



Spring football is underway in Columbus with all the usual personnel question marks and competitions, with unproven players vying for important starting roles for the Buckeyes. But there's nothing usual about the circumstances this time around.

To begin with, the biggest holes to be filled are only temporary ones. The Buckeyes will be five games into the 2011 season before they are permitted to play their key returning starters at quarterback, left tackle, running back and wide receiver. Of those four offensive vacancies, perhaps only running back is likely to be filled without the team suffering a noticeable dropoff in performance.

The defense actually lost more starters than the offense did off the 12-1 Sugar Bowl champions...and they're not coming back in October. But the talent and experience lined up to replace the graduating defensive performers makes that side of the ball a somewhat lesser concern for the coaching staff.

And speaking of filling holes...and the coaching staff...

DiVestiture

divest - *verb*

- a. To deprive, as of rights or property; dispossess.
- b. To free of; rid:
- c. To be without The Vest

Okay, so that last one's not straight out of Merriam-Webster. Ohio State will not be "free of" Jim Tressel, or "rid" of him in any real sense, but they will be "deprived" of him on the sidelines for (at least) five Saturdays this fall.

It's a safe bet that the story of Tressel's suspension will supersede all other media angles as the season approaches, and depending on what happens with the NCAA between now and Labor Day, it may dominate the reporting more than we now realize. I'm sure it will be palpably strange that first Saturday, when for the first time in 60 years, someone not named Hayes, Bruce, Cooper or Tressel will be coaching the Ohio State Buckeyes. But this too shall pass.

With the national media spotlight focused on Ohio State more than it might be in a conventional season, and the coach's name on everyone's lips due to the scandal, Tressel could well find himself in the position of being the center of attention on game day, even though he's nowhere to be seen. While that's mildly ironic, it will probably also lead to exaggerating the effect of divestiture on the team's performance.

I think Tressel's absence from the sidelines will have some impact on how the team fares, but not nearly as much as the fact that his Buckeyes will have 15 new starters playing in the September 3rd opener against Akron. I come up with two big reasons why Tressel's suspension will mean less instead of more on the field...

1) *Sunday through Friday*. Tressel is prohibited from being near the Horseshoe on Saturday, but the rest of the week will proceed as it always has, in terms of game-planning, practicing, teaching, film study, etc. Coach Tressel will not be around to call the plays on game day...and there will be no shortage of fans who will consider that not a bug, but a feature of divestiture. (Look for a major contribution to the offensive play-calling by the name of "[Dave](#)")

2) *The defense belongs entirely to Jim Heacock*. Apart from receiving some pre-game and

halftime remarks from Tressel, half the team will experience virtually no departure from how they are coached on game day. The man who famously has his fingerprints on every aspect of the football program makes one big exception for the defense. He makes no attempt to speak for, or take credit for what Heacock and Luke Fickell are thinking or planning or executing on game day.

The Gipper Factor?

Say what you will about the nature or severity of the violations committed by Jim Tressel, he has shown himself to be a “player’s coach” to the max.....indeed to the point of unwittingly orchestrating his own undoing. It is clear that most of Tressel’s players over the years revere him as a mentor and as a man, and that appears to be no less true in the aftermath of the suspensions. People close to the program are picking up a mounting solidarity and appreciation for Tressel among the players, and a sense that those first five games will be played *for* him, since they will not be *with* him.

This team may not need an emotional edge against Akron and Toledo (though Toledo figures to be tougher than most people assume) but they may need to summon a little “win one for the Gipper” attitude for their Vestless road trips to Miami and Michigan State.

It is an old adage that a team adopts and conforms to the personality of their coach, and that has been particularly true of Tressel’s Buckeyes, I think. Composed....conservative...unflappable, perhaps even boring...all are words equally applicable to Tressel and at times, his teams. His steady demeanor on the sidelines has often had a calming effect on the Bucks in tense game situations over the years.

It’s not too soon to start wondering if they’ll miss that calm, staid approach....or if Luke Fickell could generate a significantly different team personality with his own style of game day decision-making and motivation...and if that change will turn out to be a net positive or negative on the field.

From the coach...to the conference...to the controversy, there will be nothing ‘usual’ about Ohio State football in 2011.

Loose Leaves



As I hinted at above, linebacker coach and co-defensive coordinator [Luke Fickell](#) has been officially named Assistant Head Coach of the Buckeyes, and will serve as the interim coach while Tressel serves his suspension. Fickell is a player and fan favorite, having been raised in Columbus, played for the Buckeyes and spent his entire coaching career here.

Fickell has long been considered a prime head coaching prospect and a possible eventual successor to Tressel. The conventional wisdom has been that he would have to leave OSU to add a head coaching gig to his resume in order to come back to Columbus as the top dog. I'm not suggesting that a five-game stint will serve that purpose, but it doesn't hurt.

There's a scrimmage at Ohio Stadium this Saturday morning which is open to the media, so we'll get our first extended look at the 2011 team (minus Terrelle Pryor, who just had a minor

procedure on March 28 to remove hardware from his January surgery on ligaments in his foot). To this point, the OSU media has been limited to a couple of 30-minute sessions of practice inside the WHAC facility.

Access to players for interviews has been more restricted this spring than in the recent past, as the staff has distributed pre-recorded interviews with selected players for the media instead of allowing the customary interviews. This has raised a few eyebrows among the veteran beat writers, and while the reasons for the for the restrictions are understood, they were not terribly popular among media people.

Veterans of the OSU media say no Buckeye coach in memory has done more to create and maintain an “arm’s length” between the media and the team than Tressel. Of course Tressel has operated in an age in which the rules and the tools of sports media have changed the face of the game beyond anything Earle Bruce or John Cooper, let alone Woody, would recognize. Imagine the trouble Jack Tatum could have caused on Twitter. And I don’t even want to talk about Art Schlichter on the Internet.

The Spring Game is scheduled for April 23, at 1:30 p.m. at the Horseshoe, and it was announced Friday that it will be televised live by Big Ten Network. Here’s the entire [spring football schedule](#) for BTN.

I’ll be in Columbus for the scrimmage this weekend, and I’ll wrap that up for you here early in the week. David Regimbal and I will cover the Spring Game as well, and we’re planning lots of other spring football coverage...but for those of you that can’t wait....

Here’s one spring [practice report](#) by TheOZone’s Brandon Castel and [one by Tim May](#) at the Dispatch. Over at Buckeye Grove, Ari Wasserman has a preliminary

[depth chart](#)

put together for the defense.

From OSU's Athletics Communications group, here's the university's own [Spring Preview](#) article, and then this 46-page (pdf)

[Spring Football Prospectus](#)

with roster, player profiles, 2010 season in review, records, stats, and everything else under the sun. Save a copy.
