Spring football at Ohio State comes to a close this Saturday when the Scarlet meets the Gray in the annual Spring Game at The Shoe. If the weather cooperates, a crowd of 70,000 or more could be on hand to take in their first glimpse of the 2009 Buckeyes. And in the latest edition of "Buckeye Leaves", Buckeye Dan hits on the spring game, what the 2009 starting lineup will look like, and what Buckeyes will get drafted this Saturday. It's Buckeye Dan's one year anniversary writing for us! Thanks Dan!

Spring Ball Wrap-Up

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While the Spring Game is an exhibition for the fans of Buckeye Nation, the previous week's Jersey Scrimmage is played for the coaches, and for bragging rights among players. That's because the format for the Jersey Scrimmage matches the full OSU offense against the full defense, instead of splitting up both units to form both a Scarlet and a Gray team, neither one comprised of all the starters that will take the field together in the Fall.

For the uninitiated, it's called the "jersey" scrimmage because the winners get to wear the scarlet jerseys in practice for the entire year following the game. Tressel has a complicated scoring system that awards points to the defense for sacks, turnovers and defensive stops, and he has been known to 'engineer' things late in the game to keep it close.

Saturday's jersey game was no exception as the defense came out on top by a score of 56-55, but all observers agreed that the game was dominated by the Buckeye defense throughout. The defense led at one point 34-7, in part because

Tressel had both quarterbacks, Terrelle Pryor and Joe Bauserman, in black, "no contact" jerseys, which took away any rushing or scrambling threat, and made them easy targets for 'touch' sacks.

And sack the defense did...13 in all, seven by sophomore Solomon Thomas alone. Of course telling Pryor he's not allowed to run is like telling Nolan Ryan he can use anything but his fastball. Pryor seems to chafe at the restraint. But Tressel is not only protecting The Franchise, he's admittedly recycling the technique he used to refine Troy Smith's passing game, by taking away his quarterback's run option completely, forcing him to concentrate on passing mechanics, footwork and reading defenses. Hey, that experiment worked out OK.

As much as I'm in favor of polishing up the precision passing attack for the Buckeyes, it will be interesting to see if this offense shifts significantly from the between-the-tackles approach of the Beanie Wells era, to an attack that will aggressively attack the edge with Pryor and his fast backs and receivers. I'm among the fans that want to see some of that attack this Saturday. But we probably won't, because the more responsible guy in charge is just hoping to get Pryor through the game in one piece.

So with the defensive line playing like the strength of the Buckeye defense in 2009, and the offensive line being still young and unproven as a unit, it all added up to a long scrimmage for Terrelle Pryor, who finished 8 of 13 for 72 yards, and no TD's. He also threw a pick at the goal line to Devon Torrence. But at 6' 6" and 238, he's not a guy who's used to being 'down' based on one touch.

When the coach finally unleashed Pryor late in the contest, he drove the team for a TD on the final drive, which included a couple of patented Pryor running plays. However, Tressel called an unsportsmanlike foul on Pryor for excessive jawing at a defender after the touchdown, and the 15-yard penalty made Aaron Pettrey's extra-point attempt a 25-yarder, and it missed wide, resulting in the one-point win for the 'D'.

(Watch video and listen to audio of Coach Tressel and several senior players talk after the Jersey Scrimmage here .)

We're going to get to the 2009 defense in a moment, but a couple of other spring

practice notes on offense....(*more on Tressel's 2009 offense here*)

Boom Herron is the clear starter at running back, but junior Brandon Saine turned heads Saturday, just as he has been doing all spring. He's always had great speed and good hands, and is now showing the power and elusiveness that we hadn't seen from him yet, in part due to injuries. Good news, since there are just two true freshmen on scholarship behind him at tailback.
Studs
, but
freshmen
nonetheless.

The starting offensive line at the moment (and probably also in September) is comprised of sophomore Mike Adams at LT, Justin Boren at LG, Mike Brewster at C,
Bryant Browning
at RG, and
Jim Cordle
at RT. By all accounts, Boren has just been 315 pounds of badass all spring...a mauler at guard. Browning, who started every game at right tackle last year, has moved inside effectively to guard, while the versatile Cordle will likely start at his third position in as many years for the Buckeyes, at right tackle. Sophomore
J.B. Shugarts
may be too good to keep off the field when he gets back from off-season shoulder surgery, and could compete to start at either tackle spot. Adams has struggled a bit in pass protection, as has the line overall. S&G-tinted glasses aside, it appears that's partly a reflection of how good and deep the defensive line talent is for the Buckeyes. (see: Gibson, Thad)

At receiver, the starters this spring have been DeVier Posey , Ray Small and Flash Thomas
, with
Taurian Washington
having another great spring, and
Grant Schwartz
getting into the mix as well.
Dane Sanzenbacher
will be playing when it counts too, but is sitting out spring ball. Incoming freshman receiver

James Jackson
enrolled early, but has switched over to defense and is working at corner.

