

An Early Look At The 2008 Buckeyes - Part I

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Returning 18 of 22 starters from a team that played in the BCS title game, there's no question that expectations are once again sky high for Jim Tressel and The Ohio State Buckeyes this season. The problem with returning most of your starters though, is that unless players drastically improve you are still saddled with the same problems that you had the previous season. The problems that were exposed by Illinois and LSU. In the first part of a series looking at the '08 Buckeyes, Furls takes a look back at the flaws that plagued this team a year ago, and figure to be issues again this season.



Part I: Looking Back & Finding the Flaws

The Buckeyes were built to make a run in 2006 behind a dynamic 5th year senior quarterback and two future 1st

round draft picks on the outside. Ohio State had as dangerous an offense as we had seen in the Big Ten in 20 years. The defense was young and talented, but there were real fears that guys like James Laurinaitis, Malcolm Jenkins, and Vernon Gholston lacked the experience to make a title run.

The defense stood tall for the first eleven games before being exposed at home against a good Michigan offense and being embarrassed by a

dynamic Florida offense. The Buckeyes had no defensive answer for Mike Hart and Michigan's running attack, and they had no answer at all for anything Florida did.

The 2007 season was never about competing for a title, at least not to the rational fan. The 2007 was supposed to be Michigan's season to dominate the Big Ten behind their four senior All-American candidates; Mario Manningham, Jake Long, Chad Henne, and Mike Hart, but something funny happened to Michigan on their way to walking through the Big Ten. Apparently every analyst in the country (except this [one](#)) forgot that teams must also play defense. Michigan stumbled out of the gate and never regained it's footing, leaving the door wide open for the Buckeyes. Just like that, a rebuilding/reloading season turned into a National Championship berth.

In much the same sense that [Operation Market Garden](#) is often referred to as "A Bridge Too Far," I often refer to Ohio State's 2007 football team as "A Season Too Early." In the haze of a second consecutive National Championship fanny-tanning lets not forget what the Buckeyes lost in 2006, both the 1

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string quarterbacks and in Gonzo and Ginn Ohio State lost the best 1-2 receiver punch in the country (not to mention the nation's best punt/kick returner). Antonio Pittman, the Buckeyes now forgotten leading rusher from 2006 was gone, and Chris Wells was still an unproven commodity. All we really knew about Wells was that he could carry the ball in spurts and that he had a propensity for dropping it (the ball) sometimes.

The defense lost three out of four starters on the line, including both tackles in All American Quinn Pitcock and David Patterson. Antonio Smith was gone, and while his story was great, his play was average. There was very little doubt that Donald Washington or Andre Amos would be able to pick up where Smith left off. Anderson Russell had suffered a horrific knee injury in the 2006 Iowa game would he still have the speed necessary to make plays in the secondary in 2007? The team was littered with questions, but still the 2007 BCS Championship Game fell into Ohio State's lap. What were they supposed to do, turn it down?

Well, here we are heading into an even numbered year with a loaded 2008 Ohio State squad that returns 18 starters. Buckeyes fans are excited and the rest of college football is exasperated, for it appears that the 2008 Buckeyes are poised to make a charge at a third consecutive title game. I wish it was that simple but it is not.

The problem with returning most of your starters, say 18 out of 22 of them, is that unless players drastically improve you are still saddled with the same problems that you had the previous season. That is exactly the case with the Buckeyes this year. LSU and Illinois, the best two teams that Ohio State played last year, were able to expose major flaws in the 2007 Ohio State team, flaws that if uncorrected would probably cost Ohio State its shot at a championship this year.

Flaw #1

Interior Defensive Line Play: Linebackers, even two-time All Americans, are only as good as the defensive linemen in front of them. A great pair of tackles makes an average linebacker look great, an All American defensive tackle can make a good linebacker look exceptional. This is the story of James Laurinaitis.

James Laurinaitis was the beneficiary of exceptional play by Pitcock and Patterson in front of him in 2006. The point of the statement is not to take anything away from Laurinaitis, but to explain that linebackers are not independent entities on the football field. First and foremost, tackles must prevent interior offensive linemen from making it to the linebackers. If a guard or center is able to get on the middle linebacker, then the first player available to make a tackle for the defense will be either the outside linebacker on a rotation 4-5 yards downfield or a safety 7-10. This was never more prominently on display as it was in the 2007 Illinois game.

