio, class of 2018 unranked linebacker Antwan Johnson on March 21, but Johnson does not have an OSU offer. The Wolverines really got Ohio State's attention on April 1 when they picked up a commitment from class of 2018 four-star defensive end Leonard Taylor, a teammate of Johnson's at Springfield.

Taylor had just been offered by the Buckeyes on March 18 and seemed excited by the idea of potentially playing for OSU head coach Urban Meyer.

"I was very happy to get the offer from Ohio State," Taylor told Scout.com. "This offer means a lot, especially that someone like Urban Meyer thinks I can play for his team. Hearing that from him was pretty special. I have great offers, but Ohio State probably sticks out a little more to me.

"It's way too early for me to consider committing anywhere, but it was exciting to talk with Coach Meyer about it. He



JOSH WINSLOW

**ENEMY TERRITORY – Michigan head coach Jim Harbaugh got two commitments from Ohio prospects March 21 and April 1.**

asked me if I wanted some good news, and when I said I did, that's when he told me I had the offer. That sure was good news to me."

Ohio State had good reason to be interested, too. Although class of 2018 prospects have not yet been ranked either by position or overall, Scout.com recruiting analyst Bill Greene told BSB that Taylor will likely end up as a top-five prospect in the state of Ohio in his class.

Greene said Taylor is the type of player often coveted by high-level SEC schools.

"First off, Leonard Taylor passes the eye test with ease and he looks like an NFL player more than a high school sophomore right now," Greene said. "He is a good athlete for his size and has the ability to play either side of the football. While he could play tight end,

I think his future lies on the defensive side of the football.

"He has the frame that can add a lot of weight, so while defensive end would seem to be his future position, I could see him playing defensive tackle at 295 pounds as well. He's just a big, fast athlete and a player you take now and figure out a position later. He has length and the ability to come off the ball with his quick feet. This is the type of athlete Alabama recruits and puts in the NFL four years later."

Exactly two weeks after Ohio State offered him a scholarship, Taylor committed to the Wolverines.

Taylor, who had planned to visit Ohio State for the Buckeyes' spring game April 16, almost certainly won't make that trip now. But given his status as one of the premier players in the state, his commitment to Michigan won't stop Ohio State from pursuing him over the next two years.

"I was surprised by the commitment," Greene said. "I think his head coach was surprised by the commitment. Ohio State is not going to walk away from that."

So the stage is set for at least one big battle in the coming years. Given that Taylor is just a sophomore in high school, there is plenty of time for Ohio State to make its pitch and try to sell him on trading his maize and blue for scarlet and gray.

With Meyer at the helm, flipping prospects is never out of the question. The national championship-winning coach has made a living on the recruiting trail by reversing commitments and taking top prospects from rival schools. With Meyer's recruiting acumen, the school's proximity to Taylor and the need to keep Michigan and Harbaugh from developing a pipeline in Ohio, the betting odds might seem to favor an eventual flip from Michigan to Ohio State.

As is often the case in recruiting, however, the situation is more complex than it seems.

While decommitments seemingly occur at a more frequent rate each year, one particular area has been mostly immune to that phenomenon. When an Ohio native commits

to Michigan or a Michigan native commits to Ohio State, that player almost never flips back to play for his home-state school.

Decommitments were not well-documented until the last couple of years, but all indications from Internet data and conversations with recruiting analysts are that over the past decade (and perhaps even further back), there have been only two instances of a Michigan or Ohio native committing to play in the storied rivalry but in the opposite state only to flip back to his home-state school.

Massillon (Ohio) Washington cornerback Gareon Conley committed to Michigan in March 2012 but decommitted in November 2012 and committed to play for Meyer and Ohio State one month later.

Southfield, Mich., defensive end Lawrence Marshall committed to Ohio State in February 2013 but decommitted three days later and pledged to the Wolverines three months later.

While instances like that of a home-state school wooing back a prospect who decided to leave home might seem like they'd be common, most of the time the prospects who decide to cross enemy lines never come back.

