The curtain is about to go up on the Urban Meyer Era at Ohio State, and the air of anticipation is matched by a fair amount of uncertainty about what to expect. The 2012 Buckeyes have loads of young talent, and their success will hinge on how quickly they adapt to the new coaching regime, and how soon some younger players develop at key positions. I've tried to anticipate some of the questions fans may have about this year's Buckeyes, and throw out my own answers below for your consideration.

1. What do the national media, college football experts, and preseason polls think of the 2012 Buckeyes?

OSU opened at No. 18 in the first AP poll , and No. 14 in the ESPN Power Rankings. They cannot be ranked in the USA Today Coaches Poll owing to their NCAA sanctions this year. In the major preseason publications,
Phil Steele
ranked the Buckeyes No. 11 in the nation,
Lindy's
had them at No. 14, and
Athlon's College Football
rated OSU the nation's 6th best team. Fox Sports Power Rankings has the Buckeyes at No. 16. All of this is mildly surprising when one considers this is a team coming off a 6-7 season on a four-game losing streak. It says to me that the college football experts consider 2011 to be a one-off, and it shows both their high regard for Urban Meyer, and respect for the overall level of talent at Ohio State.

2. What is the biggest difference between the 2011 Buckeyes and this 2012 Ohio State team?

The coaching changeover aside, based on everything I've seen, it's the conditioning and strength of this year's team compared to last year's group. That's not to say they will be in better shape than all their 2012 opponents...they may or may not be....but the comparison of the two back-to-back OSU teams appears to be like night and day. Perhaps more importantly, they intend to exploit what they consider to be their conditioning advantage by running an

aggressive, no-huddle offense almost exclusively, all season. To say this prospect has the OSU fan base excited is like saying the Indians are going through a bit of a tough stretch right now.

3. What is the biggest question mark for the Buckeyes on offense going into the season?
Most people will answer the wide receiver corps, because they have garnered so much attention from the coaches and media, much of it not terribly complimentary. But in my view the offensive tackle positions are equally unproven at this point. Left tackle Jack Mewhort is a fine offensive lineman, perhaps the team's best and most versatile, but he has never been a regular starter at tackle for Ohio State. On the other side, either converted tight end
Reid Fragel
or true freshman
Taylor Decker
will line up on opening day for his first ever start at tackle. Lots of size and talent, but virtually no game experience at these two crucial positions. Something to keep your eye on.

4. What is the biggest question mark for the Buckeyes on defense going into the season?
This one's not hard...linebackers in general, and middle linebacker in particular. It looks as though sophomore Curtis Grant will get the start in the middle after seeing only some special teams duty as a freshman in 2011. One of the nation's top-ranked LB recruits a year ago, Grant *(#14 at right)*
struggled and lost some confidence as a freshman, but he has had an excellent offseason and a solid spring, and his performance will be a big key to the expected defensive improvement in 2012. Look for budding star
Ryan Shazier
on the weakside, and senior captain
Etienne Sabino

on the strongside to step up with improved play as well, but if Grant (#14) is executing his assignments and making plays, this defense can be truly formidable.

5. How healthy are the Buckeyes beginning the 2012 campaign?
With a week of preparation to go, the team is in pretty good shape overall. Senior defensive end Nathan Williams is being brought along slowly and cautiously in his recovery from serious knee surgery in the hope he will be ready to contribute when the season kicks off. Starting running back Jordan Hall had the boot removed from his foot Thursday as he tries to bounce back from a freakish severed tendon injury suffered a few weeks ago. Hall is hoping to be ready to go by the second game. There are a few guys coming back from 2011 injury situations, Verlon Reed , Corey Brown and Shazier among them, but so far the team has gotten through spring and fall practices *(knock on wood)* without suffering any new serious injuries.