The Illini dominated ball for the entire fourth quarter. The Buckeyes would push the Illini into a third and long situation only to watch in horror as James Laurinaitis was unable to make the key tackle. If you slow down the film and take a look you will see that more often than not it was because he had the

center or a guard on him, leading a quarterback draw. The Buckeyes tackles were abandoning their responsibilities to hold the middle of the line to provide pass protection, releasing the center in an effort to get to the quarterback giving the Illini exactly what they wanted, an interior lineman on the middle linebacker four yards down field.

This was not an isolated incident but due to the gravity of the Buckeyes loss, it was the most obvious. The Buckeyes tackles were unable to consistently gain any type of center push, but this fact was generally hidden by the Gholston's ability to provide outside pressure. It is so cliché that it is hard to write, but it is a football truism, defense begins up front, and if you cannot win the middle, well you are going to struggle to win the game.

Flaw #2

Outside Speed: 2006 was a banner year for Ohio State receivers. Tedd Ginn and Anthony Gonzalez would both go on to become first round draft picks, and Anthony Gonzalez looks like he may emerge as one of the steals in the draft as the 30th overall pick. Remember who the #3 receiver was on the 2006 team? Ill give you a hint he was last year's number one, and that is part of the problem. Brian Robiskie is a great possession receiver; he runs terrific routes, has great hands (dropped TD in

the NC game notwithstanding), and blocks well downfield, but no one is going to confuse him with a game breaker, and that is exactly what Les Miles was banking on.

In the months after the game, Miles has been quoted as saying that he knew that Ohio State could not beat LSU with the passing game. It was a gamble for sure, but he was absolutely right. Miles repeatedly dared the Buckeyes to throw the ball, lining up in eight or nine man fronts leaving his corners completely isolated in man coverage on the outside. He was exactly right. Ohio State's receivers could not beat LSU's corners one on one. That above all things has to be scary for the Buckeyes, as these are the same two receivers who stand to bear the bulk of the receiving load this year.

Brian Hartline is obviously very [fast](#), but that track speed has not translated into forcing a defense to respect him deep. This situation is aggravated to some extent by the fact that Hartline lines up in the slot most of the time. He has not shown the quicks, like Gonzo, to consistently turn the nine-yard catches across the middle into big gains with YAC and this is a problem. If your slot receiver is not a big play threat, then the safety over the top can

somewhat abandon him and cheat toward the outside receiver, Robiskie. With Ginn, this was not a big issue because of his extreme speed. With Robo, this is a serious issue.

Flaw #3

Quarterback Play: It is hard to believe that a [guy that I trust completely](#) wrote this about Todd Boeckman early last season:

"Boeckman put up respectable numbers and threw some very nice passes. He is showing all the poise and leadership that you really want to see from your starting quarterback. It may have gone unnoticed, but going into halftime, Boeckman lost his mind of the team for their sloppy play, including the stupid penalties and missed assignments. This is nice to see from a guy making his first road start."

Or worse yet:

"Boeckman looked very sharp. His throws were crisp when they needed to be (Sanzenbacher's TD), soft when they needed to be (Sanzenbacher's drop on the outside fade), and always on time. He stepped into the pressure and made good throws instead of pulling the Charlie Frye (running around and throwing off his back foot). He showed good composure and genuinely seemed to be in synch with the receivers and solidly in control of the offense."

In rereading my game wraps, the warning signs were definitely there. In the Washington game, I eluded to a couple of balls he threw that should have been picked. Against Minnesota Boeckman missed some chances down field and a couple of easy TDs. Inaccuracy against Purdue. Scary throws against Kent. Consecutive defensive TDs under pressure against MSU to put the Spartans back in the game. Of course he played his worst game of the season against Illinois, probably ultimately costing OSU the game. His play against Illinois was so bad that Jim Tressel only let him throw the ball thirteen times the following week at Michigan.

It is amazing because at the time, while the Buckeyes

were winning, Boeckman's play did not seem that bad, yet if you look at it, Boeckman really only played well in about 4 games last year. In the early games, he missed open receivers downfield and threw some questionable balls. Following the Penn State game, his play was better characterized by his happy feet in the pocket than by his stunning early season ability to hit receivers downfield.

At this point it is clear (at least to the coaching staff) that Boeckman played well enough to retain his starting job, but if the Buckeyes are going to have a realistic chance at beating USC or winning a title, Boeckman needs to regain his composure and clean up the mistakes, or the calls for Terrelle Pryor will get louder. This year's Buckeyes are ready to compete for a title now, not developing a quarterback for a run in 2009, so Boeckman will have a lot more leeway than he would have under normal circumstances. Let's just hope he does not need it.

Part II - "Fixing The Flaws"; coming Saturday ...