Cracking on Tressel for not throwing to the tight end is old and tired...and justified, but don't be surprised to see Jake Stoneburner playing big from the tight end spot this year. The redshirt freshman just outgrew (6'5", 240) the receiver role he played in high school, but he's got terrific hands and athletic ability, great speed for a tight end, and he's tough to bring down....making him potentially a good 'last resort' threat for Terrelle Pryor.
Jake Ballard
returns as the projected starter at the tight end, and he's got hands and some speed as well, and you may see both guys on the field at times.

Joe Bauserman could start for an awful lot of D1 schools.

Reloading

If you're paying attention to the NFL Draft this weekend, you could be forgiven for thinking the Buckeyes will be in trouble on defense in 2009. You'll be seeing two of OSU's 2008 starting linebackers taken, probably in the 2nd (James Laurinaitis) and maybe the 4th (Marcus Freeman) rounds.

You'll see both 2008 starting cornerbacks taken, in the 1st (Malcolm Jenkins) and probably the 3rd (Donald Washington) rounds. And you'll see defensive tackle Nader Abdallah taken in the middle rounds too.

Now you don't lose a Malcolm Jenkins without leaving a hole behind, but the early returns on the 2009 Buckeye defense point to another strong unit for coordinator Jim Heacock. And it starts with the position group least affected by graduation and Sunday football....the defensive line.

If this sounds familiar, it should. Last year, everyone projected great things for the OSU d-line, with Lawrence Wilson returning from injury, and Cam Heyward coming off a big freshman year... Rob Rose and young Thaddeus Gibson would emerge....the young tackles Denlinger and Larimore would step up with Abdallah on the inside...etc. Long story short...we may have expected too much too soon.

Aside from Wilson going down with another season-ending injury and Denlinger being injured much of the year, the line as a unit didn't meet expectations, especially early in the year. The tackles weren't getting the penetration up the middle, and ends were getting doubled. But as the season wore on, Abdallah's game really came on, Gibson started to come into his own as a pass-rushing force, and freshman end Nathan Williams came out of nowhere to peak in the Fiesta Bowl harrassing Colt McCoy. Heyward adjusted well to playing more inside at tackle, and Dexter Larimore matured before our eyes into a pretty tough defensive tackle by season's end.

Those 2008 performances, and the depth accumulating behind those guys in the program, are responsible for the optimism about the 2009 defensive line.

Defensive Ends:

Once again, Lawrence Wilson will be returning from an injury, and after having missed the better part of two seasons with injuries, anything you get from the guy has to be considered a bonus. He's a great kid, and for his sake you want to see him have a positive football experience for the Buckeyes. He deserves that, and he's a rare talent if they can keep him on the field.

The good news is that if Wilson has lost even a little, it would be tough to play him over either Cameron Heyward , Thaddeus Gibson or Nathan Williams as a starter at defensive end. Heyward and Gibson are listed as the DE starters, but the coaches like to play all three on passing downs, with Heyward at the tackle. Gibson is progressing as a run defender, and is already a fearsome pass-rusher. The NFL may come calling after this, his junior year.

The depth at defensive end on this roster is ridiculous. Rob Rose is back as a senior, and sophomores
Solomon Thomas
(he of the seven sacks) and
Keith Wells
bring speed and more speed to the unit. Adding true freshmen talents
Melvin Fellows
and
Jonathan Newsome
to this group for 2009 is just unfair.

Defensive Tackles:

The Bucks lose only Abdallah at the defensive tackle spots, and while this was an area of underachievement for OSU in 2008, a veteran group led by Doug Worthington and Dexter Larimore, (and often joined by Heyward or Rose) should be improved for 2009. Todd Denlinger is back at 100% health again, and redshirt freshman Garrett Goebel has impressed his way into the two-deep at tackle. Willie Mobley is another redshirt freshman who might be in the mix for playing time at tackle.

More defensive tackle help is arriving in fall, in the form of Adam Bellamy and Johnny Simon. Bellamy could stand a redshirt year in the weight room. Simon owns the weight room. He could play early.

