



Spring football practice begins this week in Columbus, and for new head coach Urban Meyer, it's going to be like Christmas morning. "I'm excited to see our presents," Meyer said of his first look at his Buckeye players in uniform and on the practice field. Meyer claims to have not watched film of last year's games, in order to fairly evaluate his personnel in the flesh this spring. But even before he toots his whistle for the first time, Urban Meyer has put his own indelible stamp on this Ohio State program.

To begin with, the buzz is back. A year ago, [Jim Tressel had been suspended](#) but not yet terminated. The 2011 season was set to begin without several key players, and with a different head coach on the sidelines. Then it got worse. From the lofty heights reached during a decade under Tressel, it got nightmarishly worse.

Then over the course of a humiliating 6-7 season, an OSU administration that had appeared unsteady on its good days and clownishly inept on its worst ones, did one very big thing right. They got Urban Meyer to agree to coach the Buckeyes, and in a moment turned the fortunes of OSU football 180 degrees.



All Business...Work and Winning

From the day he was hired, Meyer has shown the tirelessness and dedication to the job that at times in his past have led to exhaustion and self-described burnout. He has assured everyone that this time it will be different...that he will temper his workaholicism with a renewed focus on his health and his family. What cannot be in doubt is that he will insist on the same level of commitment and effort from his assistant coaches and players that he puts forth himself.

From the beginning of winter conditioning, one change in the culture of OSU football apparent immediately was the focus on competition. His program identifies winners and losers...in just about everything the players are asked to do, from weightlifting to the sprints and the drills. He's not unique among coaches in his hatred of losing, but he has made it clear that he will require his players to share his discomfort with it. So winners are rewarded and losers penalized. It's worth quoting the coach at some length on what he wants to see in his starters...

"The competitive nature of a guy ... the guy that refuses to lose ... the fighter ... the tough guy ... the John Simon type kid. That's why we do so many win or lose days. I want to see that distaste in someone's face when they lose. If they don't share that same distaste that a lot of our coaches have then I don't really want to see them play. I don't care how fast or how high they jump or how much they bench press. If I don't see that competitive nature in them ... that's the number one thing I look for."

Any questions?



Body Work

Meyer has made no secret of his opinion that the 2011 team was heavier and slower than he wanted them to be. He turned his charges over to his longtime strength and conditioning guru, Mickey Marotti, for winter workouts, and came away pleased with the results.

"We had a very good off-season," Meyer said. "The team looks a lot different to me, especially the offensive line. I was very disappointed in some body types that were here, and a lot of those bodies have changed."

Marcus Hartman, of *Buckeye Sports Bulletin* and Scout.com, has reported some updated player weight numbers recently as sort of a progress report in the literal reshaping of the roster. The reported starting points from which these weight gains or losses resulted are often iffy or long out-dated, so make of it what you will, but as usual you'll see difficult conditioning doing different

things for different kids.

Down ten or more pounds from previously posted weights are senior John Simon, slimmed to 260, along with fellow defensive linemen Nathan Williams (249), and Joel Hale (285) joining Jonathan Hankins, who could be dangerous at a svelte 317 lbs. Defensive linemen Chase Farris (286) and Kenny Hayes (285) redshirted 2011 and have gotten bigger over time, possibly meaning a career on the inside for one or both of them, and several young outside defenders, defensive end Steve Miller (255) and linebackers Ryan Shazier (226) and Curtis Grant (235), are all showing gains of over ten pounds from earlier stats.

Former tight end Reid Fragel, reportedly one of the stars of the off-season weight training and conditioning program, is up to 298 lbs, and is now officially an offensive tackle with a good chance to be a starter. Offensive linemen Corey Linsley (292) and Tommy Brown (310) have shed some weight, while redshirt freshmen TE Nick Vannett (248) and LB Conner Crowell (233) are up ten or better from older numbers. *(Hat tip to Marcus for the reporting)*



Spreading it Out

Ohio State fans accustomed to the conservatism on offense for the scarlet and gray will see a whole new look this fall, and the scheme being implemented for 2012 by Meyer and offensive coordinator Tom Herman will probably be their most conspicuous departure from past practice. Herman has insisted that the Buckeyes will stick with [a run-first approach](#), even as they implement a spread concept, and run it mostly out of the no-huddle.

