

Previewing The 2007 Ohio State Buckeyes

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Who'd we lose? Who's coming back? Where are our strengths and weaknesses? And most importantly, does this Buckeye football team have a chance to play for another national championship? Furls attempts to answer all of these questions in his big picture look at the Buckeye football team ... a piece that will be followed by more detailed position by position looks at the '07 Bucks. Football is back bay-bee!!!!



Forecasting the Ohio State Buckeyes is really strange this year. There are so many unknowns and so many holes to fill. There are so many players that have shown great potential, but how often has the team relied on THEM in the past? Most of the returning starters saw their first significant action last year, and while they performed well, exceptionally in some cases, they did not have to carry the team last year. That was Troy Smith and Antonio Pittman's job. Whether or not this year's juniors have a "sophomore jinx" is going to be one of the key questions for 2007.

Early previews seem to share this Jekyll and Hyde outlook for 2006. I have seen some folks predict Ohio State to finish fourth in the Big Ten, and I have seen others predict the Buckeyes to finish as high as second. The one thing that they all have in common is that they all believe that this Buckeye team will take a big step back in reforming itself following the Troy Smith Era, and why wouldn't they. On the one hand, I think this team may actually have more overall talent than any Buckeye team in recent memory, but on the other hand, there are no known commodities in the offensive skilled positions, and there is, of course, that nasty

matter of a glaring hole in the middle of the defensive line that needs to be filled.

I don't think that this team is ready to compete for a national title, but I am not so quick to dismiss this 2007 Ohio State team from Big Ten contention. There are definitely going to be some big changes and rough transitions, but the easiest transition might be the offensive overhaul from a spread to "Tressel Ball," but if you take a close look at this team, it is actually perfectly built for Tressel Ball.

2007: What will be different?

Obviously Troy Smith and his two favorite targets are gone and with them will go the wide open spread option offense. The fireworks will give way to the fizzle and field position of conservative, old school Ohio State football, but at least we have learned that Jim Tressel will adapt his system and play book to his personnel. The loss of Smith's leadership intangibles will hurt even more than the loss of his efficiency and decision-making in the pocket. He was the unquestioned leader of the 2005 and 2006 teams and brought with him a swagger that will be hard to replace.

The Buckeyes lost two captains in the middle of the defensive line and their most experienced back up, Penton, with no obvious

replacements in hand. Defensive tackles are arguably the most important players in any defense, but strangely the effects of their play go largely unnoticed. Great defensive tackles make inside linebackers look phenomenal, maybe even good enough to win a Nagurski Award. Bad defensive tackles often go unnoticed as well, again, people will just blame the inside linebacker(s) for not getting off blocks. That said, it will be interesting to see if James Laurinaitis retains his 1st Team All American status after this season.

Antonio Smith and Brandon Mitchell have moved on leaving a couple of holes in the secondary, but while they both played well, I am not sure that they are completely irreplaceable. Smith did a terrific job as a second corner and Mitchell's contributions were always a bit undervalued, but the Buckeyes have some talent ready to step in and step up.

Antonio Pittman is gone. It seems like yesterday that I first saw him play as a red shirt freshman. My initial thoughts were that he had much better burst and timing into the hole than Lydell Ross and Maurice Hall, and that he should get more carries. I also remember thinking that I should find a way to slip him a twinkie or two because he was pretty

damn small. Pittman's offseason work ethic was pretty apparent over the next two years as he gained twenty pounds and became a very good all around back. That said, there are already a couple of backs waiting to burst through the hole that Pitt left in the offense when he departed for the NFL.

2007: What will be the same?

Ohio State returns most of its offensive line. Datish and Downing are gone, but the book-ends, Boone and Barton, return along with Rehring. The Buckeyes had very little trouble opening holes last year, and I expect that it will be even easier this year. While Boone has struggled with speed rushers in the past, no one has ever questioned his ability to open up the left side of the line for running backs, nor his ability to finish blocks downfield.

Now that we are back to Tressel-Ball the tight ends will be as important as ever. Expect to see a lot of two tight end sets and more throws into the cover 2 middle seams to Rory Nichol and Jake Ballard will do their best Ben Hartsock impersonations (hopefully no Hamby's).

Ballard had a fantastic spring and would be the featured tight end on just about every team in the nation, in Columbus this year, he will provide a very real second option in the middle of the field.

Ohio State lost senior DE Jay Richardson to the Raiders, but they may have actually upgraded simply by giving Lawrence Wilson more snaps. Wilson showed flashes of brilliance in the rotation last year and coupled with standout Vernon Gholston will create major problems for opposing offenses. Ohio State's DEs will be among the best in the

nation, write it down now; it is a guarantee.

The entire linebacking corps, completely retooled last year following the 2005 NFL exodus, returns with the exception of Kerr. Nagurski Award winner and All-American James Laurinaitis will get all the headlines heading into the season, but word on the street in Columbus right now is to watch out for Marcus Freeman on the outside. The battle for the other outside slot will be pitched and it will be interesting to see who emerges to take the position, but in any case it is pretty clear that Buckeyes will possess great depth at the linebacker position.

