

An Early Look At The 2008 Buckeyes - Part II

Written by {ga=furls}
Friday, May 30 2008 7:00 PM -

It is always nice to return most of a team's starters as they are known commodities that are one year smarter, faster, and stronger. Unfortunately, it also means that you are returning a lot of the same issues that plagued you a season ago. This year's Buckeye football team returns 18 of 22 starters from a year ago. Thursday's first part of Furls' two-part discussion piece on the 2008 Buckeyes focused on the issues that hurt the team late last year. Today's second installment focuses on what can the Buckeyes do this season to fix those issues.



Part II: Fixing the Flaws

It is always nice to return most of a team's starters as they are known commodities that are one year smarter, faster, and stronger. Unfortunately, it also means that you are returning a lot of the same issues. The [first part](#) of this two-part discussion was concerned with finding the issues from 2007, this second part is concerned with what can the Buckeyes do in 2008 to fix the issues.

Outside Speed: The Buckeyes need a serious speed threat to emerge from the depth. Based on his performance this spring, I think Brian Hartline is poised and ready for a break out season this year, but that is not going to be enough. Robiskie and Hartline's positions in the depth chart remain secure, but things get a bit more interesting at flanker. Right now, Dane Sanzenbacher has the inside

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track at the third receiver position.

While Sanzenbacher is much faster than most would have you believe he is not fast enough to stretch a defense. It is more important for the defense to know that you can actually stretch the field than it is for a team to actually throw downfield. It is the potential for a corner to get beat downfield that will keep a safety at home, and I am not sure that Sanzenbacher inspires that kind of fear in anyone, but Ray Small does.

Ray Small was supposed to replace Tedd Ginn as Ohio State's next downfield threat, but up to this point he has not been able to translate obvious physical talent to consistent on field performance. Small's recent disciplinary [issues](#) in which he lost his number and position on the depth chart, have further exasperated this situation.

In Small's absence Taurian Washington had a fantastic spring. While Washington is pretty fast he still does not have Small's speed or quickness. Outside of Small, the only real burners that Ohio State has on the sideline are DeVier Posey and Lamaar Thomas. Thomas has been hand clocked with a 10.19 hundred (.19 faster than Saine's Ohio High School record 10.38) and "Accutracked" (autoclocked) at 10.30. Players with Thomas' speed have a tendency to struggle with route running for a couple of reasons. The most obvious is that when you are running that fast, it is just hard to cut, but even more it is that at the high school level players with this kind of speed are able to dominate games simply due to their physical advantage. That once decisive edge is no longer sufficient due to the better overall speed in major college football. Thomas is clearly in a speedster class of his own, but his on the field play is not as polished as Posey's.

Posey projects as Brian Robiskie's replacement on the outside, so it is unlikely that he will end up playing much flanker, but it is possible and Posey's speed is grossly underrated as demonstrated in his recent 10.6 in the 100m and sub 22 second 200m. It is going to be very hard to keep him off the field.

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Of course there is the possibility of using Brandon Saine. Saine, the current Ohio High School Athletic Association record holder in the 100m, blew away the Ohio State coaching staff and players at the conclusion of spring practice by posting an other worldly 4.29 second forty. Saine is the obvious heir apparent to Chris Wells but also brings a lot of versatility to the offense as a receiver. Jim Tressel said that Saine had the second best hands on the team following camp last year.

There is plenty of team speed in the Buckeye WR depth chart; there just isn't any experienced speed at the WR position. In the end, the Buckeyes are going to have to get some of these young burners playtime because as much as I would love to believe Ray Small will be the guy, well, fool me once shame on you (etc.). I think it will be some combination of Posey and Washington with an occasional sprinkling of Brandon Saine.

Interior Defensive Line Play:

Many of the Buckeyes errors on the inside last year were mental. As a defensive tackle, you have to be cognizant not only of down and distance, but also of your opponents strengths and weaknesses. When Ohio State sold out on the inside to put pressure on Illinois QB Juice Williams, they were essentially playing him to convert with his arm not his legs. Williams had been efficient in that particular game, but you cannot categorize any portion of his career as a study in passing efficiency. Since Illinois was obviously interested in running the clock out, this made very little sense even on third and ten.

Think about it, if you send the tackles to penetrate with reckless abandon on third and ten you are banking that they will be able to beat a block and then make a play on Juice Williams in space in the vacated (due to the spread) backfield. I will take Juice Williams, or any other running quarterback, to beat a tackle in space ten times out of ten let alone a tackle coming off a block.

Whether this call was determined by linemen reacting to the play or is part of a

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greater defensive philosophy around center push is a relevant discussion. Ohio State, for the most part, has played its tackles very aggressively, which is at least part of the reason why the Buckeyes have been so susceptible to the running/draw aspect of spread offenses. The Illinois game is not the first time that the Buckeyes have been beat by this exact scenario. If there is any risk of a draw play, particularly against a spread, the tackles must at a minimum prevent the interior offensive linemen from reaching the linebackers.

