



We're past the halfway point of Ohio State spring football practice, and a couple of "big picture" themes are starting to emerge from the mountain of detailed information coming out of Buckeye camp. Today I'll take a look at some of those general trends, and then run down the spring outlook on the offensive side of the ball for the Buckeyes. Next week I'll be back at you with a report on Saturday's jersey scrimmage in Columbus as well as a look at how the defensive personnel is shaping up this spring.

Routinely high expectations are ratcheted up a couple notches coming into the 2010 season. Coach Tressel has been pushing an in-house spring mantra of "Don't Believe the Hype", to make sure his players don't get caught up in the notion that they'll win just because they're favored to win, or because the pundits write something in July that says Ohio State is the No. 2 or No. 3 team in the country. (*I'm thinking "Remember Purdue 2009" might be just as effective, but the point is clear enough.*)

Instead the staff is trying to capitalize on the momentum gathered in the six-game winning streak that ended the 2009 campaign, peaking with the decisive Rose Bowl victory. This is a veteran team, and the coaches are taking the approach that spring ball is the next step in the logical progression from that successful day in Pasadena, as opposed to a return to basics, or a start from scratch. And with good reason...

Officially, the Buckeyes will be returning 16 of 22 starters from the 2009 offensive and defensive units, but the reality is that at only two spots (safety and OLB) will OSU be starting a player this season who didn't have significant playing time, if not game starts, in 2009. (The kicking specialists and kick returners are a different matter entirely, but more on that later.)

Along with demanding a higher level of efficiency at an earlier point in training camp, Tressel has noticeably picked up the pace at which practices are conducted. We can attribute this development at least in part to the off-season visits Tressel and his staff had with coaching staffs from LSU, Oklahoma and Virginia Tech among others. It is also part of an OSU organizational philosophy, holding that little is gained by "walking through" anything, since there is nothing in a game taking place at half-speed.

It's also a bit easier to pick up the pace when your quarterback has 23 college football starts under his belt, and is now clearly taking charge of the offense as its unquestioned leader.

Pryor v.2010

All indications are that Terrelle Pryor is 100% healthy after arthroscopic knee surgery this winter, and so far this spring, he has played like the experienced veteran he is. Though I won't see him in person till this weekend, beat reporters and other practice observers agree that Pryor's throwing mechanics, his decision-making, and his command of the offense are all noticeably improved this spring.

His confidence in what he's doing is reflected in the zip he's got on his throws, and in his willingness to squeeze the ball into narrow openings in coverage. He is looking to the middle of the field more, and doing a better job of moving through his progressions to his second or third receiver options. It's fair to expect that the offensive scheme that served to make Pryor the Rose Bowl MVP...a precision short and intermediate passing attack, balanced with a punishing rushing game...and the mercurial Pryor in the shotgun...is the offense Buckeye fans can expect to see from Game One in 2010.

Yes, Jim Tressel will reserve the right to button it up when "three-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust" makes strategic sense in a game, but there is a sense that the effective offense this team searched for throughout the 2009 season was finally "found" in 2009 bowl preparations, and unveiled on January 1st, and that this year's team will build on it and refine it. Assistant Head Coach Darrell Hazell, who is taking an increasing role in developing the offensive scheme, admits that this year the playbook is a lot bigger for Pryor and the offense than it was a year ago, and Pryor's game experience is just one of the reasons for that.

Deep, Veteran O-Line

Another reason to expect better offensive execution in 2010 is the development and strength along the offensive line, especially on the interior. In LG Justin Boren, C Mike Brewster, and RG Bryant Browning, the Buckeyes will have three 3-year starters on the inside (counting Boren's one year at UM). Brewster's injury problems are behind him, and he appears stronger and poised to have a breakout year at center, and his fellow B's at the guard spots are both road-graders with attitude. The experience of having played an entire season together in 2009

should pay big dividends for the interior trio of OSU offensive linemen.

