Last year, most Buckeye fans assumed that Coach Tressel and linebackers coach Luke Fickell would be breaking in a whole new set of starting linebackers in 2008. Middle linebacker James Laurinaitis looked like a surefire first round draft pick after picking up the Butkus Award as the nations best linebacker. Marcus Freeman had finished the season strong, and many observers felt his young family would give him cause to turn pro as well. Much to the delight of Buckeye Nation though, they're both back. And the Bucks should have one of the best linebacking corps in the country.

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With Freeman and Laurinaitis returning for 2008, the biggest position battle figured to be the replacement for Larry Grant, who played the strongside (Sam) linebacker position last season. Coach Fickell likes to prepare his troops to play all three linebacker positions, and that preparation will pay off this season, as Freeman will shift over to the strongside, and redshirt sophomore Ross Homan will start at the weakside (Will) spot. Buckeye coaches are convinced that this alignment gets the team's three best linebackers on the field, and the move demonstrates their confidence in Homan's potential to be a standout performer for the next three years.

The position flexibility that Fickell has stressed in his linebacker group makes it tough to assign all the reserves a specific slot, so we'll look at the backups as a group, and try to point out their individual strengths. One thing we do know is that Austin Spitler will be the backup to Laurinaitis in the middle. Spitler would probably be the starter for any school without the returning Butkus winner on board, and he would be the likely backup on the strong side as well, should anything happen to Freeman. The remaining Buckeye backups are a speedy group, with Tyler Moeller, Brian Rolle, and Jermale Hines all possessing speed more often found in safeties. In fact, all three have played safety, and Hines is being given a look there as summer practice continues.

The Buckeyes brought in two outstanding linebacker prospects as freshmen this season, and both Etienne Sabino and Andrew Sweat look like they could contribute early. Both enrolled early and went through Spring ball in impressive fashion, and though both have experience mostly in the middle, they both seem to have the tools to play any of the three linebacker positions.

In terms of sheer numbers, this linebacker group is fairly thin, especially since Curtis Terry has shifted to defensive end after a tryout at fullback, and Hines may end up as a safety. But if you look at pure talent, very few sets of OSU linebackers in recent memory look any better than this one. Seniors Laurinaitis and Freeman will be important emotional leaders for the 2008 OSU defense, and their play will set the tone for the season. They are two big reasons why Buckeye fans feel very good about the 2008 defense.

Projected Starters:

James Laurinaitis - #33 - Senior; 6' 3" 240 lbs. (Plymouth, MN) Wayzata H.S.

Jim Tressel has developed something of a reputation for recruiting players who are slightly "under the radar" in terms of their national prominence in high school, and then getting All-American performances out of them once they get to Columbus. These days, James Laurinaitis is one of the guys people point to as an example. He was far from being an unknown at the prep level, but he did have fewer 'stars' from the recruiting services than a lot of the other linebackers in the class of 2005. But he wasted little time making himself a familiar name in Buckeye lore.

Though he played in every game as a freshman in 2005, Laurinaitis was forced into action in a pressure-packed situation that year, when he replaced Bobby Carpenter early in the Michigan game, when Carpenter suffered a broken leg in the first minutes of action. He proved very early that he was equally adept at pass defense and stopping the run, and by the end of his sophomore year he had developed into an All Big Ten performer. He won the Nagurski Award as a sophomore, a prize given to the outstanding defensive player in the country. He made several All-American teams that year as well, having led the team in tackles and interceptions.

In his junior year, the accolades continued to pour in for the Buckeye captain, as he was named first team All-American, Butkus Award winner, and Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, after again leading the team in tackles, and landing a spot on the Big Ten All Academic team as well. Few players can match Laurinaitis' dedication to weight training, film study and practice, according to his teammates, who admit they are driven to work harder themselves when they see the decorated senior leading by example. Laurinaitis decided to delay becoming an NFL millionaire after the loss to LSU in January, because there is still unfinished business in Columbus. The man who set a BCS championship game record with 18 tackles against LSU is driven to return to that game and achieve a different outcome.

Marcus Freeman - #1 - RS Senior; 6' 1" 239 lbs. (Huber Hts., OH) Wayne H.S,

Freeman begins his third year as a starter on the Buckeye defense, but this year he'll be playing a different position. After starting for two years as the weakside linebacker, Freeman will move to the strongside spot to help the team. He played as a backup in 2004 as a true freshman, and was in line to start in 2005, but his season ended early with a knee injury and subsequent surgery, and then an infection that cost him the entire year. As a sophomore in 2006, Freeman was third on the team in tackles, including 15 in the BCS game against Florida.

As a junior in 2007, Freeman made 2nd Team All-Big Ten, after finishing second to Laurinaitis in tackles. A less well known commodity than his teammate Laurinaitis, Freeman began to come into his own in 2007 with several standout games. His "measurables" are off the charts for a man his size, with a rare combination of speed, agility and strength. Freeman holds numerous

Buckeye records in the weight room, and yet has posted some of the fastest times in the shuttle and other speed and agility drills. He's a sure tackler and a capable defender in the passing game as well.

Freeman has graduated with his Bachelors Degree, and is currently in a graduate program at OSU as he finishes his college football career. He has a young family now, and while that may change his off-the-field priorities, the focus remains getting back to the BCS championship and winning. He and Laurinaitis have become close friends over the years, and whatever happens in 2008, they'll be side by side.

Ross Homan - #51 - RS Sophomore; 6' 0" 229 lbs. Coldwater (OH) H.S.

Homan was a big name in the Ohio State recruiting class of 2006, committing to the Buckeyes early in 2005 after leading his Coldwater team to the state championship in Div IV, playing both ways, at running back and linebacker. He was a three-time all-state player, and won the Div IV Player of the Year award his senior year. Homan played in every game as a freshman with the Buckeyes in 2006, and got noticed with a couple of outstanding performances. He suffered a serious turf toe injury in 2007 though, and took a medical redshirt year after he was slow to come back from it.

