The 2009 Buckeyes will be deeper and faster at linebacker than they have been for some time. They'll take the field this season without any big names returning, but with several guys looking to make one for themselves. And Buckeye Dan Wismar is betting Buckeye fans are going to like what they see. In the first in a series of position group previews for the 2009 Ohio State Buckeyes ... Dan takes a look at the young gun linebacking crew.

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Linebacker Who?

Penn State likes to consider itself "Linebacker U.", and not without good reason.

But Buckeye fans like to think that, in a showdown, we could see their Jack Ham, Ed O'Neil, Greg Buttle, Shane Conlan, Andre Collins, Matt Millen, Walker Lee Ashley, LaVar Arrington, Paul Posluszny, Lance Mehl and Dan Connor...

...and raise them with our Randy Gradishar, Tom Cousineau, Stan White, Jim Houston, Mike Vrabel, Pepper Johnson, Marcus Marek, Chris Spielman, Andy Katzenmoyer, A.J. Hawk, and James Laurinaitis...confident that we were holding the better hand.

Throw in a second tier of Buckeyes who were less-celebrated but had standout

careers in Columbus and went on to have NFL careers of one kind or another... Na'il Diggs, Bob Brudzinski, Matt Wilhelm, Steve Tovar, Anthony Griggs, Alonzo Spellman, Bobby Carpenter...and in 2009, Marcus Freeman....and we'd say the Nittany Lions should just fold that Linebacker U. argument. *(To be fair, I didn't research the second tier for Penn State a whole lot....because who cares really?)*

Sometimes the wrong Buckeyes got selected in the NFL's first round...which wasn't *their* fault. Eric Kumerow and Craig Powell come to mind, and of course Cousineau was an NFL bust after a brilliant college career, but on balance the pros have done well by OSU linebackers. (note of course that two of those three mistakes were by one NFL team.)

Necessarily in any conversation about Linebacker U., you have to talk about Florida State and USC and a few others if you're going to be serious about it...which I'm not so much. I just wanted to set the table for talking about current and future Buckeye linebackers.

Next Generation

Obviously, the reputation helps in recruiting, success breeding success and all that. Good young linebackers want to play for Ohio State, and Ohio does seem to grow a lot of them. It's too soon to tell how this year's crop of Buckeye linebackers project to NFL careers, but Tressel and linebackers coach Luke Fickell are stockpiling talent, and, for the moment, one hopes pro ball is the last thing on their minds anyway.

Ohio has produced all three projected starters at linebacker for the 2009 Buckeyes: Austin Spitler , a senior from Bellbrook, will be a first-time starter in the middle, Ross Homan , the junior from Coldwater, returns for his second year as a starter on the weak side (Will) , and Tyler Moeller , the junior from Cincinnati Colerain is first on the depth chart at the Sam (strong side) position.

Spitler will be starting at MLB as a 5th year senior, having backed up Laurinaitis for three years, excelling on special teams along the way. He has good size (6' 3", 238) and strength to go with a jarring tackling style, and his years in the system give him an edge in helping coordinate the coaches' scheme on the field.

He has looked strong in stuffing the run, but is unproven as a pass defender.

Homan is the leading returning tackler in the linebacker group, having made 67 total tackles in 2008, including 35 solos, and six for a loss. He started a bit slowly after missing the 2007 season with a bad turf toe injury, but made the kinds of strides in his first year starting that create optimism about the level of play we might expect from him as a veteran this year.

Tyler Moeller has earned a larger role for himself this year by somehow always managing to be in the thick of the action whenever he has been on the field as an underclassman. He's got the size of a safety (6' 0", 216 lbs) but he has used his quickness and speed to develop as an effective blitzer and run support player in spite of his size. He's a strong tackler in space, and utterly fearless throwing his body around to make a play. The coaches love to walk him up to the line and send him off the edge into the backfield.

The starters are solid, but it would be a mistake to put too much stock in the early depth chart. In the Hawk-Carpenter-Laurinaitis-Freeman era, the OSU coaches hardly ever took their big guns off the field. One consequence of the lack of established stars this year will be a rotation that uses more guys, and there may be as many as six or seven interchangeable linebacker parts filling the three jobs.

