I love this time of year. College and pro football are getting down to the nitty gritty. The Cavs are flat out rollin'. Baseball's hot stove season is heating up. And college hoops season is getting underway. The Buckeyes lost Kosta Koufous to the Utah Jazz, but Thad Matta has brought in another talented recruting class. This is a young Buckeye team without a senior on the roster. Buckeye Dan previews the team for us in his latest column.

Young Bucks

Color Thad Matta's 2008-09 Buckeyes Scarlet and Green. Ohio State's fifth year head coach has another highly-rated crop of recruits coming into the program, but as a team the Bucks will be very light on experience. In fact, junior swingman David Lighty is the only scholarship player on the roster that has played in a game for the Buckeyes prior to last season. There is not a senior on the roster. That's green.

Matta has long since proven he can attract some of the the best players in the country to Ohio State. What has eluded him so far is the continuity that comes with a group of guys that plays together for...say, the time it takes to get a college education. In each of the last two seasons, Matta has lost a talented freshman center to the NBA Draft. And in 2006-07, Greg Oden was accompanied to the NBA by two other OSU freshmen, Michael Conley and Daequan Cook.

Last season, freshman Kosta Koufous stopped by Columbus for a year on his way to picking up a regular paycheck, and another freshman Evan Wallace transferred out. All the incoming and outgoing traffic is making it hard for Matta to get any more seasoned as a basketball team.

In addition to Lighty, Jon Diebler and Evan Turner both started games for Matta as true freshmen last year, but all three have to be considered big guards or small forwards, or some hybrid of the two, which means that significant experience at the point and in the frontcourt is almost non-existent on this year's team.

Only three other scholarship players logged any minutes at all for Matta in 2007-08. JC transfer P.J. Hill got about six minutes per game backing up at point guard, and Dallas Lauderdale (7 min. per game) came off the bench at power forward and center. Backup center Kyle Madsen saw very limited action after sitting out the previous two seasons, transferring from Vanderbilt.

Looking for Leaders

How tough will it be to win consistently without a single senior on the team? Even the group led by Oden and Conley to the NCAA Finals in 2007 had senior Ron Lewis to take the really big shots . Last year it was Jamar Butler and Othello Hunter providing the experience and stability for the 24-13 Buckeyes, who won the NIT to cap off an inconsistent season with a strong finish.

This year that burden of leadership falls on the shoulders of Lighty, who was fourth on the team in scoring last season (9.0 ppg) but is the only one of the top four scorers returning. The junior from St. Joe's seems eager to take on the challenge, and it's not a stretch to project a breakout season for Lighty, who has been a terrific defender for two years, but has not been counted on to be a big time point producer.

It's no surprise then, that the Buckeyes are not prominently mentioned among the top contenders for Big Ten honors this year. Those expectations are reserved for the likes of Purdue , defending champion Wisconsin , and Michigan State . The Buckeyes finished fifth in the conference last year, with a 10-8 Big Ten mark, and missed out on the Big Dance.

This year's version of the Buckeyes, in the returning trio of big guards, Lighty (9 ppg), Diebler (5.9 ppg) and Turner (8.5 ppg), returns less than 25 points per game of scoring, at last year's pace, plus about 12 rebounds. All three might have to double those scoring averages this year for the Bucks to contend.

I do expect a solid year out of sophomore power forward Dallas Lauderdale . He's a strong rebounding and defensive presence, and if he's getting regular minutes at the power forward, he'll score in double digits. But even in the most optimistic scenario, this year's kiddie corps of Buckeyes would have to grow up in a big hurry to finish higher than fourth in the conference.

Baby Steps

Whatever lumps the young Bucks take this season, they should be exciting to watch. The infusion of new talent into the program by Coach Matta (3rd-ranked class here) consists of four touted freshmen, two JC transfer players, and a another 7-footer from Greece, who will sit out this season, but will get to practice with Mullens and Lauderdale for a year.

No less than six new faces (not counting walk-ons) will be looking down the bench to Matta this fall, and they all come in with some degree of fanfare. No one knows yet if there are any Greg Odens or Michael Conleys in this group, but the ongoing challenge for Matta and his staff will be to retain the talent they bring in, as a way to develop the familiarity on the court, and the personal relationships off the court that make a real team. After all the comings and goings in Matta's program in recent years, it does now look like the revolving door is slowing down.

Just to be clear, wishing for continuity in the program is no knock on the guys who are good enough to grab the brass ring after one year in college. Players like Oden and Conley don't come along that often, and more power to them for capitalizing when they can. But I've got to believe that Matta would prefer to build a program around kids he can work with longer, and not have to retool every couple years.

In the meantime though, the recruiting is going well. Here's a look at the incoming Buckeyes for 2008-09:

New Buckeyes

Once again Matta has landed the top-ranked high school center in the nation for the Buckeyes. B.J. Mullens (7'0", 275) of Canal Winchester (OH) will come into a thin OSU frontcourt, and be expected to contribute right away at center. Mullens made USA Today, Parade and McDonalds All-American teams as a high school senior, and was the Co-Player of the Year in Ohio. Needless to say, expectations are high. Mullens has been projected by many pundits in the preseason as the Newcomer of the Year in the Big Ten.

The other 2008 Ohio Co-Player of the Year will also be a new Buckeye this fall. William Buford (6'5", 190) of Toledo Libbey won the Ohio Mr. Basketball award, and averaged 23 points and 11 rebounds his senior year. Another McDonalds All-American.

