Trying to get Buckeye Dan Wismar's head in some condition to objectively evaluate the Buckeyes is an annual exercise that he's not sure he will ever really accomplish completely. But with the 2009 season fast approaching, we coerced Dan to give our readers his thoughts on how this season will play out for the Bucks. And he relented. So, without further adieu, Buckeye Dan gives us the best damn Ohio State preview in the land as we get ready for the start of the college football season.

Trying to get my head in some condition to objectively evaluate the Buckeyes is an annual exercise that I'm not sure I ever really accomplish completely. But I'm up for a brief brush with reality, and I think this may be as close as I'm going to get anytime soon, so let's have at it.

I consider myself duly chastened by having been swept up in the fever of OSU optimism last year (the only one among my roundtable peers here at TCF to predict a 12-0 regular season), only to bounce back to earth early and often. I was still cleaning up from the Labor Day picnic when that dream died. It was pretty obvious after the second game, an embarrassing squeaker at home over a bad Ohio U. team that, at the very least, the touted offensive and defensive lines were overrated, and Beanie was already injured and out till who knew when.

Then of course USC laid bare some Buckeye flesh on national TV the following week, and the 35-3 margin of defeat that night fed into a growing national groundswell of opinion that Ohio State was at least one notch below the elite football teams in the country. Any chance of playing for the BCS Championship went away that day....the day Jim Tressel benched his senior all-conference starting quarterback.

That's All Over

In a way it's remarkable how Tressel then took his team to a share of the Big Ten title and a BCS berth after the humiliation in L.A. and the subsequent on-the-fly transition of his offense to feature the anti-Boeckman, Terrelle Pryor . Tressel called on his senior stars like James Laurinaitis and Malcolm Jenkins to rise to the occasion, and they both did....in a big way. Although some other seniors (*cough-fensive line*) didn't rise so much, the Bucks beat up on a fairly soft Big Ten, and the only conference game they lost was under control in the 4th quarter until ...
(was it Woody who said you can count on losing one game for every freshman you have starting?...well somebody said it...)

The other two OSU losses in a season that is considered by nearly everyone a disappointing year for the Buckeyes, were to the teams that finished #2 (USC) and #3 (Texas) in the country. But it can never be a good year for Ohio State when they lose their last game. And there are no moral victories, especially in bowl games.

It is at once the blessing and the curse of the status reached at Ohio State under Jim Tressel, that nothing less than competing for the BCS trophy is expected, with the conference title reduced to a somewhat important stop along the way. And you don't have to go back too far in Jesse's entertaining retrospective to find a time when that wasn't necessarily the case.
(..and Jesse's a pup...he only goes back 20 years...)

My best objective take on the 2009 Buckeyes is that they're a team loaded with talent, and at the same time, almost to a man, unproven. Painfully young. There are all kinds of reasons to see this team going 10-2, or even 9-3, and maybe missing out on the BCS bowls (say, if Penn State can beat them in Happy Valley and go on to win the conference.) A team this green could conceivably beat a USC and then turn around and drop one to Minnesota. Ohio State lost all three big games they played last season, and until they win one this year, there will be doubts. But again, consider where we are. We're talking about projecting a possible 10-2 season as *a down year.*

The Problems Unknowns

For starters, there are no returning senior All-Americans like Laurinaitis and Jenkins and Wells. The names of this year's seniors....like Cordle and Spitler and Coleman....don't roll off the tongue like first-round draft choices. The prognosticators left the Buckeyes off their preseason All-America teams in droves. (more on that here)

In nearly every position group on the offensive side of the ball, new starters will be taking over. Only one offensive line starter (Brewster at center) will return playing the same position as last year. The two starting wide receivers, the running back and fullback from 2008 are gone.

On defense, at linebacker they'll need to replace the 200-plus tackles made last year by Marcus Freeman and Laurinaitis. Whoever they line up at cornerback, he won't be Malcolm Jenkins. The defensive line returns intact, and is perhaps the strength of the team, but the interior of that line needs to improve on last year's productivity. And all this uncertainty...and these graduation losses...and unproven young players adds up to...what?

...a team ranked between #5 and #10 by the four major college football publications, and favored by most to win the Big Ten Conference. So what do they know? On what basis are they climbing out on that limb?

I'm not sure....but I have a theory. They know a few things. For one, they know Jim Tressel has had three consecutive highly-ranked recruiting classes, and that the team has excellent depth and ability beyond its recognizable "name" players. They know the whole country doesn't know much yet about Justin Boren or DeVier Posey or Nathan Williams among others, but they soon will.