Coach Fickell stresses versatility, and he wants all his guys to be able to contribute at more than one of the positions. And there is clearly not a lot of drop off from the starters to the next group of backers.

That should mean lots of playing time for up and coming out-of-staters like sophomore Etienne Sabino from Miami, and junior Brian Rolle , another Florida product, as well as sophomore
Andrew Sweat
, from Washington, PA, and maybe even a couple of promising freshmen.

Sabino has good size (6' 3", 232 lbs), eye-popping athletic ability, and sideline-to-sideline range, and he always seems to arrive at the ball in a bad mood. The same attitude is there with Rolle, who is a smaller (5' 11", 221 lbs) faster version, who also likes to be on the delivery end of violent collisions. The PD's Doug Lesmerises had a nice interview with Rolle the other day.

Junior Jermale Hines from Glenville, is officially listed as a strong safety, but his

role as the hybrid LB/DB in the nickel packages makes him a linebacker of sorts, and the job he did in that role last year made him *look* like a linebacker. With good size for a safety (6' 2", 210), and great speed for a linebacker, he's another part of the talent influx on defense that is making it faster as a unit.

It's easy to envision Sabino and Rolle starting, or at least playing as much as any of the starters, and doing it at any of the three spots. Sabino is listed as second team at both the Sam and the Mike spots, and Rolle has been playing the Mike and the Will. Along with Moeller and Hines, they add a speed element to the Ohio State linebacker group that we haven't seen in recent memory, if ever.

Incoming...

The tradition of standout Buckeye linebackers seems secure for a few more years at least, with the addition of four outstanding prospects in the 2009 freshman recruiting class.

Jordan Whiting from Louisville was the first player to commit in the OSU class of 2009, and then he helped his Trinity H.S. team to the Kentucky state championship, the latest of *four* state titles Whiting would be a part of at Trinity during his prep career. Whiting played middle linebacker in high school, and he has the thick build (6' 1", 235 lbs) and lower body power that indicate he'll likely stay on the inside as a collegian.

Zach Boren from Pickerington is the younger brother of starting OSU offensive guard Justin Boren, and was a two-way player at the high school level who will start out at linebacker at OSU. Another middle linebacker prospect at 6' 1", 255 lbs, Boren made 192 tackles and forced eight fumbles as a senior. He enrolled early this spring, but sat out practice rehabbing his knee.

Then we get to the two OSU linebacker recruits who could have played at any school in the country. At the high school level, the best football player on the team will often play running back and linebacker...the idea being to keep the ball in his hands on offense, and give him the chance to make a lot of tackles on defense. That was the case with both Storm Klein and Dorian Bell.

Storm Klein looks like the All-American boy...a modern day Huck Finn in shoulder

pads. The 6' 3", 225 lb. inside linebacker from (Newark, OH) Licking Valley H.S. was seemingly named to be a football player too. He's one of those players who was highly rated nationally, but was correctly presumed to be all-Buckeye from the start, and committed to OSU right after his good friend Whiting signed on. Klein rushed for over 6000 yards in his prep career, with 99 TD's, including 1797 yards as a senior with 24 touchdowns.

But Klein's heart resides on defense, and that's where he'll play for the Buckeyes. He enrolled early, and went through spring ball, including playing in the spring game, where he made a few tackles, and didn't look a bit overwhelmed with it all. He was named one of the captains for Team USA in the Junior World Championships played this past week in Canton, and he had an interception early in Sunday's 41-3 championship game win over Canada. At a minimum, I'd expect to see Klein playing on some special teams for the 2009 Bucks.

Dorian Bell is one of the "5-star" recruits in the 2009 Buckeye recruiting class. An outside linebacker from Gateway H.S. in Monroeville, PA, Bell was rated the #2 OLB in the nation by Scout. Unlike Klein, Bell had some competition for best player on his high school team, but fortunately for Ohio State, they got the other guy too.

Bell had an impressive 19 tackles for a loss, including seven sacks, among his 113 tackles as a senior at Gateway. He's the kind of player scouts call "explosive", with great pursuit speed and excellent pass rushing skills off the edge. At 6' 0", 227 lbs. with 4.5 speed, he can cover receivers, but also has the power to deliver a blow in run support, or in the pass rush. I can't see this kid redshirting either. Speed and tackling skills like his should find their way onto some OSU special teams right away.

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