Ohio State has signed eight Michigan natives dating back to the class of 2007 (and has another committed for the class of 2017), and seven of those players had Michigan offers. The Wolverines have signed 51 Ohioans since the class of 2007 (and have two more committed for the class of 2018), and nine of those players had Ohio State offers. Way more often than not, the schools have been able to protect the players they raided from across the border.

One theory that's been floated for the rock-solid commitments across state lines is that players make absolutely sure that school is right for them knowing what might be coming their way from local fans.

"To pull that trigger and say that I'm going to go there, the heat that the young person is going to take – you better be right on," Meyer said.

Added Scout.com recruiting analyst Allen

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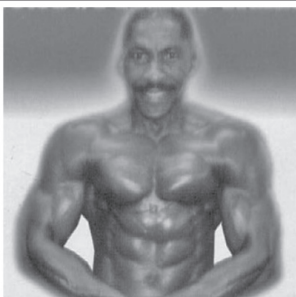
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Trieu, "If you're going to leave your home state for the enemy, you better be really, really sure. I think that's why a lot of the time you don't see decommitments happen."

There's also the possibility that each school does more to hold on to its prospects in the neighboring state, knowing its rival is likely doing everything it can to flip the player back to the home team.

Ann Arbor (Mich.) Pioneer four-star running back and OSU commit Antjuan Simmons, whose high school is across the street from Michigan Stadium, said Ohio State cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs recruits like a madman and seems to relish the chance to swipe prospects from Michigan.

"Ohio State recruited me really hard," Simmons told BSB. "When the recruiting period opened up and they were allowed to talk to the juniors and visit kids, they came in just to say hello and see how I was doing and make sure I was doing fine. They showed a lot of love."

Whether Ohio State will be able to successfully pull back Taylor remains to be seen. The numbers would indicate that flipping the Springfield native isn't a likely outcome, but there's also not a large amount of data on the subject.

"I think the sample size is so small because normally if Ohio State and Michigan are both going after an Ohio kid, the odds are very good that he's going to commit to Ohio State," Greene said. "The same thing is true the other way. If Ohio State and Michigan are both recruiting a Michigan kid, he used to always go to Michigan. There really weren't that many opportunities to flip them back."

To understand the mentality that Ohio



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**FUTURE BUCKEYE – Ann Arbor, Mich., native Antjuan Simmons (left) committed to Ohio State's class of 2017.**

State might be up against, however, one only needs to look back at how hard it's been to pull back local prospects. With the arrival of Harbaugh, Michigan did everything it could to flip class of 2015 four-star running back Mike Weber from his OSU commitment. Meyer said he didn't sleep the night before

signing day while he worked to ensure Weber was a Buckeye. When it came time to sign, he stayed a Buckeye.

Ohio State chased after Alliance (Ohio) Marlington five-star safety Dymonte Thomas in the class of 2013 but couldn't sway him from his Michigan commitment. The

moment he made up his mind to leave home, it was a done deal.

"Once you commit somewhere you don't leave them," the safety said at the time. "You don't do that. That's like having a best friend and stabbing them in the back. You don't do that. Once you commit, you stay 100."

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# Close To OSU, Gill Is Far From A Lock

By RYAN GINN  
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Associate Editor

In the recruiting world, Jaelen Gill to Ohio State should be a sure thing.

The prodigiously talented high school sophomore is a Columbus-area native, and the Buckeyes and Urban Meyer have never missed on a local kid they've wanted. Moreover, there's hardly ever been a Columbus prospect who looked around. Former captain Joshua Perry committed two years early, and redshirt freshman linebacker Nick Conner and departing linebacker Darron Lee both committed the day they received a scholarship offer from Meyer.

Even other schools think Gill, who stars at Westerville (Ohio) South, is destined to wear scarlet and gray.

"A lot of the SEC schools will talk to us but they won't offer him because they think he's an Ohio State lock," Gill's father, Rodney, said. "They talked to us before he got the Ohio State offer, but as soon as he got the Ohio State offer they backed off."

Gill's Ohio State offer, which came in June 2015 – not long after he finished up

his freshman year of high school – showed why the four-star running back is such a big deal.