And they know the Buckeyes have Terrelle Pryor .

And they know he's good. But they think he might be great.

Driven

That's pretty much where I am too. In fact, I think the difference between a 10-2 or

9-3 OSU season and something much more exciting than that will be whether or not Pryor has progressed to the point as a complete quarterback where he can attack an opponent as a runner, a passer and a team leader. His coach seems committed to diversifying his famously conservative offense to suit the skills of his young star, (an offseason process we talked in some depth about here) and the skill position talent around him in 2009 is also poised to break out along with their quarterback.

The exciting thing for Buckeye fans is that Pryor has given his coaches and his teammates every reason to think that he has the desire and the work ethic to be great, not just good. There's a palpable sense in Columbus by people who follow the program closely that it's going to be a monster year for the kid from Jeannette, PA. And why not? It's not as if his ability has ever been a question mark.

That Pryor is an immense talent is the worst kept secret in America, and any Buckeye fan who saw him play last season as an 18-year old freshman had more than a few of his own 'OMFG' moments....watching him glide for 20-yard gains after being flushed out of the pocket...or run option keepers around the end for touchdowns...or soar above all the DB's for a bowl game TD reception. He exudes 'special'. All through his 10 starts, OSU fans were muttering to themselves "Once he figures out what the hell he's doing, he could be unstoppable." Well, okay, that was *me* muttering that, but c'mon..you were watching too, right?

At times I'd find myself *hoping* he'd see no one open on his dropback, so I could watch him scramble. If he wants to take it to the edge on a read option run...with, say Boom Herron trailing...on every single play, till the defense starts holding him under five yards a pop, that's OK with me too. Come to think of it, that's a pretty decent game plan.

The conventional wisdom had the young man refining his passing skills and growing up with a Buckeye team in transition in 2009, with the real target being the 2010 season, when he could put it all together in his junior year, likely his last at OSU. And that may well happen. But it appears that Terrelle Pryor doesn't want to wait that long to start concentrating on winning every game.

Attitude

By all accounts, Pryor is an willing student and a hard worker. And as we all saw after the Penn State game, this is not a kid who likes losing. He is driven to be a great passer as well as a great runner, and assistant quarterbacks coach Nick Siciliano says the difference in Pryor's passing mechanics between the time he arrived on campus and this spring is like night and day. One of the reasons he's playing in Columbus instead of Ann Arbor is his long-stated desire to be an NFL quarterback...not just a running QB, and he knew that Tressel, quarterbacks coach Joe Daniels, and Siciliano could make it happen...in time. And they've been diligently on the case....

Pryor showed considerable improvement mechanically in the Spring Game this year, and throughout spring ball his coaches and teammates raved about the improvement they saw in his overall game....including his leadership of the offense. It's all his now, and what's more, he genuinely relishes taking on that mantle of leadership. He wants to be the man. He saw how Troy Smith commanded the attention and respect of his teammates...by his actions, not his words...and he wants to be
that guy
.

Pryor also seems to possess that all too rare quality of being confident and enthusiastic on the field, without coming off as a self-promoter. I thought he showed tremendous poise last season as a true freshman starter at the highest level of the college game. He was among the first to encourage or pump up a teammate, and among the least likely to celebrate his own accomplishments with look-at-me demonstrations on the field. I hope he can retain that humility and calm as he progresses as a player.

It's also worth noting that the kid with the rap of not yet being a polished pro-style passer led the Big Ten in passing efficiency *last year*, a mere four months removed from high school. He threw six of his 12 TD passes in his last three regular season games, including two textbook TD passes in the Michigan game in November. There is not, and has never been any question whatsoever about his arm strength. Fans whose lasting memory of Pryor's 2008 performance was his forgettable passing showing in the Fiesta Bowl, might do well to recall that he played with a painful shoulder injury
that night, and instead consider his on-the-job training over the long haul of the season.

Go ahead... refresh your memory ...(jump to 1:30 mark for highlights). I'll wait here.

That's the reason the Buckeyes are ranked in the Top Ten with a team that's green as grass.

Speaking of work ethic and dedication...a full off-season of weight room work has added 15 pounds of muscle, and Pryor will play this year at 6' 6", 238. Oh, yeah...he's the fastest Buckeye on the roster, timed this spring at 4.38 in the 40. Did I mention 6' 6", 238? That's just not fair.

One of the problems with being a mid-season replacement who had never gone through spring football or taken a majority of practice reps with the first team was a limited familiarity with the OSU offense, and Pryor was clearly being restricted by Tressel in 2008 as a result. He averaged under 15 pass attempts per game in his 10 starts, compared with his average of 10 rushing attempts per game.