Point guard Anthony Crater (6'1", 170) from Flint, MI is the third blue-chipper in Thad Matta's Class of 2008. He was an all-state performer and Michigan's Class B Player of the Year. Crater will compete for the starting point guard job immediately.

Guard Walter Offutt (6'3", 170) of Warren Central in Indiana is the fourth freshman in the recruiting class. Offutt missed most of his senior year in high school due to injury, but is a well-rounded player with excellent skills as a defender.

OSU announced in May that two junior college transfer players would also be joining the Buckeyes for the 2008-09 season:

Jeremie Simmons , a 6' 2" point guard from Chicago, playing at Mott Community College in Flint, MI., will be a Buckeye this fall. Simmons was first team NJCAA All-American, and led his team to a two-year record of 70-5, winning two Division II National JC championships. Simmons will have two years of eligibility at OSU.

Nikola Kecman , a 6' 8" forward originally from Serbia, played one year at the JC level in Arizona, averaging 13.4 points and 3.8 rebounds per game, and was the second leading scorer on his team. Kecman recently found out he will be forced to miss the first 12 games of the Buckeye season. This is the NCAA punishment for his having played on a team with other players who were

being compensated, as the team transitioned from an amateur team to a professional one.

After losing young centers two years in a row, this year Matta bought insurance . He is bringing in another young center, Zisis Sarikopoulos , (7' 0", 265) a native of Greece, who is transferring after one year at Alabama-Birmingham. He'll sit out this season, and have three years of eligibility for the Buckeyes. Sarikopoulos was picked by Michael Jordan to represent Greece at his Jordan Brand Classic, and he's just 18. A year of weights and practice should serve him well.

Outlook

Expect the 2008-09 Buckeyes to be a faster, quicker, more athletic team overall than we have seen in recent years. They'll be deeper in the backcourt than last year, but thinner up front. But after what will surely be some early growing pains, I think they'll gel as the year goes along. As with any young team, they'll struggle to win the close games, and those Big Ten road contests, but it should be fun to watch them develop, as long as you keep in mind that Matta is building for 2009-10 and beyond. There is enough raw talent there for them to win 20 games and maybe sneak into the NCAA Tournament, if everything goes right.

Consider that the point guard position seems to have quickly gone from a relative weakness to a strength. Jeremie Simmons , with two years at the JC level and two JC national championships to show for it, has experience no freshman could bring. He's a very good outside shooter, a scorer at the point. Freshman Anthony Crater is more of a penetrator, distributor, and inside scorer, and is pushing Simmons for playing time. Hill is the only one of the three with OSU game experience, but the position seems to be in very good, if young hands.

The shooting guards and small forwards are deeper and stronger than last year too, with standout freshman William Buford likely to join veterans Jon Diebler , Evan Turner and David Lighty

in the two-deep at the 2 and the 3 positions. Incoming freshman Walter Offut rounds out that group.

Here's where it gets dicey. At power forward and center for the Buckeyes, there are really only three bodies to play those two positions. Not only will freshman center B.J. Mullens , sophomore forward Dallas Lauderdale and junior center Kyle Madsen have to avoid injury, they'll also have to be in great shape.

Matta does play a lot of four-guard offense, using a point and three of his swingmen along with one big man, so that will save some of the wear and tear on these big guys. Then 12 games into the schedule, Kecman will be re-instated to give the frontcourt one more body to throw out there. Anyway you look at it though, they're perilously thin in the ranks of the bigs.

Early Schedule

The 2008-09 Bucks have an exhibition on Thursday Nov. 13 against Walsh University, and then open the regular season against Delaware State a week later, on Nov. 20. The opener will be played at St. John Arena, due to a scheduling conflict at Value City Arena. They then have two more home dates, with Bowling Green (11/24) and Samford (11/29), before hitting the road to play at Miami (FL) in the Big Ten-ACC Challenge on Dec. 2.

They are at Notre Dame on 12/6, and then home to Butler on 12/13.

Buckeyes 2008-09 Basketball Schedule

Talent Pipeline Full

Coach Matta has his full complement of scholarship players enrolled for this

season, and since he will lose no seniors off this team, there are no recruiting commitments yet for the class of 2009. But Matta has already assembled a star-studded class for 2010, including Jared Sullinger, one of the nation's best junior big men, from Columbus Northland H.S., and DeShaun Thomas, the #2-ranked forward in the country, from Ft. Wayne, IN.

Sullinger and another 2010 Buckeye recruit, Jordan Sibert from Cincinnati Princeton, played together on the All-Ohio Red team that took home the championship of the national AAU 16-and under tournament this past summer. Sullinger reportedly dominated the competition with a blend of brute strength, low post moves, shooting ability and passing skills to go with an outstanding supporting cast on All-Ohio Red.

Scout.com and Scouts Inc. have Sullinger ranked as the No.1 player in the nation in the Class of 2010. He is 6' 8", and 265 lbs. at age 16. Words like "punisher", "monster" and "beast" are routinely used to describe the way he has toyed with the competition in his age group. And yes, he is the brother of former Buckeye guard J.J. Sullinger.

If Matta can keep all of his big men in college, two years from now, a frontcourt of Mullens, Lauderdale, Sarikopoulos, Sullinger and Thomas could be one of the best in memory in Columbus.

Stay tuned.

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