In Coach Tressel's OSU offense, the gaudy statistics are usually sported by the running backs and quarterbacks and wide receivers. So if you're looking for big numbers, that's where you'll have to go. The fullbacks and tight ends in the OSU system are blockers first and ball-handlers second...if at all. Buckeye Dan Wismar continues his look at the 2008 Buckeyes with his preview of the teams fullbacks and tight ends.

In Coach Tressel's OSU offense, the gaudy statistics are usually sported by the running backs and quarterbacks and wide receivers. So if you're looking for big numbers, that's where you'll have to go. The fullbacks and tight ends in the OSU system are blockers first and ball-handlers second...if at all.

Last season's starting fullback, Dionte Johnson, carried the football *once* all season. Starting tight end, Rory Nicol had 16 receptions, just over one per game. This is not to say these guys aren't important components of the offense. It's just that what Tressel demands first and foremost from them is the successful execution their blocking assignments in both the running and passing games.

The emphasis on blocking as opposed to rushing or receiving for the OSU fullbacks doesn't figure to change much in 2008, since it looks like Tressel will begin the season with two converted defensive players at the position. Not a bad idea, I guess, if you're looking primarily for guys who like to hit people. Curtis Terry has spent his OSU career mostly at the strongside linebacker position, but has been working all spring the first unit at fullback. Another former linebacker, Ryan Lukens, looks like the backup to Terry, along with redshirt freshman Spencer Smith. True freshman Jermil Martin will be learning the offense and may

be a redshirt candidate.

At tight end, Nicol and his primary backups from 2007, Jake Ballard and Brandon Smith, will all return this season, with true freshman Nic DiLullo rounding out the group. All of the tight ends are hoping that they get more opportunities to help the offense in 2008, and a year of experience for QB Todd Boeckman could be a big factor toward helping them do just that.

Fullbacks

Projected Starter:

Curtis Terry - #55 - RS Senior; 6' 1" 229 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Terry agreed to the switch to the fullback position when the coaches assured him that he would be allowed to continue to play defense as well. And with four years in the program, Terry knows the defense well enough to spend some time learning a new spot. The redshirt senior from Glenville sat out 2007 after suffering a high ankle sprain in summer practices. He had missed so much action that the coaches' suggested he take a medical redshirt and come back healthy for 2008.

So Terry, who didn't even expect to be on campus this fall, will be back for another season, this time opening holes for Chris Wells. OSU defensive coaches still love Terry's emotional play and pass-rushing skills from the linebacker position, so don't be surprised if you see him some doing double-duty in 2008.

Reserves:

Ryan Lukens - #49 - RS Senior; 6' 0" 238 lbs. (Cincinnati, OH) Moeller H.S.

Lukens is another linebacker who was approached by the coaches after the 2007 regular season and asked to switch to fullback to help the team. A walk-on with impressive Buckeye bloodlines, Lukens had played on special teams in 2007, but didn't figure to see much playing time at linebacker, so he agreed. Ryan's dad Bill Lukens was a captain for OSU in 1976, and his uncle, Joe Lukens played for the

Buckeyes from 1979-1982.

Spencer Smith - #48 - Freshman; 6' 2" 230 lbs. (Cincinnati, OH) Colerain H.S.

Another walk-on for the Buckeyes, Smith is the brother of current OSU offensive lineman Conner Smith. He played in a highly run-oriented program at Colerain, so he may need some work in pass-blocking. Smith will compete for playing time at fullback and on special teams.

Jermil Martin - #41 - Freshman; 5' 11" 215 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Martin has more experience as a ball carrier than the other fullback candidates. He's a bit lighter than the others, and has good speed. In other circumstances, Martin might be redshirted in the interest of getting him stronger for future seasons. But the position is thin, and the Bucks have two good fullback prospects already committed in the 2009 recruiting class, so Martin has a chance to see action sooner instead of later.

OSU coaches have been experimenting with new formations this offseason, including one they call the 'Pony' set, which utilizes a tailback instead of a fullback, and is presumably geared to getting Brandon Saine and Chris Wells on the field together. But the coaches have also made it clear that they don't intend to abandon the power running game with the fullback leading the blocking. So these guys will labor in relative obscurity again in 2008, and do their jobs without hearing their numbers called very often.

Tight Ends

Projected Starter:

Rory Nicol -#88 - Senior; 6' 5" 252 lbs. (Beaver, PA) Beaver Area H.S.

Nicol caught 16 passes in 2007, and gained just 84 yards on the season. His production was down somewhat from 2007, when he had only 13 catches, but 151 yards, and 3 TD's. This will be Nicol's third year as the starter at tight end. He has reliable hands when given the opportunities to use them in the passing game. But despite the annual talk about making better use of the tight ends in the offensive scheme, Nicol has yet to make a major impact as a receiving threat. That is of course partly attributable to Tressel's offensive philosophy, and last year, also partly due to Boeckman's inexperience at quarterback. Nicol played some as a freshman in 2004, but missed virtually the entire 2005 season with injuries, before emerging as the Buckeyes' starter for the last two seasons. His biggest output of the season was his six receptions in the Penn State game, but in five of the last seven games of the season, he did not have a catch or any other game statistics.

Reserves:

Jake Ballard - #86 - Junior; 6' 7" 256 lbs. Springboro (OH) H.S.

Ballard had 13 receptions in 2007, for 149 yards, an 11.5 yd average, and two touchdowns. As a freshman in 2006, Ballard had only two catches, but one was a spectacular TD grab on a short drag pattern near the goal line from Troy Smith. Ballard showed the good hands a few more times last season with touchdown receptions against Michigan State and Penn State. Many observers felt that Ballard would eventually be an offensive tackle for OSU, based on his large frame and his quickness, but Ballard and the coaches have squelched that talk, and he looks to finish his OSU career as a tight end. If the Buckeyes decide to make the tight end a bigger part of their passing attack this season, Ballard could end up being the guy who makes the most of that decision.

Brandon Smith - #87 - RS Senior; 6' 2" 251 lbs. Euclid (OH) H.S.

Smith had limited playing time in 2007, with three receptions for 30 yards, getting one catch in each of three games. He'll likely be in the same situation this season, barring an injury to one of the two upperclassmen ahead of him on the depth chart.

Nic DiLullo - #88 - Freshman; 6' 5" 245 lbs. Madison (OH) H.S.

DiLullo was a little bit under the radar as a high school prospect, and wasn't really expecting an offer from the Buckeyes, even though he attended their camps. But it was a dream offer once it came, and DiLullo wasted no time accepting. A redshirt year is a distinct possibility for DiLullo, based on the depth chart and the relative shortage of tight ends on the roster in 2009.

This article is one installment in a series on the 2008 Buckeyes. Read the others at the links below:

Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Offensive Line

Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Running Backs

Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Quarterbacks

Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Wide Receivers