But even with a hobbled Beanie Wells and a lack of top-end speed at receiver to go along with the risk-averse play-caller in the sweater-vest, Pryor managed 1311 yards passing and 12 passing TD's to complement his 6 TD's rushing, with just four interceptions. He was 100 for 165 (61%) passing, and was named the Big Ten Freshman of the Year, also making numerous national all-freshman teams.

Without question, having Beanie Wells behind him gave defenses something else to worry about besides Pryor last year, and Wells' replacement by a committee of less experienced backs in 2009 is a cause for concern. But it's not like the cupboard is bare. Having talked earlier about the many holes to fill from the 2008 lineup, let's move on briefly to some of the players doing the filling.

The Rest of the Offensive Upside

Anticipating new faces on the offensive line isn't necessarily bad news for the 2009 Bucks, especially considering the relative underachievement by seniors Boone, Person and Rehring last year. The fruits of Tressel's recent O-line recruiting should become apparent this year, as Mike Brewster returns for his sophomore season at center with a year of experience, and the nation's #1 tackle from the 2008 freshman class,
Mike Adams

(6' 8", 322) appears ready to step in at left tackle full-time.

While he's not yet a finished product in pass protection, Adams can be a dominating run blocker, and when paired on the left side with transfer LG Justin Boren , who has been the most impressive of all the linemen in spring ball, the Bucks look like they could have an excellent left side running attack. Throw in true freshman Adam Homan (Ross' brother) who enrolled early for spring ball, and at 6' 4", 235 lbs., looks like he could be a hammer as a lead blocker at fullback, and the OSU rushing game could take some pressure off of Pryor. Homan opened some eyes in the spring game, keying some of the longer running plays with crunching blocks, and he's the presumed starter at fullback at the moment.

Bryant Browning , who at times last year looked like a guard trying to play tackle, will be moved inside to right guard in 2009. The 6' 4", 312 lb. junior had an excellent spring on the inside after starting every game at right tackle in 2008. Two year starter Jim Cordle will likely be the starting right tackle in 2009 as a senior, after starting at center (2007) and guard (2008) the previous two years. At some point, sophomore tackle J.B. Shugarts , who lettered last year as a freshman but struggled with shoulder injuries, will make an impact. If he is playing too well to keep him off the field this fall, I would foresee Cordle competing with Browning for the RG job to make room for Shugarts at RT.

So all the starting offensive linemen have at least a year of starting experience, even if they have shuffled around a bit. Boren, the Columbus-area native who started at center for Michigan as a true freshman in 2007 and made Honorable Mention All-Big Ten, has shuffled all the way back to his home town. OSU fans are going to love Boren. He's a bear.

At wide receiver, the 2009 Buckeyes will go at least six deep, with more speed if less experience than last year's starters Robiskie and Hartline. Sophomore DeVier Posey and senior Ray Small should be the starters on the outside (assuming Small's summer academic work goes satisfactorily) with

Dane Sanzenbacher
working mostly out of the slot position. They'll be backed by an emerging
Taurian Washington
, a junior, and speedy sophomore
LaMaar "Flash" Thomas
, along with junior
Grant Schwartz
. Of the the three incoming freshman wide receivers, Cris Carter's son Duron might be the most ready to contribute early.
Judge for yourself
.

Boom Herron and Brandon Saine will form the 1-2 punch in the rushing attack for the 2009 Bucks... although maybe we should make that "the 2-3 punch", since that guy at QB can rush the football a little bit himself. Herron has added strength in the offseason, and Saine had a very promising spring after struggling with a hamstring injury most of last season. Incoming freshmen Jamaal Berry and Carlos Hyde could contribute, but the hope is that they won't have to, at least not right away.

And at tight end, senior Jake Ballard will be joined by redshirt freshman Jake Stoneburner
, another emerging Buckeye who is likely to open some eyes this fall with a size-speed-hands combination that will cause some matchup problems for defenses.

Defense Won't Rest

The Buckeyes will be counting on their defensive line to be dominant, especially while their new starters at linebacker and cornerback get up to speed. Pressure on the quarterback can make up for a variety of other defensive weaknesses, and if the OSU defensive ends live up to their billings, the Buckeyes should have plenty of that.

Thad Gibson came on strong last season at one end, and proven performer Cameron Heyward
is listed as the other starter, but the Bucks go at least six-deep at end with senior

Lawrence Wilson
and promising sophomore
Nathan Williams
backing up the starters, and
Rob Rose
and
Solomon Thomas
behind them. And that's not even taking speedy sophomore
Keith Wells
and true freshmen Melvin Fellows and Jonathan Newsome into account.