J.B. Shugarts is a returning starter at right tackle, and at the other tackle, Mike Adams and Andrew Miller are still competing for the starting nod, but they had seven 2009 starts between them at left tackle, so there's lots of game experience and depth at the position regardless of who starts. Adams, Miller and Shugarts are reportedly in the best shape of their lives, and Buckeye fans could be finally about to see the dominating "Block O" offensive line (featuring Adams, Brewster, and Shugarts) they envisioned two years ago when the celebrated recruiting class arrived in Columbus.

There's also depth this year on the O-line that we haven't seen in a few years at OSU. The second unit at the moment looks like this: LT Miller/Adams, LG Connor Smith, C Jack Mewhort, RG Corey Linsley, RT Marcus Hall. Mewhort and Linsley are alternating as the backup at center, and Mewhort has shown the versatility to play tackle as well. Hall played enough tackle as a freshman (including one start) to show the coaches he's the real deal, and he'll be a legitimate challenger to Shugarts for playing time.

The bottom line for Pryor and his skill-position teammates is that not only will they have more plays in the playbook this year, but with a big, experienced offensive line in front of them, they should have more time to run them.

Stop me if you've heard this one...

At the risk of generating loud guffaws from Buckeye fans everywhere, I'll note that, to a man, people whose word I trust implicitly are saying that Ohio State will be making increased use of the tight end in the passing game in 2010, and that projected starter Jake Stoneburner has been one of the most impressive performers in spring ball to this point. Stoneburner has been beset by injuries since he arrived in the 2008 class with Pryor and the "Block O" boys, but his potential is finally being tapped this spring, and he has been a receiving threat down the middle for Pryor, catching everything in sight.

Stoneburner's scary size (6' 5", 250), speed (4.6) and hands combination has never been in doubt, and it looks as if now Pryor is comfortable enough in the system to locate him downfield and deliver the ball. Sophomore TE Reid Fragel has been impressive as well, and we'll see both of them on the field at times in 2-TE sets.

I hear you skeptics... *"next he'll be telling us they're going to throw to the running backs too"*. Well...yeah, it looks that way so far...and it's not really a new 2010 development. Brandon Saine (2009 - 17 rec., 224 yds, 2 TD) has always been able to catch the ball well (and he scored on a pass reception in the Rose Bowl). Recall that Dan Herron caught a *screen pass*, of all things, for a score against Michigan. Remember too that fullback Zach Boren had a couple of huge receptions against Penn State for first downs...(notice how all this was occurring in the last third of the 2009 season?)

Expect that trend to continue into 2010, because the team is showing a lot of pass plays to backs this spring, and the up-and-coming running backs Jordan Hall and Jamaal Berry have also both shown good hands and receiving instincts in the early going. Chalk it up to the Hazell-effect...or to the ongoing maturation of Pryor...or to the evolution of Jim Tressel...whatever. It's another weapon in the arsenal, and a welcome one.

WR's and RB's

The good news at the offensive skill positions is that everybody is back from the 2009 team. The better news is that strong recruiting at wide receiver and running back in the last two years is providing depth in both units for 2010. The bad news is that the talent is deeper than the experience.....after Herron and Saine among the backs, and after Posey and Sanzenbacher for the wideouts.

If there's a consensus among the beat writers about anything this spring it is that junior wide receiver DeVier Posey looks like a man among boys in this OSU camp. He's stronger, more focused, running more precise routes, and showing great explosiveness after the catch. If there's any down side to the tale, it's that if he wants to go play on Sundays after this season, we can all kiss him goodbye. Think all-conference, maybe All-American in 2010.

After Posey and Dane Sanzenbacher as the returning starters, the next several slots in the WR rotation are truly up for grabs. Those two combined for 96 catches, 1398 yards and 14 TD's in 2009, but no other receiver currently in camp had so much as a single pass reception last season. Sophomore Duron Carter had 13 receptions, but he is not in camp owing to academic problems that may or may not be resolved by the start of the season. Meanwhile, his dad is a regular at practice, working with the other wide receivers. What a great message Cris Carter sends to the rest of the players by doing that, by the way.

