

The Buckeyes return all their running backs from a season ago. Beanie Wells, Maurice Wells, Brandon Saine, and "Boom" Herron. And Beanie is arguably the marquee player on Jim Tressel's 2008 Buckeyes, a team well stocked with future NFL talent. Dan Wismar takes a thorough look at the Buckeye runners in the latest installment of his position by position look at the '08 team.



"If he's not in a class by himself, then it sure doesn't take long to call the roll."

Ohio State junior Chris Wells brings to mind that old line Bum Phillips used to use in the 70's about his star back Earl Campbell. Wells is arguably *the* marquee player on Jim Tressel's 2008 Buckeyes, a team well stocked with future NFL talent. He is touted as the preseason Heisman favorite in many quarters, and seems personally driven to be one of the all-time greats in OSU history.

The man they call "Beanie" is healthy again after being hampered in 2007 with a nagging ankle sprain, and as long as he stays that way, OSU opponents have a real problem. Wells set the OSU record for rushing yards by a sophomore in 2007 with 1609, and only three Buckeyes have ever rushed for more yards in a season (Archie Griffin, Eddie George, and Keith Byars.) He added 15 TD's, and accumulated those numbers playing on a bad ankle, while also sitting out large portions of blowout victories. He will be concern No. 1 for every defense the Buckeyes play.

And keeping him healthy for 13 games will be concern No. 1 for Coach Tressel. The Heisman hype has begun ([guilty, as charged](#)) and Tressel will have to make game-by-game decisions on whether to leave a healthy Chris Wells in the game to help his stats, and thus a possible Heisman run, or rest him for the long haul of the season. There are two reasons why I suspect he'll do the latter. His track

record is to subordinate individual statistics to team goals as a rule. And he's got a lot of other good running backs that deserve to play.

The entire group of OSU running backs (*not fullbacks*) returns intact from 2007, another area of the team in which a year of experience and maturity stands to benefit the Buckeyes in 2008. Of the 19 returning starters on the 2008 team, Wells is just one of 13 who were first-time starters a year ago.

Wells' two principal backups, Maurice Wells ('07 rushing: 367 yds.) and Brandon Saine ('07 rushing: 267 yds.) will again vie for playing time behind the starter, and Dan "Boom" Herron is coming off a redshirt year looking ready to push for some field time too. True freshman Lazaar Thomas might also make an early splash in this group. He looks too good to redshirt.

Projected Starter: [Chris Wells](#) - #28 - Junior 6' 1";, 237 lbs. (Akron, OH)
Garfield H.S.

The numbers for Wells from 2007: 1609 yards rushing, 15 TD's, a 5.9 yd. rushing avg. He had five pass receptions for 21 yds. And he rushed for only 63 yards combined against two of the Buckeyes' weakest opponents, YSU and Kent St., by coach's decision. Without making too much of the health issue, it's worth noting that Wells was actually more seriously injured than even the coaches knew at the time.

In addition to the season-long ankle sprain, he had injured his wrist as well, and that injury required surgery over the winter, and caused him to be held out of spring practice. In fact, both injuries happened on the same play, a year ago in spring ball, when he was sandwiched by three of his defensive teammates. He said he couldn't worry about the wrist all season because his ankle was killing him.

Wells had four painful 100-yd games in the early going, then ground out 85 yds. at Purdue, but went only four carries against Kent. Sometime around that part the season, a little bird must have whispered to Wells that the great ones play hurt. Over the course of the last six games, only Illinois held him to less than 133 yds., and he ran over Michigan State and Michigan for 221 and 222 respectively. He had 146 in 20 carries against LSU, and set a title game record with a 65-yard TD.

([Wells 2007 stats](#))

The focus and determination has carried over into 2008, as he aims to be more consistent and precise in his execution this season. A year of experience working with Boeckman and the O-line should help with that, and the talent is unmistakable. Best of all, Chris Wells seems to sense the opportunity, there for the taking. All the pieces are in place for a date in New York in December: an exceptional offensive line...the national exposure....a balanced offense...a favorite's headstart...the T-shirt..