At tackle, Todd Denlinger , Doug Worthington and Dexter Larimore all return with starting experience, and in many of the Buckeyes' passing down sets, ends like Heyward or Rose will be moved inside to get more pass rushers on the field. Denlinger missed a good portion of last season with injuries, and his return along with Larimore's improvement last year make the prospects better in 2009 for solid play in the defensive middle. Look for redshirt freshman
Garrett Goebel
and maybe even freshman Johnny Simon to get some playing time at tackle as well.

At linebacker (as with the receivers) the Bucks will be greener but faster in 2009. Senior Austin Spitler will take over for Laurinaitis in the middle, and while they don't gain speed in that transition, Spitler is a crunching hitter and sure tackler with a senior's knowledge of all the linebacking spots, and he has earned his time after three years behind the All-American. If he falters, blue-chip sophomore
Etienne Sabino
is ready to step in at the MLB spot.

Sabino will play somewhere, but with Ross Homan manning the weakside (Will) linebacker spot, and Tyler
Moeller
looking like the starter at the strongside (Sam) spot, the Bucks have a wealth of talent to spread around. The speed bonus comes into play with increased field time for Moeller, Sabino, and backup WLB
Brian Rolle
, along with DB/LB
Jermale Hines
in the nickel packages. Early enrolling freshman MLB

Storm Klein
showed in the spring game that he belongs, and sophomore
Andrew Sweat
is in the mix as well.

Both starting safeties return in 2009, with strong safety Kurt Coleman getting some attention on a few preseason All-American and all-conference lists. Anderson Russell returns as a steady force at free safety, while the coaches look for depth from a relatively inexperienced group including sophomores
Orhian Johnson
,
Rocco Pentello
and
Nate Oliver
, and senior
Aaron Gant
.

Senior Andre Amos and junior Devon Torrence will compete for the job to replace Malcolm Jenkins at one cornerback spot, while returning starter
Chimdi Chekwa
has the other side nailed down. Amos probably has the edge in experience, but the freakish athletic ability of the converted receiver Torrence may give him the edge in the long run. There's no shortage of talented cornerbacks behind those three. Coaches are high on redshirt freshman
Travis Howard
and sophomore
Donnie Evege
, and they have three very good corner prospects arriving as true freshmen in Dominic Clarke, C.J. Barnett, and Corey Brown.

Dicey Proposition

If nothing else, last season proved how tough it is to make meaningful predictions before the season starts (*see: Utah Utes*). What is blindingly obvious though, is that again this year, the OSU season will turn on the result of the USC game in September. Before that showdown, I hesitate to make any prediction at all. But with a gun to my head, I'd say 10-2 for the 2009 Buckeyes. For me the fun part

will be finding out if #2 is going to be great...or just good. Because if he takes the leap that he's capable of, there's nobody on the Ohio State schedule that they can't beat.

New Blood

I had hoped to get into some discussion of the incoming freshmen as a group, but that was 3000 words ago, and besides, you can see profiles of them all here , and here , plus I've already done that back in the dead of winter. Here's some additional commentary on spring ball 2009 (...and please forgive all the self-referential linking going on here...I'm just trying to congregate all the stuff I've written over the winter for the people who are just now starting to look at the 2009 Bucks)

Loose Leaves

Just one Loose Leaf this time around, since I can sense a number of readers already dozed off...

Ohio State has scheduled their primary non-conference opponents in football going out all the way to 2019. Now, forgive me if I am banging on a drum you have heard me banging before, but I challenge anyone to find an FBS program that is doing what Jim Tressel has done with his scheduling. Consider...

Looking back over the past four seasons, and looking ahead to the next ten years, Tressel has the Buckeyes scheduled in home-and-home series with:

Texas (2005, 2006)

USC (2008, 2009)

Miami, FL (2010, 2011)

California (2012, 2013)

Virginia Tech (2014, 2015)

Oklahoma (2016, 2017)

Tennessee (2018, 2019)

Five of those seven schools (excepting Miami and Tennessee) are in this year's preseason Top Ten, and when Tressel scheduled the Miami series (before the 2002 season) the Hurricanes were the reigning national champions.

Yes, there are tougher in-conference schedules elsewhere thse days, but *no one* has been more aggressive at scheduling traditional non-conference powerhouses as early-season opponents than Jim Tressel has. Every year (except 2007).

Remember that when people whine about the Buckeyes playing Akron or Kent State in their non-conference slate. Or just refer them to Joe Paterno's schedule .

See you next time.