The Buckeyes had the best defense in the Big Ten last year, and one of the best in the country statistically, and they accomplished that with a relatively inexperienced defensive line. The team was dealt a real blow in the first game when one of the projected starters, at defensive end, Lawrence Wilson, was lost for the season with a broken leg ... but then got a huge breakout season from Vernon Gholston. Dan Wismar previews the Buckeyes 2008 defensive line in his latest.

The Buckeyes had the best defense in the Big Ten last year, and one of the best in the country statistically, and they accomplished that with a relatively inexperienced defensive line. The team was dealt a real blow in the first game when one of the projected starters at defensive end, Lawrence Wilson, was lost for the season with a broken leg. Both of their defensive tackles were first-year starters at the beginning of the 2007 season, and the staff had yet to discover how productive freshman end Cameron Heyward would become for them.

As it happened, Vernon Gholston would have a breakout year in 2007, playing his way into the top six picks in the NFL Draft, racking up 14 sacks, and keeping opposing offensive coaches awake nights trying to figure out a way to slow him down. It won't be easy for the Buckeyes to replace Gholston's production in 2008, but the return of a healthy Lawrence Wilson could go a long way toward that goal. Wilson is a player whose athleticism grabs your attention when you see him on the field. His combination of size, speed and length is rare at any level of play, and it's reasonable to predict a huge year for the redshirt junior from Akron as long as he can avoid injuries.

Wilson and Heyward figure to be the starters at defensive end for the 2008 Buckeyes, but the team has an impressive array of talented backups at the end positions, including redshirt sophomore Thaddeus Gibson, who will see playing

time especially in pass-rushing situations, and Robert Rose, who is healthy again after sitting out much of last year with injuries to both shoulders. Redshirt freshman Solomon Thomas is another youngster with a bright future, and converted inside linebacker Mark Johnson got a little playing time at linebacker last year, and could end up in the regular rotation at end if he continues to progress.

The depth at the end position looks even more impressive when you consider the trio of talented incoming freshmen that will be anxious to show the coaches what they can do right away. Nathan Williams, Willie Mobley and Keith Wells were all ranked among the nation's best defensive linemen as high school seniors, and they'll round out a group that looks to be the deepest, and collectively the most talented defensive ends in recent memory for the Buckeyes.

At the defensive tackle position, all four members of the 2007 rotation return this season. Since all four get significant playing time and are rotated in and out more than perhaps any other position on the team, defining which two are the starters seems less crucial at these spots. Last year Todd Denlinger and Doug Worthington were usually the two who started games, but Nader Abdallah and Dexter Larimore both saw regular action as well. (That rotation has been thrown into some doubt this summer, as Worthington awaits the disposition of a criminal charge resulting from a recent DUI arrest. A court appearance is scheduled for late August, and any word on possible game suspensions will come after that. For the moment, Worthington is practicing regularly with the team.)

The position is an area of concern for the Buckeyes going into the 2008 season, and the coaches are counting on improvement from the defensive tackle spots based on their top four players having had a year of experience. The four defensive tackles had only five sacks combined in 2007, with Larimore (2) the only player with more than one. Playing in front of an outstanding group of linebackers, they were very effective against the run though, as the Bucks led the Big Ten in rushing defense by a wide margin (66.8 ypg, 2.21 ypc).

Help is on the way in the person of incoming freshman Garrett Goebel, one of the nation's top-rated defensive tackles, from the state of Illinois. Tressel's staff also has a history of experimenting with moving defensive ends inside to the tackle spots, and with the apparent glut of talent at the end position, it wouldn't be surprising to see some of that in 2008, with Rose or Heyward looking like potential candidates for some playing time inside in certain situations.

Defensive Ends:

Projected Starters:

Lawrence Wilson - #87 - RS Junior; 6' 4" 274 lbs. (Akron, OH) St. Vincent-St. Mary H.S.

Wilson appears poised to realize his enormous potential this season for the Buckeyes. By the time OSU played in the BCS title game in January, Wilson was nearly 100% recovered from the broken leg he suffered in the 2007 opener, but wisely chose not to put it to the test, and saved a season of eligibility as a result. The break required surgery and the insertion of a steel rod in the tibia, but Wilson looked very mobile and strong in spring ball, and had an outstanding showing in the Spring Game.

Wilson played sparingly as a freshman in 2005, and had 14 tackles, including three sacks and five tackles for loss as a sophomore backup in 2006. His athleticism is off the charts for a player his size. He has been timed at 4.6 in the 40, and has a 36" vertical leap. He can power through a blocker or run around him. With two years of eligibility remaining, there is still plenty of time for Wilson to make his mark as a Buckeye, despite the injury setbacks.

Cameron Heyward - #97 - Sophomore; 6' 6" 287 lbs. (Suwanee, GA) Peachtree Ridge H.S.