Wells has not been above [talking about the H-word](#) . But when the whistle blows he'll be all about team. He's a Tressel guy.

Reserves:

[Maurice Wells](#) - #34 - Senior 5'10" ; 196 lbs. (Jacksonville, FL) Sandalwood H.S.

Mo Wells has spent his entire OSU career playing in the shadows of other players, and that doesn't figure to change much this season. In 2007, he rushed for 367 yds. on 103 carries, for a 3.6 yd. average. He had ten pass receptions for a modest 47 yards.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Wells had an unreal high school career in Florida. As a junior his numbers were an eye-popping 3076 yds and 31 touchdowns. He committed to OSU on national TV at the Army All-American Game. OSU coaches gushed about his talents. But if Mo Wells has any regrets about deciding to be a Buckeye, you'd never know it from his attitude or effort on or off the field.

Wells was the first running back off of Tressel's bench most of the time in 2007, and he gradually began to show some of the strength and toughness required to run between the tackles that hadn't been apparent in his first two seasons. He does have extraordinary quickness and excellent speed once he gets into space, but he had struggled to absorb the first hit, and make it to the space. That said, he still has the kind of talent that might have made him a star in a system designed more to suit his skills.

Instead, Wells has been a loyal Buckeye backup, and as a senior he'll continue to

give the Bucks a change-of-pace off the bench, and be a contributor on return teams. I'd make a small wager that he'll be on an NFL roster next year.

[Brandon Saine](#) - #3 - Sophomore 6' 1" ; 217 lbs. Piqua (OH) H.S.

OSU fans got just a glimpse of Brandon Saine during his freshman year as a Buckeye last season, and he showed them flashes of talent when he got the opportunities. That talent was no surprise to anyone in Ohio who knows what "Mr. Football" means. Saine won the award in 2006 as the state's best player, led his team to the state championship, and also won state track championships in both the 100-meter, and 400-meter dashes, for two consecutive years. His 10.38 100-meters set the state meet record. Is there a "Mr. Track"?

Saine had 60 carries for 267 yards and two rushing TD's for the 2007 Buckeyes, and he showed good hands too, hauling in 12 passes for 160 yds and one score. The season started well for the freshman, peaked in one game in mid-season, and then for whatever reason, he was rarely used over the last six games. ([Saine 2007 stats](#))

In the season opener Saine had 42 yards on 10 carries, and his season high for rushing yards came in the third game, at Washington, when he ran for 83 yards on nine carries, including a 37-yarder. He didn't play the following week against Northwestern and it was disclosed that he had undergone arthroscopic knee surgery.

Saine only missed two games as a result of the surgery, and in his second week back, he led the team in both rushing (69 yds) and receiving (76 yds) in the Buckeyes' 48-3 win over Kent State, a feat no Buckeye running back had accomplished for six years. Through seven games, Saine had 242 rushing yards, and a 5.6 yd. average. But the last six games yielded only 17 more carries and 25 yards for Saine, as the coaches went mostly with Mo Wells when Beanie needed a break.

In the offseason, in the attempt to get Beanie and Saine on the field at the same time, OSU coaches have installed the "Pony" set, a formation that uses Saine instead of a fullback, and aims at isolating him against a slower defender...which will include just about everybody.

[Dan 'Boom' Herron](#) - #2 - RS Freshman 5' 10" 193 lbs. Warren (OH) Harding H.S.

Herron had his helmet on a number of times during games last season, when it looked like he might get on the field, and take off the redshirt, as they say. With Wells and Wells and Saine as banged up as they were, it surprised a lot of people that the coaches were able to avoid using up a year of Herron's eligibility, and still have enough tailback manpower to make it through the year.

Herron, an all-state tailback from Warren Harding, is glad now that they held him back, having put a year into intense practice and weight training. He ran with the scout team in 2007, and opened eyes, earning several of player of the week awards. He finally had his Buckeye coming out party in the [Spring Game this year](#) and showed well. I recall writing at the time that he was the most impressive running back in the game (which Beanie sat out.)

