This is the third in a series of position group previews for the 2009 Buckeyes.

The Ohio State defensive line will be taking the field in 2009 with something several of the other position units for the Buckeyes lack...significant game experience. The Bucks have nine of their top ten defensive linemen returning from last season, and the coaches will be relying on them to stabilize the defense while the young linebackers and a cornerback or two get their baptism under fire.

A defensive end rotation that could have as many as seven or eight different players seeing action looks like it could be one of the strengths of the team. Opposing coaches will have to figure out a way to slow down Thaddeus Gibson, Cameron Hayward, Lawrence Wilson and Nathan Williams as they try to disrupt the offense from the outside. Rob Rose and Solomon Thomas add quality depth to the defensive end group, and sophomore Keith Wells and redshirt freshman Willie Mobley will be looking for any opening to make an impact in their first game action. Incoming freshmen Melvin Fellows and Jonathan Newsome are both Cleveland kids with loads of potential.

On the inside at defensive tackle, the core group of Todd Denlinger, Dexter Larimore and Doug Worthington returns, having lost only Nader Abdallah from the foursome that manned the middle for the Bucks last year. Garrett Goebel comes off a redshirt year to back up the starting tackles, and two promising freshmen from northeast Ohio, Johnny Simon and Adam Bellamy will join the group in the fall.

OSU line coach Jim Heacock will often rotate some of his quicker defensive ends into the tackle spots in pass rushing situations to get more athleticism and speed onto the field. Heyward, Rose and Williams all saw action on the inside at times last year, and the emphasis on versatility and situational substitution will surely carry over to 2009.

The System Works

The Buckeyes led the Big Ten last season in that most important of defensive statistics...scoring defense...at 12.3 points per game in the conference. They were second overall in yards given up per game, and showed good balance, finishing third in the conference against the run, and third against the pass. The 2008 Bucks finished with 26 sacks, good for 4th in the Big Ten, including 16.5 of those by players who return in 2009.

As a hedge against unbounded optimism *(who..me?)*, we'd do well to recall that there were similar high expectations for the D-line at this time last year. And while the line performed well for the most part, the relentless pass rush many expected didn't consistently show up, and some opponents were able to exploit the middle of the defense with the rushing attack. Unfortunately, the star-crossed career of Lawrence Wilson suffered another serious injury setback, and perhaps too much was expected of sophomores Heyward and Gibson, who entered the year with just one year of starting experience between them. At the tackle spot, Denlinger spent a good part of the year injured.

Call these circumstances excuses...or call them explanations, they are nonetheless facts. But they are issues that the players themselves have addressed with another solid year of experience, and Coach Tressel has since addressed across the board with this team, by way of recruiting depth and more depth.

The holes the Buckeyes have to fill at linebacker and corner were occupied by some big names last year, but with seven starters returning, and a boatload of talent on that side of the ball, the expectation is that the defense will carry this team, especially in the early going, while the young skill position players on offense do some catching up.

And if games are won in the trenches, as the old adage goes, then this year's Buckeyes are well-positioned to succeed with the skilled and experienced group they've assembled on the D-line. Here's a closer look at the 2009 OSU defensive linemen.

Defensive Ends

Thaddeus Gibson - #90 - RS Junior; 6' 2" 240 lbs. Euclid (OH) H.S.

Gibson began the 2008 season as the first end off the bench, but by the fourth game, he was the starter, and he started the final 10 games of the year. Playing the 'Leo' position, over the tight end, Gibson was used primarily in pass rushing situations, and he led the team with 5 sacks and 9 tackles for a loss. Gibson's principal challenge in 2009 is to become a reliable and consistent every down player, and by all accounts he has worked very hard both on his technique, and on the mental aspects of recognition and reaction to the ball in order to justify staying on the field full-time.

Gibson has established a reputation for playing with that intangible "attitude" that some of the best defenders possess. His search and destroy style plays well with teammates and fans alike, and as long as it can be channeled into productive play, is something to be encouraged. Gibson is an imposing figure physically, possessing excellent speed for a player with his strength. After having had a taste of starting as a Buckeye, Gibson has shown the dedication to self-improvement in the off-season that, when taken with his talent, experience...and that attitude, could make for a scary combination for OSU opponents. Can you say "breakout year"?