No Buckeye player was a bigger or more pleasant surprise in 2007 than Heyward, who not only became a starter as a true freshman, but ended the season ranked second to Gholston among defensive linemen in tackles (33) and sacks (2.5), and led the team in tackles for a loss with 7.5.

Heyward became the last member of the OSU recruiting class of 2007, as the Buckeyes managed to pull him out of SEC country, where he had offers from Florida, Georgia and LSU. Heyward did have some roots in this part of the country though. He is the son of the late Craig "Ironhead" Heyward, who went to Pitt, and had a successful NFL career as a running back. Cam was a standout basketball player in high school, and is still learning the techniques for playing on

the defensive line. He possesses good speed and agility, and a wingspan that allowed him to break up as many passes (3) in 2007 as All-American cornerback Malcolm Jenkins. Heyward looks like a guy who is certain to be playing on Sundays eventually, but he's got at least two more years to wreak havoc on Buckeye opponents. The difference is that starting in 2008, his play won't be surprising anyone.

Reserves:

Thaddeus Gibson - #90 - RS Sophomore; 6' 3" 240 lbs. Euclid (OH) H.S.

Gibson will be one of the first players off the bench for the OSU defense in 2008. His speed is his calling card, but it is his attitude and intensity as a pass rusher that has earned him the nickname "Killer" from his teammates. Wisconsin QB Tyler Donovan would probably agree after fumbling the ball on a highlight-reel hit last year that was recorded as Gibson's first career sack. Originally a linebacker when he came to Ohio State, Gibson has now assumed the 'Leo' position in the OSU defense, after spending 2007 learning the position by watching Vernon Gholston in that role. In the OSU defense the Leo is a hybrid position requiring pass-rushing skills and the speed and agility to drop into coverage in certain situations. Gibson may be the one Buckeye defensive lineman who can match Gholston's closing speed off the edge, and he is almost certain to be on the field in obvious passing situations this fall.

Robert Rose - #9 - Junior; 6' 5" 285 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Rose is another very talented defensive lineman for the Buckeyes who is still looking to fulfill the high expectations of him coming into the program. He dazzled college scouts in the Army All-American game two years ago, appearing virtually unblockable from his defensive end position, showing great quickness off the snap, and the strength to overpower offensive linemen. But that was two years, 45 pounds, and several painful injuries ago, and so Rose remains a bit of a question mark for the Buckeyes coming into 2008. He has bulked up considerably from his 240 lb. weight as a freshman, and a number of injuries, including problems with both shoulders in 2007, have limited his playing time. What has never been in doubt is his overall athletic ability, and at 285 rock-solid pounds, he

is an imposing physical presence. He is said to be close to 100% healthy this summer, and if his speed is anything close to what he showed as a younger, lighter player, the Buckeyes will have a real force to bring off their bench this season. The added bulk might tempt the coaches to move him inside to a tackle spot in certain situations, giving the Buckeyes some extra athleticism at that position.

Solomon Thomas - #98 - RS Freshman; 6' 5" 240 lbs. (West Chester, OH) Lakota West H.S.

Thomas was a highly-sought prospect from the Cincinnati area, and had offers from Florida, Tennessee and Louisville, before committing to Ohio State. He's a versatile athlete with outstanding speed for a defensive lineman. Thomas took advantage of a redshirt season last year to add 15 pounds to his freshman weight of 225 lbs. while contributing to the scout team, and will take the field in 2008 a stronger player, with a year of experience in Jim Heacock's system. Like so many Buckeye backups, Thomas is a talent who would be starting in a lot of D-1 programs, but is waiting his turn to see meaningful action as a Buckeye.

Mark Johnson - #44 - RS Sophomore; 6' 3" 250 lbs. (Los Angeles, CA) Dorsey H.S.

Johnson is another prospect who played linebacker in high school, but has converted to defensive end at Ohio State. He was among the top inside linebackers nationally playing in the highly regarded football program at Dorsey High in Los Angeles, and had some limited playing time at linebacker in 2007 with the Buckeyes. He has added 25 pounds since arriving at OSU, and the coaches felt his best shot at contributing to the defense in the long term would be at defensive end, so the formal switch was made following the 2007 season. He has been seen working with the second team defense in early practice sessions this month.

Incoming Freshmen:

Nathan Williams - #39 - Freshman; 6' 4" 245 lbs. (Washington Court

House, OH) Miami Trace H.S.

A powerfully built athlete who doubled as a running back for his high school team, and also played basketball and ran track. A bit under the radar in the incoming class of 2008, Williams could turn out to be a sleeper, and contribute relatively early.

Willie Mobley - #96 - Freshman; 6' 3" 265 lbs. Eden Prairie (MN) H.S.