Linebackers:

Two of the three starting linebackers the OSU defense in 2009 are pretty much a given. The third one depends on what formation the Buckeyes have on the field.

Senior Austin Spitler will get the start in the middle after caddying for Laurinaitis for three years, and returning starter Ross Homan will be playing the weak side (Will) linebacker most of the time. In the base defense, Tyler Moeller or Brian Rolle would probably be the third linebacker (strongside) on the field. In the nickel package, a set the Bucks use as much as 50% of the time, Jermale Hines would start at nickel back, replacing the third linebacker.

Rolle has really come on strong this spring, and he might now have a slight edge, but he and Moeller and sophomore Etienne Sabino all have the talent and experience to be on the field a lot for the Bucks this fall. All three bring above

average speed to the linebacking rotation, and Moeller especially has already shown a knack for creating chaos in the offensive backfield.

Sabino appeared to be the heir apparent in the middle for OSU, and if he doesn't supplant Spitler as the starter this year, he has the speed to play outside as well, and might end up contributing there. Besides, true freshman and early enrollee Storm Klein has been very impressive this spring at the Sam and in the middle, hitting everything that moves...and with an attitude. He may soon have something to say about who inherits the legacy position of Ohio State middle linebacker.

Sophomore Andrew Sweat will back up Homan and Rolle at the Will, and after touted freshmen Dorian Bell and Jordan Whiting arrive in August, the Bucks will be able to field a very impressive three-deep all across the linebacker group.

Cornerbacks:

Two of the top three OSU cornerbacks from 2008 are gone, with Chimdi Chekwa, who started several games, the only returning corner with extensive collegiate game experience. This spring, two contenders have risen to the top of a talented group to step into the void created by the departures of Jenkins and Washington.

Andre Amos, a fifth year senior whose OSU career has been beset by injuries and major knee surgery, played in 12 games as a freshman in 2006, and has looked great in his most recent comeback attempt. He would probably start opposite Chekwa if the Bucks had a game tomorrow, but he is being pushed hard by Devon Torrence, the junior from Canton who has split time between OSU football and his professional baseball career as a farmhand in the Houston Astros organization. Torrence may now feel like his future could be as another in a long line of Buckeye cornerbacks to play in the NFL, at least enough to put baseball on the back burner for a year to find out.

Amos and Torrence each had an interception in the jersey scrimmage Saturday, so the competition continues. The truth is that you need three good cornerbacks anyway, and these guys are clearly the Bucks' top three.

Redshirt freshman Travis Howard and sophomore Donnie Evege have emerged as the fourth and fifth corners on the spring roster, but that might be altered come

August when the Buckeyes welcome two freshmen with the chops to potentially play early. Co rey Brown could end up at wide receiver, but he's a kid who invites comparisons to Chris Gamble with his overall ability, and could end up as a dominant cornerback before he's through. Another incoming freshman cornerback that the OSU coaches are very high on is Dominic Clarke, a promising kid from Jenkins' home turf in the D.C. area.

Safeties:

The 2008 starters, Anderson Russell and Kurt Coleman, both return as seniors for the 2009 season, but the depth at the safety is much better than the situation a year ago. Jermale Hines of course, is a starter in the nickel package, and the coaches have been very impressed with the athleticism and overall play of redshirt freshman Orhian "OJ" Johnson this spring. Sophomores Nate Oliver and Rocco Pentello, and redshirt freshman Zach Domicone provide more depth at safety, and incoming freshman Jamie Wood is another promising youngster who is enrolled early and making a mark.

It will be important for the coaches to get their young safeties some meaningful game action this season since both starters will graduate after 2009.

Even with some inexperience at cornerback and some nagging concerns at defensive tackle, it looks like this Buckeye defense is not going to drop far from their 2008 performance, which ranked near the top of the defensive stats for scoring defense and overall defense nationally.

I'll be on the railing in C-Deck Saturday to bring you a report on the game

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Covering the Spring Game this Saturday marks something of a milestone for me. A year ago this week, I submitted a story on the 2008 Spring Game to Swerb, and he liked it well enough to post it the next day, and welcome me to the TCF staff. Not only that, but he has kept me around for a year writing about the Buckeyes, among other things. Well, that year has flown by, and it's been a great ride. It feels good to be a part of an awesome team. Thanks, Swerb.

Links:

OSU 2009 Spring Football Information (pdf)

YouTube video of incoming 2009 OSU recruits, narrated by Coach Tressel:

Video #1

Video #2

Video #3