Herman [told the PD's Doug Lesmerises](#) recently that the no-huddle will be the biggest change

the players will have to adjust to. The essence of any spread offense is to use multiple receiver sets as a way to force the opponent to defend the entire field, and then get the ball into the hands of playmakers in space.

One key to any spread attack is that the quarterback be a legitimate run threat on every play, so Herman and Meyer are excited to work with Braxton Miller, based on what he showed them last fall as a true freshman. "He's still got a lot of room for improvement from what I've seen on video, but he's an unbelievable young man," Herman said. "He's eager to learn, very respectful, and I think the team really looks to him as a leader. You start at The Ohio State University as a true freshman for however many games he did, and that says something about not only your skill set but your mental makeup and the things you're capable of doing."

There won't necessarily be more plays in the offense, but they will run the same base plays from a variety of formations, and they'll use a lot more pre-snap motion and will have run-pass options incorporated into their basic plays. You'll see a mixture of zone and power blocking schemes by the offensive line, with an emphasis on quickness and positioning over road-grading techniques as a rule.

In his first meeting with the team last November, Meyer reportedly told Jake Stoneburner that he planned to make an All-American out of the senior tight end, and for once, OSU fans can refrain from chuckling when an OSU coaching staff promises to use the tight ends more often. It is Meyer's stock in trade. "Probably the position I'm most excited about right now is the tight ends," Meyer said. "We have three good-looking guys. [Stoneburner, and second year players Nick Vannett and Jeff Heuerman] We'd go out and recruit those guys any day of the week."

Here's more on the [spread offense](#) approach. For more X's and O's, check out Ross Fulton, ([here](#)

,
[here](#)

and

[here](#)

) now writing for 11W, with a primer on Meyer's spread offense.

Fickell and Co.



The defensive transition to the new regime should be less noticeable, with Luke Fickell staying on as co-coordinator with newcomer [Everett Withers](#) . Fickell learned at the knee of the retired Jim Heacock, so it will be interesting to see what kind of imprint Withers

(pictu
red)

puts on the defensive strategy of the team. Withers built well-regarded defenses in four years at North Carolina, attracting and developing some supremely talented individual players along the way.

There have been reports that Meyer thought a number of OSU defenders, especially linebackers, were carrying too much weight last season, and one can assume his defenses will continue to put a premium on quickness and speed over body mass. That could translate to a more aggressive brand of defense too, especially if the impatient streak in Meyer's offense tends to migrate to the other side of the ball.

Nine starters return to the OSU defense, with a boatload of young talent waiting in the wings. They are stacked on the defensive line as we'll see, and last year's defensive secondary returns intact and looks very solid. There are possibly jobs to be won or lost at linebacker in preseason practice, but Ryan Shazier's is not one of them. The Buckeyes were extremely young on defense in 2011, and it showed in a dropoff in performance. The 2012 model will be more seasoned, and its ultimate success will depend on the production Withers and Fickell, and assistants Mike Vrabel and [Kerry Coombs](#) can wring out of the talent on hand.



Banging the Drum

Another change we're going to see in the months and years ahead is a more aggressive campaign by the football program and the university at large to show the world what's *right* at Ohio State. After a year of having its name dragged through the mud, the university will reportedly undertake a multi-million dollar PR campaign designed to showcase the good works being done by its athletes, coaches and administrators.

The school has reached out to the many OSU alumni and friends in the national sports media to assist in this campaign, and have several big names lined up to cooperate. Meyer will be intimately involved with this program, although it surely originated somewhere above his pay grade...sorry...somewhere above his level in the OSU administrative hierarchy.

Jim Tressel did countless good works in the community over the last ten years, and by his choice, most of it was done completely without media coverage or fanfare. But the school has decided the time is right for a little fanfare, as a way to place the national attention back on the positive things going on at OSU. Seems to me like money well spent.

No Pressure

Urban Meyer faces what amounts to a one-year grace period at Ohio State, during which no one will put more pressure on him than he puts on himself. His Buckeyes are unable to compete for the Big Ten championship, let alone the national title. There will be no bowl game for this squad with 18 of 24 starters returning. And yet the excitement in and around Columbus for the upcoming season is palpable.

It's about the ongoing transformation of the Ohio State Buckeyes. That project hits the practice field this Thursday, and figures to play to a full house for the Spring Game April 21st.

Merry Christmas!

[OSU Athletic Communications: OSU Spring Football Release](#)

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