Right now, they have Taurian Washington as the #3 receiver (he of the stellar Spring Games and the regular season drops), but if Carter fails to make the classroom progress he needs, look for senior Grant Schwartz or redshirt freshman Chris Fields to get playing time in the 3 and 4-WR sets. Sophomore James Jackson is another comer in that unit, but it has been Fields getting most of the rave reviews this spring. He's slightly smaller (6' 0", 185) than Posey, but looks to have a similar skill set. Fields may get his first playing time returning kicks.

The Bucks have three incoming freshmen at wide receiver, but it would be a surprise if we see any of them on the field anywhere outside of special teams in 2010.

At running back, the 2010 Bucks have more depth than they have had on any team in my memory...and I'm old. That said, if there is a running back talent on this roster comparable to a Wells or a Clarett, I have yet to see him play.

Dan Herron and Brandon Saine have to be considered the co-starters, (with Saine having the clear edge in my opinion, after their respective 2009 performances), but it looks as if both sophomore Jordan Hall and redshirt freshman Jaamal Berry will force their way onto the field this season, based on their spring showings. At the moment, Hall would probably have to be considered the #3 tailback.

I've heard people I respect say they think Jordan Hall is the best RB on the OSU roster. I trust Tressel to play him if that's true. And Berry has finally shaken the injury problems that forced him into a redshirt year last season, and has shown a quickness and acceleration that is unique among all Buckeye running backs on the roster. At some point this season, OSU offensive coaches may have the nice problem of trying to find snaps for Hall and Berry in games, just to find out if they can replicate what everyone sees in practice.

Sophomore Jermil Martin and incoming freshmen Carlos Hyde and Rod Smith round out a very talented group, but all three are long shots to play much this season.

Replacing Kickers

Last week's kick scrimmage helped somewhat to clarify the roles for three OSU kickers going into the new season. Devin Barclay, the former walk-on who bailed out the Buckeyes last year when Aaron Pettrey got hurt, appears to be the most accurate of the placekickers inside 40 yards, but he definitely struggles outside that range. Freshman punter-kicker Drew Basil has the early edge to win the job kicking off, putting the ball into the end zone with some consistency, and his big leg might wind up as the choice for longer field goal attempts as well.

Sophomore Ben Buchanan has apparently won the punting job, and should be an upgrade over Jon Thoma. Buchanan could still be a factor in the competition for field goal duty as well, but he had the same issue as Barclay...looking fairly good on the short range kicks, but less so on the longer attempts.

On the kick return units, the coaches are experimenting with a number of guys, including Posey, Sanzenbacher, Fields and cornerback Devon Torrence on punt returns. On the kickoff return teams, all the running backs are getting reps, with Herron, Saine, Hall and Berry seeing action along with Torrence.

Another emphasis in this Buckeye camp has been attention to the special teams units by Tressel and his staff. There is no designated coach for special teams in the OSU program, and Tressel has taken this area to be his personal domain. Closer to the truth is that the various special teams coaching duties are delegated to different assistants, coordinated by Tressel. It's fair to say that over the last couple of seasons, Tressel's rep as a special teams guru has taken a hit, as both the Buckeye kick/punt return and kick coverage units have been, to be charitable, below average.

The 2009 Iowa game never gets to overtime without a 100-yard kickoff return TD for the

Hawkeyes. Then in the Rose Bowl, the kick coverage teams simply bottomed out. The Ducks had some dynamic returners, but the OSU coverage teams were shredded repeatedly, setting Oregon up with field position that they weren't ever able to achieve against the OSU defense. With an average showing by the kick coverage teams for OSU, that game is not close. Nobody knows that better than Tressel, and his commitment to make it better is showing this spring.

