Buckeyes right tackle Kirk Barton announced yesterday that he will return to school for his senior season, giving the team what will likely be the best pair of bookend tackles in the nation in 2007. This announcement leaves the trio of Ginn, Gonzalez, and Pittman all still yet to declare. And contrary to public opinion, Mike Furlan believes all three will leave. In his latest, he tells us why, where they will get picked, and how they will fare as pros.

Yesterday, not unexpectedly, Kirk Barton announced that he would return to the Ohio State football team next year. On most teams in the NCAA, Barton would start at the big money position, left tackle, but since Ohio State has Alex Boone, Barton will not even be the best player on his own offensive line next year. Barton's announcement comes off the heels of Michigan's stud tackle Jake Long also recently announcing that he will return next season.

This begs the question, what will the other three Buckeyes that are currently considering their draft status do?

Teddy Ginn:

Teddy Ginn is as good as gone. There is no chance that he is coming back, and nor should he. I don't think that he is necessarily ready for the NFL, personally. Ginn's route running is rather poor and once he gets to the NFL (when the speed differential is not as great) he will have some trouble. Additionally, he is not particularly strong and he will struggle at the next level with stronger, more physical corners, and it may take him a while to adjust. In spite of these weaknesses, he will still be drafted in the top 10 based largely on what I predict will be a RIDICULOUS 40 time. I would not be surprised to see him post a Deion Sanders-like 4.21.

Where does that leave the Buckeyes? I don't think the effect is as great as the doomsdayers would have you believe. Ginn's replacement, Ray Small, is already in Columbus. Small displayed some of that explosiveness last year while lined up as the fifth receiver in the slot, and he appears to be more of a natural wide receiver than Ginn. Ginn's loss will be felt, but it will be mitigated rather nicely with Small.

Anthony Gonzalez:

As much as I hate to admit it, I would be surprised to see Gonzo come back next year. I suspect that right now the NFL is telling him that he will be a second round pick, but I think that his draft stock will soar as the draft approaches, particularly when he surprises the scouts by running a forty time that will only be matched by Ginn. Gonzo is the better of the two receivers because he does a better job using his strength to gain separation (which is more important in the NFL) and he has better hands.

The optimists will tell you that Gonzalez is an excellent student and that his desire to excel academically will keep him in school for another year, but I don't think that is necessarily true. I think that what will ultimately drive him out is the realization that Troy Smith will not be back next year, and the fact that he will not be able to count on the passing game being as good as it is right now, even without sharing the ball with Ginn.

Where does this leave the Buckeyes? Well, actually, his replacement is already here as well. Think about the Buckeyes wide outs for a second. Now think of a tough, gritty underclassman that has terrific hands, good speed, and is absolutely fearless across the middle. Brian Hartline should have materialized in your mind. Hartline's development this year has been one of the great surprises of the season. I thought Hartline would be a good player on this team, in a couple of years. His emergence this season has been one of the key factors in the Buckeyes push through what I presume will be a championship season. I think the Buckeyes will survive the loss of Gonzo, but I will be bummed to see him go.

Antonio Pittman:

This is the hardest of the three to forecast, not because I think his decision is in doubt, but I feel bad for him and the decision he has to make. The writing is on the wall for Pitt, and he must go. He has the proverbial 230 lb gorilla breathing down his neck and Chris Wells will get the ball next year, so much so that he will actually cause Pitt's draft stock to plummet. Making matters worse for a Pittman return next year is that the draft class of 2008 appears to be exceptionally deep and strong at running back featuring guys like Slaton, McFadden, and Hart (not to mention Marshawn Lynch if he decides to stay).

I am aware that Pittman has said in the past that he plans to come back to Ohio State to compete for a Heisman next year, but I still don't think he will return and even if he does, how do you think he will fair when Chris Wells is getting 20-30 touches a game? If I were advising Pitt, I would tell him that if he is projected into the 3rd or 4th round he should go. Those projections are generally very conservative and if he gets a 3rd or 4th round projection that would actually make him more likely to go in the 2nd or 3rd round.

Where do the Buckeyes stand without him? I actually think that the loss of Antonio Pittman will hurt the Buckeyes more than the loss of either Gonzo or Ginn. Beanie has been a good ball carrier (when he holds on to it), but running backs are expected to do a lot more. Pitt has done a great job holding onto the ball, he is a good blocker, and a good teammate. Chris Wells will have impressive rushing statistics next year, but the Buckeyes will feel this loss until Wells becomes the complete back that Pittman is.

The Summary:

All in all, the talent factory that is Ohio State football is going to adapt, and the Buckeyes will be fine next year regardless of who stays or goes. Waiting behind Ginn and Gonzo are Small and Hartline, and waiting behind Pittman is the guy we have all been waiting to see. There will be some bumps in the road next year, but somehow, under Jim Tressel the Buckeyes always seem to develop all the players they need to fill any hole they have. Fret not Buckeye fans!