The most of exciting change in the secondary

this year may not actually be the emergence of a new face, but the return of a familiar one, Anderson Russell, back from last season's knee injury. Malcolm Jenkins will be back along with Jemario O'Neal and Nick Patterson.

While there are some holes in the secondary, there is definitely some continuity and a lot of talent.

2007: The Outcome

This is the perfect season for the Buckeyes to reload as Ohio State should not be tested until the 9th week of the season. This should provide the

Buckeyes offense ample time to settle in and find an identity. Additionally, Coach Tressel's two deep-roster is not really set until about the third game of the season, so Jim Tressel will have a couple of weeks to get his personnel packages together before the trip out to Seattle.

When it is all said and done, I see three likely outcomes to this season,

all three analogous to other recent Ohio State seasons.

1. 2004

The 2004 team was similar to this team in that it marked a real transition point as Craig Krenzel and the remaining major contributors from the 2002 National Championship team passed the torch to the next generation of Buckeyes. This season was marked by the difficult switch from Craig Krenzel to Justin Zwick and

ultimately to Troy Smith that symbolized the same process that was occurring all over the field as guys like Hawk, Pitcock, and Boone stepped into their new roles

This team is very different from that 2004 team in that there is a lot more continuity to it, more than they nay sayers would have you believe. The Buckeyes clearly lost a lot of talent and leadership, but it is not as though the team is being completely rebuilt on both sides of the ball. This team is much more intact than the one the Jim Tressel fielded following the Fiesta Bowl win over Kansas

State that concluded the 2003 season. I view this as the least likely scenario for the 2007 season, and I think that if you are expecting to see these Buckeyes merely compete for the Capital One or Alamo Bowl, then you are selling this team short.

2. 2002

The homer in me wishes for this team to come from nowhere and to emerge as National Champions, and why couldn't they? There are a lot of similarities. Both teams featured new game managing

quarterbacks and had very good defenses. Nobody expected very much from either team, as they will both start their seasons ranked outside of the top ten. Both teams featured young, outstanding (and unproven) running back prospects. Actually, Wells and Clarrett's running styles are very similar, so there is actually a lot to this comparison.

Unfortunately, there is also a lot missing from this comparison. The 2002 team was able to sneak up on opponents because no one really saw them coming. This team, even

ranked between #10 to #15 will not be able to sneak up on anyone, and there will be a lot of “axes to grind” throughout the Big Ten.

Additionally, while Boeckman and Krenzel were asked to be game managers (smart quarterbacks) there is no debate over which is the smarter quarterback. Also, remember that the 2002 team featured Michael Jenkins and Chris Gamble. There are no receivers on the 2007 team that compare favorably to those two. Last but not least, remember, that 2002 team required a lot of luck to get through all those close games, I am not even

sure that the 2002 team, given a second chance would win them all.

3. 2005

I think the 2007 team most closely resembles the 2005 team. Not necessarily in terms of scheme but in terms of the transition. The 2005 team had much of the same turmoil at the quarterback position and a lot of questions about the wide receivers. The '05 receivers (Ginn and Gonzalez) did not lack talent, but they definitely lacked experience. Defensively, the two teams were very similar. They both

featured a very strong group of linebackers, but also faced some questions about whether Quinn Pitcock, then a sophomore, and Marcus Green would be able to step up and carry the load in the interior line. This year's ends are far superior to that team's (Kudla and Richardson) and the secondary looks to be better than that team's as well.

The two biggest differences between these teams are the schedule and the offensive line. Ohio State's 2007 offensive line should be the best that the team

has put on the field in recent memory. It features three guys who should be first day picks in next year's draft (Boone, Barton, and Rehring) and a nice mix of young talent (Cordle, Smith, and Person). The 2005 team struggled up front early in the season due to its youth and lack of a real running identity. This year it is going to be pretty simple, give the ball to Wells (either of them) and blow open the holes.

The Buckeyes schedule this year plays out very favorably compared

to the 2005 team. The '05 team was continuing to develop following the disappointing '04 season, while staring down the barrel of a loaded University of Texas team in the second week of the season. Further complicating matters, an early road game against a resurgent Penn State team. That Ohio State team was tested by two teams that finished in the top three nationally before it had its legs under it, but I am not sure that there was a better team in the country at the end of the year.

In order to make the dreams of the 2005 season a reality, the Buckeyes must survive an early season road game against Washington (the Buckeyes usually do not travel well early in the season) and Todd Boeckman must emerge as a leader and effective game manager (no game blowing interceptions) by the ninth game of the season. Additionally, Brian Robiskie and Hartline have to pick up where they left off last season, and one of Lyons, Small, or Dukes must emerge as a viable third receiver

to compliment the other two in three and four wide sets. I do not think these things are unreasonable. Therefore, I expect that this team, after some early growing pains, will play to roughly the same level as the 2005 team.

I expect the Buckeyes to enter the final four game swing of their schedule no worse than 7-1 (probably 8-0). Then things get dicey as the Buckeyes hit the road

for Happy Valley and then host the Badgers and Illinois, before finishing the season in Ann Arbor.

I do not think the Buckeyes will be able to run that gauntlet undefeated, but I do not see any team on that list that will be impossible for them to beat. It is interesting to note that the Badgers appear to have the Buckeyes number winning four of the last six matchups including three straight in Columbus.