In His Own Words

Jim Tressel took part in a teleconference call with the other Big Ten coaches this week, and some of his remarks are worth reproducing here for those who may have missed them.

On the development and improvement of his quarterback Terrelle Pryor....

"As I think back to what Coach Siciliano, Jim Bollman and Darrell Hazell have talked about in Terrell's case, he has really done a good job of working on his feet. He has done a good job keeping his feet patient. And as he's grown to experience more and more about how people try to defend us, he's done a good job keeping his feet in synch.

"With that thought process, I think he has also done a good job of having a lot better recognition and understanding for the progression of receivers all the way down to the check-downs. I think when you are young as a quarterback you try to memorize who is the primary read and those kinds of things, and the older you get, as you watch the defense, you know who is one, two and three. ... He's done a good job of growing in that area.

"I think in general his calmness and his command has improved over the course of these first seven practices. I think he really began heading in this direction during the month long bowl practices.

On Pryor's work ethic...

"He trains exceptionally hard... Honestly, I think the thing you have to worry about with Terrelle is over-training. He likes to work so much. You see him coming in here at six in the morning...making appointments with the strength coach to work on this or that, and yet we have a practice later in the day. In his excitement to become as good as he can...we have to pull his reins in."

Asked if he has been surprised by what Pryor has been able to achieve thus far...

"I don't know that I expected him to, after two years, have been the starting quarterback on two Big Ten championship teams and in two BCS games," Tressel said. "I don't know that I thought this was going to be a walk in the park for him to do that."

“Am I surprised that he has been a part of that? No. I don’t know that I thought this was going to be an automatic, though. In terms of his development, you never know what the experience level of a guy is going to be. You never know how he is going to be health-wise. You don’t know if he’s even going to get into the lineup to get those repetitions one needs to get better.□ But he’s been fortunate to get opportunities to play and he has remained fairly healthy. To have the number of games under his belt at this point of his career is pretty good.

“He is a junior now and the expectations here are rising.”

On Big Ten expansion...

“I would expect there to be significant discussion for expansion. I think the Big Ten sits in an enviable position, honestly. We have a little bit of a central location. There are people a little to our west and to our south and to our east who may have an interest being part of this group. This is, in my mind, the finest group of academic institutions in this country. Obviously anyone would want to be a part of this as an institution.

“I think the fact we have the Big Ten Network, which has proven to be so successful, is also something someone would want to be a part of.

“Typically when things are brought forward and there is a rationale made and it makes sense, I’m on board, whether it’s a rule change the NCAA has made ... or in the case of expansion.

“I’m sure whatever rationale is come up with we’ll be on board and we’ll get excited to be a part of it.”

Loose Leaves

As expected by all but the most delusional OSU fans, Evan Turner has [decided to turn pro](#) . He'll need the money for a trophy case to handle all of his new hardware.

Last week, Turner completed a clean sweep of the major postseason basketball honors by winning the [Wooden Award](#) . That can now go into the trophy case alongside the [Naismith Award](#) , the [Sporting News POY Award](#) , the

[Associated Press honor](#)

, the

[NABC Player of the Year Award](#)

, and the

[USBWA's Oscar Robertson Award](#)

. I don't think that's ever been done before. Don't quote me on that.

Speaking of things never done before, OSU leads their 2009 Season Review (linked below) with the notable factoid that the 11-2 Ohio State Buckeyes in 2009 became the first FBS team ever to defeat five 10-win opponents in a season (Navy, Penn St., Iowa, Wisconsin, Oregon)

It's a little easier to do that since the FBS made the 12 game schedule uniform, and roughly 70 bowl teams play 13 games, but that's still one record that might stand for a while. My other thought on hearing about that achievement by last year's team was that if someone had told you before the season started that OSU would beat five 10-win teams, how much would you have bet that USC would be one of them?

Links:

[2010 Spring Football Media Guide](#)

[2010 OSU Roster](#)

[OSU Athletic Communications - 2009 Season Review \(pdf\)](#)