Cameron Heyward - #97 - Junior 6' 6" 287 lbs. (Suwannee, GA) Peachtree H.S.

Heyward is the veteran among the OSU defensive ends in terms of game experience. He started as a true freshman in 2007, and was named to several freshman All-America teams after making 30 tackles, including 9 TFL and 2.5 sacks. As a sophomore last year he added 36 stops and 3 sacks to his career totals, while playing inside at the tackle spot a significant percentage of the time. Heyward has proven to be as versatile a lineman as any on the roster, playing equally well at tackle and end. In fact, the official OSU roster now lists him as a defensive tackle, a hint that the roster depth at defensive end may allow the coaches to use Heyward exclusively on the inside this year.

More likely is that Heacock will continue to move him around based on the opponents and the match-ups game to game, or play to play. He does bring some attributes to the defensive tackle spot that some of the others at that position do not. His long arms on that 6' 6" frame give him a wingspan that has already proven effective at swatting down passes at the line of scrimmage. And he remains remarkably agile and quick for a man that size, an advantage against interior offensive linemen. Heyward is an intelligent player and a hard worker, and regardless of where he's lining up, he's one of the Buckeyes four best defensive linemen for 2009.

Lawrence Wilson - #87 - Senior 6' 4" 274 lbs. (Akron, OH) St. Vincent-St. Mary H.S.

As the old song goes, "if it wasn't for bad luck..." Lawrence Wilson "wouldn't have no luck at all." Wilson suffered season-ending injuries in two consecutive years: in 2007 (broken leg in the first game) and 2008 (ACL tear in the 7th game), but he'd be the last to suggest he was Born Under a Bad Sign. Wilson has been as diligent in his rehab as he has been enthusiastic and upbeat in his support for his teammates, and he hopes to be 100%...again, when the season opens in September.

Wilson had 18 tackles, a sack and an interception in 2008 before the injury, but since getting his first chance to start for OSU in 2007, the all-state athlete from Akron has had his promising career repeatedly frustrated by circumstances beyond his control. His return as a senior this year has to be an inspiration to the teammates who have watched him work in rehab for nearly two whole seasons, plus off-seasons. An athlete with "the whole package" before the injury setbacks, Wilson has one last chance to make his mark as a Buckeye. How can you not be rooting for this guy?

Nathan Williams - #43 - Sophomore; 6' 4" 245 lbs. (Washington C. H., OH) Miami Trace H.S.

The fact that Williams gradually worked his way into the two-deep at defensive end over the course of the 2008 season as a true freshman was something unexpected, especially considering the depth at the position. But it's a credit to his ability and his relentless "high motor" playing style that the coaches felt they owed it to the team to get him on the field. He contributed 18 tackles, 2 sacks and 2 TFL, and finished the season with a flourish, with a strong showing against Texas in the Fiesta Bowl. Williams has shown an ability to play the run as well as rush the passer, combining good athleticism with strength and strong tackling technique. His bull-rushing aggressiveness got him noticed as a freshman, and he looks to me like another Buckeye to keep an eye on in 2009 as a potential breakout player.

Rob Rose - #9 - Senior; 6' 5" 285 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Rose has proven to be a versatile performer in his OSU career, playing both end and tackle for the Buckeye defense. He appeared in all 13 games as a junior in 2008, contributing 10 tackles, including 3 TFL and one sack. Rose missed most of his sophomore year due to serious shoulder injuries, but worked his way back into the D-line rotation last year, and he enters his senior year close to 100% physically, though he did miss part of spring ball with a knee injury. He has added at least 40 pounds over the course of his Buckeye career, going from a super-quick defensive end to a stronger player who can fit in at any spot along the line. Rose has a chance to be a major contributor off the bench for the '09 Bucks, and finish up his OSU career on a high note.

Solomon Thomas - #98 - RS Sophomore; 6' 5" 240 lbs. (West Chester, OH) Lakota H.S.

