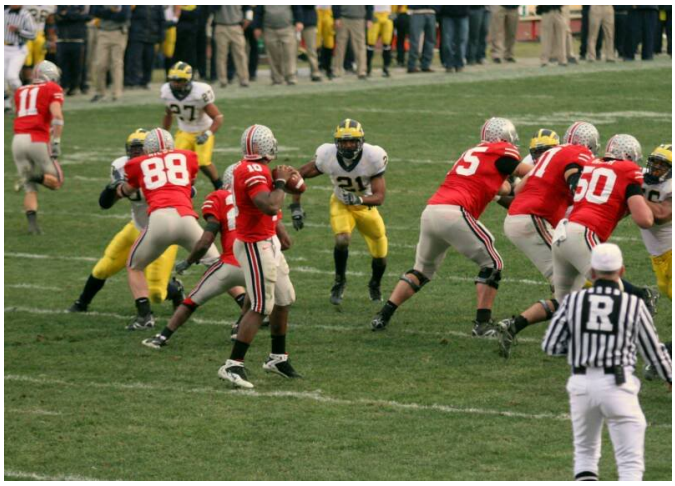
The Buckeye offensive line was thought of as a strong unit last year .... until getting exposed against Florida in the National Championship Game. The unit lost Doug Datish and T.J. Downing to eligibility, but returns starting tackles Alex Boone and Kirk Barton, as well as guard Steve Rehring. How does the unit shape up this season? Furls delivers the 411.



Gone:

Center: Doug Datish
Guard: TJ Downing

The Replacements:

Center: Cordle or Smith
Guard: Person, Smith, or Cordle

This year's losses on the offensive line (Downing and Datish) are significant but not irreplaceable. I am not sure that there are many teams that have done better than Ohio State at replacing big bodies on the offensive line. Fortunately for Coach Tressel, all of his "elite" talent is returning in the form of a pair of tackles that will rival any other pair in the country, and probably the biggest guard in the NCAA in Steve

Rehring. Additionally, Rehring is a very capable tackle if forced outside by injury.

Replacing Datish and Downing will be some combination of Cordle, Smith, Person. Early rumors had Smith as the front runner for the center opening, but recent indications are that it will be Cordle snapping the ball this year. Cordle is an athletic and nasty young player who reminds me a lot of Alex Stepanovich. Woe be to the middle linebacker that is so busy looking into the backfield that he does not see him coming.

There were a few certainties last year for the Buckeyes, one was that if they wanted to run around the left end of the line, that Alex Boone would open it up. Pittman and Boone had great timing together and Pitt was terrific at reading Boone's block and timing the hole appropriately. Unfortunately, it was almost as certain that Alex Boone would fall asleep at the wheel once or twice a game in pass protection. Smith was able to compensate for this with some fancy footwork, Todd Boeckman will not, so Boone is going to have to play more consistently on the outside. He has all the hype and talent to be a first round pick in the 2008 draft; all he is missing is the consistent execution.

Boone and Barton have both struggled against speed rushers in the past and a Buckeye fan can only hope that matching up

against Gholston and Wilson in practice will help rectify the problem. Ohio State is one of the few teams in the nation that consistently matches "ones" against "ones" in practice, and this is one case where I expect the dividends to be huge.

This line, in whatever configuration it ends up in, will be among the biggest in the NCAA. Hell, at an average of 6'7" 313lbs this would be one of the largest lines in the NFL and they should have no problem blowing holes open in the interior or on the outside for Beanie Wells. In Barton, Boone, and Rehring, the Buckeyes have three viable All-American candidates on the same offensive line, and it is this strength that will help ease the Buckeyes transition back to Tressel Ball.

In addition to the obvious merits of the interior line, the Buckeyes will also be returning tight end Rory Nichol. Nichol, at 6'5" 250lbs, obviously possesses the size and strength to be an effective blocker in the run game, but he also has the speed and hands to create match up problems for a cover two zone. Look for the emergence of Jake Ballard in two tight end sets. The 6'7" Ballard is actually larger than Nichol and has shown impressive blocking ability and hands, and will press hard for extended playtime this year.

Star: Are there really stars on an offensive line? You pick, Barton or Boone.

Emerging Star: Jim Cordle

He was kind of lost in the shuffle in the 2004 recruiting class (the class that also contained Alex Boone), but he should be found this year. This is Cordle's big chance and he will capitalize. Will he be the next in the line of Bentley, Stepanovich, Mangold, and Datish? Only time will tell, but there must be something in the water in Columbus because I am not sure that anyone has a run of centers like that.

Future Star: The Recruiting Class of 2008

Ohio State's offensive line of the future is beginning to look stacked. The 2008 recruiting class features the consensus #1 O-Line prospect in the nation (Michael Brewster), the #1 Ohio Prospect (Mike Adams), and Texas Prep standout (J.B. Shugarts). The future in

Columbus is bright indeed.