6. Which returning players will make the biggest leap in productivity compared to last year...and which freshmen will have the greatest impact?
I know, that's two questions...Of the returning players on offense, clearly Braxton Miller and Devin Smith stand to benefit from the coaching change and the new spread look, added to their year of experience in the program. On defense, versatile lineman Michael Bennett *(pictured)* and OLB Ryan Shazier appear poised to break out in 2012. (See "Ten Breakout Buckeyes") Of the freshmen, defensive linemen Noah Spence and Adolphus Washington

will contribute as first-year players on defense, and running back
Bri'onte Dunn
and receiver
Mike Thomas
should make the biggest splash on offense. (See
"Ten Young Bucks"
)

7. How will Urban Meyer motivate this team without the possibility of a Big Ten championship or a bowl game appearance?
It appears his approach is to take the long view...emphasizing what it takes to be a Buckeye...insisting on complete effort and commitment all the time...in every practice and every game...on every play...with the understanding that if a player won't give that level of commitment, he won't play for Urban Meyer. In 2012 or ever. Meyer says he wants a hungry, angry team, and a unit that values "team" over individual accomplishment. He has shown that he understands and appreciates the traditions in Columbus, while adding a few of his own. His approach has caused a player or two to take their talents elsewhere, but the ones that remain appear to be buying what he's selling all the way.

8. Who are the new coaches on Urban Meyer's staff, and what can we expect to see from them?
Meyer brought in new coordinators on both sides of the ball. Tom Herman *(pictured)* will coordinate the offense (along with Meyer of course), and while he will throw the ball willingly, he insists the Buckeyes will remain a run-first offense, with a mix of A-gap power and inside zone plays forming the base of the rushing attack. Everett Withers comes in from North Carolina as co-coordinator of the defense with Luke Fickell. Withers' specialty is defensive secondary play, so look for some positive impact from him in those units. Ed Warinner on the offensive line and Tim Hinton with the tight ends both came over from the Notre Dame staff in the offseason, and new cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs joins
Meyer's team
from Cincinnati. Zach Smith worked with Meyer for five years at Florida, and he joins the staff as the new wide receivers coach. More details and profiles of all the new coaches in a previous article

here
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9. Is there an "every down" running back on this year's team, and if so, who is it?
The team is quite deep at running back, but in the temporary absence of Jordan Hall, both Meyer and Tom Herman have identified one of their backs as having come to the fore. By virtue of his better understanding of the complex offense, and by his toughness and speed on the practice field, Carlos Hyde has become the starting running back for the opener next Saturday. Rod Smith and true freshman Bri'onte Dunn are battling for the backup spot, and another freshman
Warren Ball
has looked good as well, but the 6' 0", 232 lb. junior Hyde has separated himself from a fairly strong pack, and at least until Hall returns in mid-September, he is the man.

10. Who will be Urban Meyer's "playmakers" at the wide receiver positions?
Based on the most recent remarks from the coaches, two OSU receivers have cemented their roles as starters in the Meyer-Herman spread offense. The coaches named junior Corey
"Philly" Brown
(pictured)
and sophomore
Devin Smith
...in that order...as receivers who have earned pride of place among the OSU wideouts.
Evan Spencer
and freshman
Mike Thomas
are probably the next two in the pecking order at WR, and senior tight end
Jake Stoneburner
has been working with the receiver group of late as well. But it appears that Brown and Smith will be the primary deep threats at the end of Braxton Miller's passes. Their ability to gain

yardage and score touchdowns after the catch will be a major key to the success of the OSU offense.

11. Will the pass rush be improved over the team's 2011 level of productivity?
It had better be...and there's every reason to predict that it will be. The 2011 Buckeyes at times had four defensive tackles playing on their defensive line...with Nathan Williams out, and before Michael Bennett began to get more playing time. In some games it seemed that if John Simon couldn't get to the quarterback, no one would...and OSU opponents would double him for that reason. The emergence of "Leo" end Steve Miller and the addition of 5-star freshmen Noah Spence at end and Adolphus Washington at tackle, should give this defensive line an improved pass rush. They'll join Simon, the up and coming sophomore Bennett and preseason All-American tackle Johnathan Hankins to put added pressure on opposing passers. Bottom line is that there is more speed on the outside than they were able to generate last year. Throw in the speedy OLB Ryan Shazier coming off the edge, and this can be a dangerous group.

12. Who is an "under the radar" player for the 2012 Buckeyes on offense?
I'm going to go with center Corey Linsley here because he plays an important but unsung position on the team, and because he took charge of the center spot in spring ball and has earned the praise of the coaches in terms of his improvement over the offseason. Linsley is a 4th year junior from Boardman who has been a backup at center and guard for the last two seasons. It's his first season as a starter, but he brings needed experience and consistency to a line with several players getting used to new positions. He is known as one of the strongest players on the OSU roster, with an especially powerful lower body. I expect him to improve further with the benefit from the instruction of Coach Warinner, and thrive in the new OSU offense.

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