If you were looking for a new guy to step in and change things on the inside, stop. He is not coming as the Buckeyes do not have anyone that is ready to come in out of nowhere and immediately make plays. In Garrett Goebel the Buckeyes did bring in one of the best DT prospects in the nation, but it is exceptionally rare for a true freshman DT to step in and play at a very high level. The difference between high school and college interior lineman is exceptional, and it generally takes young players at least a year to adjust.

This year, the Buckeyes will continue with the Dough Worthington Experiment. Worthington has put on about twenty pounds and will start 2008 at a more respectable interior line playing weight of 285, but at 6'7" Worthington will continue to struggle to play with leverage.

Larimore showed some flashes of great play in 2007 and appears to be the Buckeyes most viable option on the inside, but his play has not been spectacular or consistent. Denlinger has shown more consistency, but has not shown any real flash nor has he shown an ability to push the center of the pocket.

The most surprising aspect of this situation is that the interior line play has been a continuing issue for six years now but the Buckeyes depth issues at the position are not getting any better, nor does it appear that they will get any better in the immediate future. The Buckeyes have only signed one DT in each of the last three recruiting classes (Larimore 2006, Heyward (now a DE) 2007, Goebel 2008), and have only offered to two DT's in the 2009 class (Simon and Ezell). There is a possibility that 2008 recruit Shawntel Rowell could be moved from

guard to DT, but that further underscores the issue DT seems to be an afterthought every year.

Speaking of moving players, this year there is a lot of talk about Ohio State moving Cameron Heyward inside (like the talk last year about moving Rose inside), particularly in obvious passing situations. This makes a lot of sense as Heyward has the size to play inside and plays with the necessary leverage as the Buckeyes best six-technique end, but at the same time it assumes a lot. It assumes that Heyward, as a sophomore, is going to consistently be able to beat interior linemen and maintain his gap(s), an issue that has plagued this line since Pitcock and Patterson left. Heyward will not be able to just pin his ears back and attack. In short, the transition is not as easy as matching a physical skill set to a position where it should succeed even though the positions are similar.

Inconsistent Quarterback Play:

Todd Boeckman put up some very strong statistics last season; that is a fact. In his first year as a starter, Boeckman completed nearly two-thirds of his passes while throwing for 2,400 yards and 25 TDs. Not bad for a first season, but these numbers obfuscate a dirty little secret, Boeckman was nowhere near as efficient as those numbers would lead you to believe.

Much has been made of Ohio State's soft schedule last year, and most of it is true, but if you had to pick the most difficult stretch of the schedule, it would have to be the last four games of the regular season in which Ohio State played Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, and LSU. All five of these opponents would go on to finish the regular season ranked. To get a real feel for Boeckman's season last year, you must break the season down into two parts and compare them, as Ohio State essentially played two seasons, one against the bottom of the Big Ten and a horrific non-conference schedule, the other against the top of the Big Ten and LSU.

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Early season average game (9 games):

15.5 of 23.2 attempts (66.5%) for 198 yards, 2.3TDs .9 INTs

End of season average game (4 games):

13 of 22.5 attempts (57.8%) for 150 yards, 1 TD 1.5 INTs

Normally, I would blindly attribute the decrease in statistics to playing better competition and there is obviously something to that, but after closely watching the Buckeyes last year, something happened to Todd Boeckman. I am not sure why it happened, but in the second half of the Penn State game Todd Boeckman's composure vanished and he began channeling Charlie Frye. I wish I could attribute Boeckman's sloppy play at the end of the season to his relative inexperience as a starter, but that doesn't really make any sense because none of this was evident in the beginning of the season.

Typically once a quarterback gets happy feet they almost never lose them; it is a one-way road. In order to mentally rehabilitate Boeckman, which is exactly what Tressel will have to do, the Buckeyes will have to reshape the offense to give Boeckman more confidence in the pocket. Even then the prognosis is not great, for under these exact circumstances in the Spring Game Boeckman was unimpressive throwing two more interceptions (one was a great play by Coleman, the other was a terrible decision) and fumbling once. In fact, it is possible that if they were going head to head on even footing that Boeckman may have lost the job to Bauserman.

There is no fix for this blemish. Buckeyes fans are going to just have to white knuckle it along with the coaching staff this year. So while it is true that this year's team is ready to compete, there are going to be problems, problems with no easy solution. My sincere hope is that Jim Tressel opts to get his young players into

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blowouts early and start getting them ready for the future. In the past, the Buckeyes have been very quick to go into "prevent offense" (2nd string tailback up the middle). This year, I would really like to see the Bucks let the second stringers open it up some on both ends. I don't want to see the Buckeyes running scores like Bob Stoops, but at the same time, I would like to see the future of the Buckeyes get to run some real plays. Who knows, maybe the Buckeyes will discover someone a year early.