Mobley was the defensive star of a high school team that won back-to-back state championships in Minnesota his last two years there. He had 12 sacks as a senior, and was recruited by all the major programs based on his versatility and speed. Mobley is listed officially as a defensive end for the Buckeyes, but he has played inside as well, and may be able to contribute at either spot for Ohio State as his career progresses.

Keith Wells - #94 - Freshman; 6' 5" 210 lbs. Gainesville (GA) H.S.

Wells projects as a speed rusher on the outside for the Buckeyes, who recruited the young man from Georgia relentlessly after he de-committed from Florida State, eventually winning the recruiting battle which included offers from Notre Dame and Tennessee. Wells has great speed and leaping ability, and was recognized as one of the top overall players in the entire southeast region. Considering the depth on the team at his position, Wells may be a candidate for a redshirt year to work with the S&C coaches and put some pounds on that big frame.

Defensive Tackles:

Projected Starters:

Todd Denlinger - #92 - RS Junior; 6' 2" 292 lbs. Troy (OH) H.S.

Denlinger will be entering his second year as a starter, and he appears to be on a

mission to elevate the play of the defensive tackles from what they all admit was a performance in 2007 that left lots of room for improvement. The year of experience should help slow the game down a bit for Denlinger in 2008. He has the ability to make up in quickness for what he may lack in sheer size, often getting off the snap and into the backfield before his opponents are set up to block him. Todd redshirted as a freshman, and then learned last year how tough it is to follow a couple of experienced graduating seniors like David Patterson and Quinn Pitcock. He was thrown into the fray with three other inexperienced teammates to learn on the job, and the inevitable result was some mistakes, both mental and physical. Reports are that Denlinger has come into camp this summer in terrific shape, and the coaches will be looking to Todd to show the improvement and leadership expected of a second year starter.

Dexter Larimore - #72 - RS Sophomore; 6' 2" 300 lbs. Merrillville (IN) H.S.

Like his defensive tackle teammates, Larimore got his first taste of extended game action in 2007, and really started to come on and make a positive impression toward the end of the season. He is another in a recent OSU tradition of recruiting defensive tackles with strong wrestling backgrounds. Larimore is powerfully built and retains the quickness and balance of a superior wrestler to control the line of scrimmage and clog up the middle. He recorded two sacks in the Spring Game this year, and had a pretty impressive game overall. I am listing him here as a starter, not only because his play seems to have impressed the coaches in the latter part of 2007, but also because last year's starter Doug Worthington's availability to play early in the season is still up in the air.

Reserves:

Doug Worthington - #84 - RS Junior; 6' 6" 276 lbs. (Athol Springs, NY) St. Francis H.S.

Worthington started 11 games for the Buckeyes in 2007, and recorded 24 tackles and one sack. He came to Ohio State projecting as a defensive end, and was moved inside to try to take advantage of his athletic ability, and help get more pressure from the middle of the defensive line. One key to having success at the

tackle spot is to stay low, which is especially difficult for a guy who goes 6'6". Worthington has good speed and a huge wingspan that help in the pass rush game, and he had some excellent moments in 2007, but like his tackle teammates, he was playing at college football's highest level for the first time, and learning on the job. Worthington may find himself dealing with some disciplinary action as the 2008 season gets underway, either by the university or by the football coaches, as a result of a recent arrest. Whatever happens off the field, Worthington will have to work his way out of Tressel's doghouse, and back to being a solid contributor to the OSU defense.

Nader Abdallah - #93 - RS Senior; 6' 4" 300 lbs. (Metarie, LA) Archbishop Rummel H.S.

Coming into his last season as a Buckeye, Abdallah has developed a focus and a commitment that was not always present during the early stages of his OSU career. His time in Columbus has gone from a personal low of having to deal with the devastation of his home town of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, to the high of playing for the national championship in that same city. For a time his entire family moved in with him in Columbus in the aftermath of the hurricane, and all the adversity helped motivate Abdallah to rededicate himself to his conditioning and his preparation for football. He was a regular part of the tackle rotation last year, and recorded 19 tackles and one sack. Along with the others in that foursome, Abdallah is motivated by the criticism this group has received for their play in 2007, and committed to showing teammates and fans that they can be a positive force for the 2008 Buckeyes.

Garrett Goebel - #53 - Freshman; 6' 5" 280 lbs. (Lombard, IL) Montini Catholic H.S.

Incoming freshman Goebel was a two-sport star in high school, making the finals for Illinois' "Mr. Football" award, and setting state records in Illinois as a wrestler for career wins and career pins in the heavyweight weight class. He may be a candidate for a redshirt year as a freshman, but even with four players ahead of him on the depth chart, and some of the ends group likely to see some action inside, a strong summer camp by Goebel could convince the coaches that

he can help the 2008 team.

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

Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Fullbacks and Tight Ends