Thomas has had limited opportunities to play so far in his Buckeye career, but he started to show his stuff this past off-season, and the future looks bright for the Cincinnati native. Solomon got into just five games as a redshirt freshman last year, recording just 3 tackles, but he has developed into a special athlete, showing excellent range and speed off the edge, and he should force his way onto the field in 2009 if his performance in spring ball is any indicator of his ability. Thomas registered a remarkable seven sacks in the spring jersey scrimmage, and followed that up with a solid performance in the spring game, to get his name mentioned on the short list of OSU defenders to watch for 2009.

Keith Wells - #94 - Sophomore; 6' 5" 210 lbs. Gainesville (GA) H.S.

Wells was a highly sought high school player a year ago, and committed early to Florida State before changing his mind and deciding to be a Buckeye. He spent most of 2008 on the sidelines, due to injuries as well as the talent in front of him on the depth chart, playing just enough to lose the redshirt and a year of eligibility. Wells' calling card is his speed and his pass rushing ability, as he still lacks ideal heft to play every down at defensive end in the Big Ten. He has athletic ability to burn though, and it will be interesting to see how the coaches utilize that

ability to help the team in the coming season.

Willie Mobley - #96 - RS Freshman; 6' 3" 265 lbs. Eden Prairie (MN) H.S.

Mobley is another heralded national recruit from the Class of 2008 who spent last season buried on the depth chart behind more experienced players, so he remains a bit of an unknown entity to OSU fans. What we do know is that he has a rare combination of size, speed and quickness for a defensive lineman, and the OSU coaches have been looking at him at both defensive tackle and defensive end to try to determine where he can best help the team. It remains to be seen how he'll fare as he competes for playing time in a crowded and talented field of defensive linemen.

Melvin Fellows - Freshman; 6' 5" 245 lbs. Garfield Heights (OH) H.S.

Fellows is a local product who was recognized as a high school All-American by all of the recruiting ratings services. He was rated a 5-star player and the #3 defensive end prospect in the nation by Scout.com after setting career records for sacks and TFL at Garfield Hts., and was heavily recruited by a number of major college programs before settling on Ohio State. This is yet another special athlete with all the physical attributes to develop into a standout defensive end for Ohio State. It might be unreasonable to expect him to play significant minutes at DE for the 2009 Bucks, but then again, no one expected Nathan Williams to contribute as a freshman last year either. Remember the name.

Jonathan Newsome - Freshman; 6' 3" 240 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Ted Ginn Sr.'s renowned Glenville program continues to produce standout players for Ohio State, and that pipeline continues this year with the commitment of Newsome (and OT Marcus Hall) to the Buckeyes. A superior overall athlete, Newsome has the length, speed and power to develop into a defensive end or possibly an outside linebacker during his OSU career. He played both ways at Glenville, as an offensive lineman and a defensive end, and was named 2nd team all-state and a member of the Ohio squad for the Big 33 Game.

Defensive Tackles

Dexter Larimore - #72 - RS Junior; 6' 2" 300 lbs. Merrillville (IN) H.S.

Larimore comes into 2009 as one of three Buckeyes expected to compete for the starting defensive tackle spots in the conventional OSU defensive set. He has played in all 26 games the last two seasons after redshirting in 2006, racking up 31 career tackles, including 9 TFL, 4 sacks and a fumble recovery. Having started three games in his first two seasons, he seemed

to progress well last year, and his continued improvement is important for the Buckeyes' fortunes on the defensive line in 2009. Larimore's wrestling background serves him well in terms of strength, balance and agility inside, and the year of experience in 2008 should be reflected in stronger and more consistent play defending opponents' rushing attacks this season. His ability to penetrate and help out rushing the passer will determine how much he is left on the field on those situations.

Doug Worthington - #84 - Senior; 6' 6" 276 lbs. (Athol Springs, NY) St. Francis H.S.

Worthington had his best year as a Buckeye in 2008, playing in all 13 games and contributing 34 total tackles, 5 TFL and 1.5 sacks. In 35 career games over three seasons, he has accumulated 61 total stops, playing almost exclusively at the tackle position. Worthington has to make up in length and agility what he lacks in overall size, playing at a weight (approx. 280 lbs.) that makes him undersized for a D-1 defensive tackle. At 6' 6", Worthington has probably not often in his life been called "undersized", but the reality is that DT's under 300 lbs. are increasingly rare in college football. Worthington has gotten much stronger as his OSU career has progressed, and his productivity and leadership this year could be a big key to improving a position that has been seen as a relative weakness for the Buckeyes in recent seasons.