He had only about 30 yards rushing that soggy day, but showed some instincts and a patience not always present in freshmen. He showed quickness in and out of cuts that was impressive. He's not really big, but he got tough yards after the initial hit. He's not blazing fast, but he'd get to the corner, and he consistently fell forward for the extra one or two yards. A gamer, you might say.

Herron will see some action this year at the running back position. The questions are how much, and how meaningful that action will be. I would think he'll also get a look returning kickoffs, an area in which the Buckeyes could use a lot of improvement. Boom could probably start for half the teams in the Big Ten. In Columbus, he's fourth-string, with a bullet.

[Lamaar Thomas](#) - Freshman - 5' 11" 186 lbs. (Ft. Washington, MD) Friendly H.S.

It should be hard for a guy to get labeled a "sleeper" in a recruiting class when he was rated by Scout.com as the #10 running back in the nation, and then starred in the nationally televised Army All-American Game. But Lamaar Thomas has somehow flown under the radar, in contrast to the attention garnered by some of his incoming freshman mates like Pryor, Adams, Posey, Brewster and Sabino.

Thomas is such a versatile player that it was unclear at first to recruiting observers whether he was being sought as a receiver or as a running back by the Buckeyes. He played mostly at running back in high school, and in the A-A game, but his receiving skills are good enough to look at him there as well. When he signed with OSU, the official word was "receiver/athlete". No matter, I suppose, because Jim Tressel recruits in just three basic categories, and the one Lamaar Thomas falls in is "Speed".

Thomas runs a 4.4 40-yd dash and won the Maryland state championship in the 55 and 100-meter dashes, with a 10.3 time in the 100M. He says the OSU coaches have shown him various formations they plan to use to get him the ball in space, (a player named Ginn was mentioned about this time) and that they plan to use him in the return games. In the A-A game and on film, he reminded me a bit of another Thomas, the one named Thurman, a great receiving threat out of the backfield in his day.

So as I dub Thomas my "sleeper" of the 2008 class, I concede that there's a chance the coaches foil my plan, and elect to redshirt the speedster, given the talent above him on the depth chart. The luxury of such depth on the roster may allow the coaches to let him work with S&C Coach Eric Lichter for a year to develop better physically before competing at this level. But somehow, I'll bet his pure speed and versatility find the field.

[Bo Delande](#) - #35 - RS Freshman - 6' 0"; 184 lbs. (Hilliard OH) Davidson H.S.

Delande makes this list for a few reasons. First and foremost because it's quite likely that Buckeye fans will see him play at some point during the season, and might want to know more about #35. Delande walked on to the team last year after leading his Hilliard Davidson Wildcats to the D-1 State Title his senior year. In the title game, Delande scored five touchdowns, plus the walk-off two-point conversion to win the game over Mentor, 36-35. He rushed for 236 yards on 47 carries. Next we'll find out he was the Homecoming King, for heaven's sake. Just a great story.

Delande turned down D-1 offers elsewhere when given the opportunity to play at his dream school for Jim Tressel. He's a college football player for all the right reasons. That's another reason he's on this list.

Then he got my attention in the Spring Game, when he carried the ball several times in the late stages, and just looked like a football player. Nothing fancy. Just hard running...dropping the shoulder, making the tackler pay. Knowing he's a walk-on made it even better. Plus I just love the name. It sounds like a Buckeye. Delande is one Buckeye we might not see unless the good guys have a four-touchdown lead in the fourth quarter. But then again, there may be more than a couple of those games in 2008. #35 is a baller.

After Chris Wells, the 2008 Buckeyes have talent at the running back position, but no one who could be considered a dominant every-down back in the Big Ten at this point in his career. For that reason, there is no other single player for whom staying healthy is more important to the entire OSU team than Chris Wells. Just thought I'd state the blindingly obvious one more time for emphasis.

Links:

[2008 Ohio State Football Roster](#) (excluding freshmen not yet enrolled)

[2008 Incoming OSU Freshmen](#)

This is the third in a series on the 2008 Buckeyes. Previous installments listed below

[Meet the 2008 Buckeyes:Quarterbacks](#)

[Meet the 2008 Buckeyes:Offensive Line](#)