Homan is now back to 100%, and his spring and summer performance prompted the coaches to move Freeman back to the strongside position, allowing Homan to play his more natural spot on the weak side. Spring practice observers say he has stood out as a real force on a very talented defense, and had a very strong Jersey Scrimmage this past Saturday. As one of only two new starters on the OSU defense for 2008, Homan should benefit from playing with a veteran group, as he looks to make his mark as another in a long line of star Buckeye linebackers.

Reserves:

Austin Spitler - #38 - RS Junior; 6' 3" 234 lbs. Bellbrook (OH) H.S.

It must be tough to come to Ohio State as an All-State player at inside linebacker, and then have to spend three years playing behind All-Americans A.J. Hawk and James Laurinaitis. With two years left in his college career, Austin Spitler is still looking for his chance to be a starter, now that Laurinaitis has returned for his

senior year. Spitler redshirted that first year in 2005, and has been a standout on special teams for the last two seasons, while working as Laurinaitis' backup. Opportunities have been limited though, because not only has Laurinaitis stayed healthy, he rarely if ever comes off the field with the game still in doubt. Spitler has played enough to demonstrate that he is a real talent, and that he has the size and versatility to play both the middle (Mike) linebacker spot and the strongside position as well. He is probably the first backup to both Freeman and Laurinaitis going into the 2008 season, and figures to get a lot of playing time, having proven to be a strong and reliable tackler and a physical presence wherever he plays.

Tyler Moeller - #26 - RS Sophomore; 6' 0" 216 lbs. (Cincinnati, OH) Colerain H.S.

It might be fair to describe Tyler Moeller as a linebacker in a safety's body. Moeller has worked at both positions since he became a Buckeye in 2006, and has also worked at the hybrid "Star" position for Jim Heacock's defense, which combines pass rushing, run support and pass coverage responsibilities. Moeller has always made up for any lack of ideal size with speed, toughness, and an instinct for making plays and always being around the ball. He loves to rush the passer and create havoc in the backfield, and he will probably be given ample opportunity this season to do just that for the OSU defense. The coaches love his pass-rush skills (Moeller had 15.5 sacks and 29 tackles-for-loss as a senior at Colerain) and they want to put his relentless, attacking style of play to good use when the situation calls for it. He is likely to see playing time in the regular linebacker rotation with the first unit. Moeller had some highlight-reel hits on special teams last season, and fans can expect more of the same in 2008. But fans who haven't yet seen what Tyler Moeller can do on defense are in for a treat this season.

Brian Rolle - #36 - Sophomore; 5' 11" 221 lbs. Immokalee, (FL) H.S.

Rolle is another of the new breed of speedy linebackers being recruited by the Buckeyes as more and more teams are running spread offenses and multiple receiver sets, which in turn requires better speed and coverage skills at the linebacker spots. Brian was a two-time All-State player and a highly sought prospect from Florida who surprised a few people when he committed to Ohio State in the class of 2007. He made an early splash for last year's Bucks with some bone-jarring hits on special teams, combining great speed with a fearless, physical style of play that often provided an emotional lift for the whole team.

You'll have that when a guy makes a hit that you can hear in C-Deck. Rolle will back up Homan at the Will linebacker position, and will no doubt continue to intimidate opponents on special teams as he competes for playing time on the defense.

Jermale Hines - #7 - Sophomore; 6' 2" 210 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Hines is a tremendous athlete who started at quarterback for Glenville his senior year, in addition to being named his team's defensive MVP. He has worked at both the outside linebacker positions at Ohio State, and earned a letter contributing on special teams for the 2007 Buckeyes. Hines has been practicing at safety this Spring, and the early returns are promising. It's too soon to tell if the switch will be full-time or permanent. He's another candidate for the hybrid "Star" (strong safety/linebacker) role in Heacock's defense, and his size-speed combination could work out very nicely there, and get him onto the field as part of one of the team's regular defensive sets.

Etienne Sabino - #6 - Freshman; 6' 3" 232 lbs. (Miami, FL) Dr. Michael M. Krop H.S.

Another product of Jim Tressel's Florida connection, Sabino was all-state in Florida, and ranked as one of the top inside linebackers in the nation last season. He enrolled early at OSU, and proceeded to show the Buckeye coaches in spring ball what all the accolades were about. An inside linebacker with the speed of an outside player, Sabino has shown a versatility and an athleticism that grabs your attention on the field. In the Spring Game he was making plays sideline-to-sideline, with a combination of quickness and sure tackling ability. For the moment he is repping at the middle linebacker spot, behind Laurinaitis and Spitler, but his talent may push him onto the field in some other roles before the season is over. He'll be playing on special teams for sure, and if he picks up the defensive system quickly enough, get ready to see a lot more of #6 in the near future. A star in the making.

Andrew Sweat - #42 - Freshman; 6' 2" 230 lbs. (Washington, PA) Trinity H.S.

Andrew Sweat is another true freshman inside linebacker with a world of talent and potential. Sweat also enrolled at OSU in time for Spring ball, and was playing

in a Buckeye uniform before his classmates had graduated from high school. He was a three-sport starter at Trinity, excelling in baseball and basketball, and going both ways in football as a fullback/linebacker. Sweat projects as a middle or strongside linebacker as a collegian. He has the size and speed to play either position, and has even talked about taking a shot at fullback if that's what the coaches want him to do. Sweat may have been the best senior football player in Pennsylvania last year not named Pryor. Buckeye fans will probably get a chance to see him on the special teams units this fall, and possibly at one of the outside linebacker spots with the second unit.

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

Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Defensive Line