Todd Denlinger - #92 - Senior; 6' 2" 292 lbs. Troy (OH) H.S.

The 2008 season was a disappointment for Denlinger and also for those who were counting on him to be a force for the OSU defense in the middle. He suffered an ankle injury in the second game of the year, and it hobbled him throughout the season. Although he played in all but one game, he was never at 100% following the injury, and that lack of productivity was reflected in the statistics. Denlinger made just seven tackles for the season, and his absence was noticeable, especially in early season games against teams like USC and Wisconsin, when the defensive interior was exposed by strong rushing attacks. When he's healthy, Denlinger has exceptional quickness that allows him to penetrate and disrupt the action in the backfield, as well as assist with the pass rush. A rebound season for Denlinger in 2009 could give the OSU defense a huge lift, especially since the roster at the tackle position is a bit thin, with only three players (four, if you count Heyward) returning that have any game experience at all.

Garrett Goebel - #53 - RS Freshman; 6' 5" 280 lbs. (Lombard, IL) Montini Catholic H.S.

Goebel redshirted for the 2008 season, playing on the Buckeye scout team, where he showed why he was rated among the top 100 prep players in the nation coming out of the Chicago area in 2007. Goebel was a finalist for the Illinois Mr. Football award as a senior, excelling as a wrestler as well at the high school level. He should get plenty of playing time on the OSU defensive line this year, as the coaches really need to develop the next generation of OSU defensive tackles. It's one position on the team that is dominated by upperclassmen, with very little experience in the younger ranks. Goebel is the latest in a line of recent OSU defensive tackles with strong wrestling backgrounds (Fickell, Anderson, Pitcock, Larimore, among others)

and program observers who have seen him in practice say he compares favorably with those guys. The rest of us will be getting our first real look at Goebel this fall.

Johnny Simon - Freshman; 6' 3" 285 lbs. (Youngstown, OH) Cardinal Mooney H.S.

One of three 5-star recruits in Coach Tressel's top-rated 2009 class, Simon committed early to the Buckeyes (Notre Dame came in second, but he says "it wasn't really close") after a stellar prep career at Mooney. He was named the Ohio Division IV Player of the Year, and played in the Army All-American Game after his senior season. Simon has been lifting weights since the fifth grade, and his rather stunning weight room exploits have been publicized to the point of embarrassing the young man, who would prefer to be thought of as a fine football player who just happens to be one very strong son of a gun. With the roster at DT a little thin, Simon might get a chance to play early. The justification for most freshmen to take a redshirt year is to get into the weight room to get stronger. Suffice to say that shouldn't be necessary with young John Simon.

Adam Bellamy - Freshman; 6' 4" 275 lbs. Aurora (OH) H.S.

Bellamy was a team captain and played both ways on the line for the Aurora team that won the Div III state championship in 2008. He registered 90 tackles, 15 TFL and 5 sacks on defense, and worked at tackle on offense. He made first team all-state, and played for Ohio in the Big 33 Game. Bellamy could still end up on the offensive side of the ball as a collegian, where he probably projects as a guard, but there's plenty of time to make those evaluations once he gets on campus. Based on the talent ahead of him in the system, he's a good bet to take a redshirt year in 2009.

While the overall defensive line situation looks positive for the 2009 Buckeyes, questions remain about the tackle position. The outside pass rush should be strong and deep, (especially with faster outside linebackers contributing more than in recent years) and there is more experience at the inside spots than in 2008. But it seems to me crucial for the 2009 defense that the team gets strong performances from Denlinger, Larimore and Worthington, because behind them will be some inexperienced inside linebackers that could be exploited if the defensive tackle play in front of them is even average. Heyward could be key to helping out in the middle if he is used on the inside as much as I suspect he will be, but no single factor would be more helpful to the line's success than a strong rebound year from Denlinger.

Other position group previews in this series on the 2009 Buckeyes:

Linebackers

Wide Receivers