Meyer isn't shy about explaining why his program seems to offer so many more players from out of state than in the state. Local prospects are much more likely to jump on an offer as soon as it comes (as the aforementioned examples indicate). And even if a recruit takes some time to mull over the offer, it would be political suicide for Meyer's relationship with the state's high school coaches if OSU were to later change its mind on an Ohio kid and pull a scholarship offer.

"I don't say it's positive or negative but in state you have to be very cautious because once that offer goes out you can't pull it," Meyer said. "You're in it. Now out of state if you offer a guy and he has a bunch of other offers you can kind of just move on. In Ohio, you have to be very careful."

So when that Ohio State scholarship offer came Gill's way, the Buckeyes knew they wanted him and would have taken him that second. Many might have expected that to be the case and still expect Gill to end up in Columbus. And while that may still happen, two things in particular make it far from a lock.

The primary reason Gill might end up elsewhere is simple enough: Unlike such players as Conner, Lee and Perry, Gill is willing to look around at other places. He's taken trips to Virginia Tech and Tennessee, and when he spoke to BSB at the Unrivaled Athlete Consulting camp in Akron on April 2 he had just returned from a trip to see UCLA and USC. He already had a UCLA offer going into the trip and picked up one from USC on his trip to the West Coast.

To Gill, it's amazing that it sometimes takes him getting on a plane for schools to realize he's seriously considering going there.

"I think it's kind of funny," he said. "People say I'm an Ohio State lock and stuff. I'm not a lock at all. I'm open to anywhere."

"When they first start talking to me, they ask me if they're wasting their time by recruiting me. I tell them, 'No, not at all.' I'm open to anywhere. I don't have to stay home. I'm making sure I'm making the right decision by seeing which school best fits me. Whichever school best fits me and has the best opportunity and best life after football is the school I'll choose."

Even if Gill ends up at Ohio State, he feels he needs these visits to have a base of comparison that will allow him to make sure Columbus is the right place for him.

"Why not go out to California? Why not go down south? You don't know what's out there until you go out there," he said. "I was impressed with UCLA and USC. It definitely

opened my eyes. I didn't know how good of schools they were until I went out there. You kind of need to do stuff like that."

It would be enough if that's all Ohio State had to contend with, but there's more. Football might not even be the sport Gill plays best. A talented baseball player who projects as a center fielder at the college or pro level, Gill already has scouts telling him he should consider keeping himself draft-eligible as a high schooler for the MLB first-year player draft. Coaches from Vanderbilt, the No. 3-ranked team in the country, have already stopped by to see him.

If Gill develops into a prospect with fifth-round talent or better, his football leverage would easily push his signing bonus offer into six or seven figures. Billy Hamilton, for example, chose pro baseball over playing wide receiver for Mississippi State after the Reds offered him \$623,000.

Both Gill and his father were clear that football is his true passion, and the gridiron is definitely the betting favorite to win out in that choice (especially if the college of his choice also lets him play baseball), but it's not a sure thing.

"That's tough," Gill said. "That's a real tough one. That's definitely something I've talked to my family about. I think about it a lot. Football is my number one love, but I don't have an answer on that one yet. I have a lot to think about with that one."

Given his immense talent, Ohio State is more than happy to wait on an answer.

## Get To Know: Jaelen Gill



**High School** – Westerville (Ohio) South

**Position** – Running back

**Height, Weight** – 6-1, 180 pounds

**Rankings** – Scout.com rates Gill a four-star prospect in the class of 2018.

**Player Evaluation** – "This is one amazing athlete, and I can literally see him playing any number of positions. Defensively, Gill has all the skills needed to be a bigger cornerback in the mold of Eli Apple or a long safety like Tyvis Powell. From an offensive perspective, he has the running back look of Ezekiel Elliott, and that is probably his future position. I would not rule out wide receiver, where Gill could develop into a faster Mike Thomas on the outside. Suffice to say, Gill is a tremendous athlete and a player that has five-star talent. Were he to be ranked against 2016 prospects, he would be listed as one of the top 15 prospects. As a 2018 prospect, he is a national recruit." – Scout.com recruiting analyst Bill Greene

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