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

There may have been some question at the end of last year as to who was the "feature" player in the Ohio State offense, between Beanie Wells and Terrelle Pryor, but the 2009 Buckeyes have no such questions. Jim Tressel's offense will flow through the hands of his scintillating sophomore quarterback, and this year it's clear the Buckeyes' offensive fortunes will be defined largely by Pryor's performance.

If 2008 taught us anything, it was that you don't always get the Buckeye team you expect to see based on the preseason press clippings, but there's a growing excitement in Columbus this summer that Terrelle Pryor is 100% ready to take over as the undisputed leader of the Ohio State Buckeyes. That's in part because he'll tell you as much every chance he gets. But it's also because coaches and teammates can see that Pryor is bringing a renewed dedication, a fierce will to win, a focused work ethic and a leader's confidence to the 2009 team...all as complement to what has already proven to be a very special set of physical tools. Remember?

If the savvier, more experienced, mechanically-improved Terrelle Pryor can put it all together in 2009, he knows he has a versatile supporting cast of running backs and receivers to give him the additional weapons he needs. And if the coaching staff's offseason efforts to make the most of the budding star they have under center pay off sooner instead of later, the Buckeyes' offense will be as explosive as any we have seen at Ohio State in the Tressel era.

Joe Bauserman returns as a strong-armed, experienced backup to Pryor, and the Bucks have

incoming freshman Kenny Guiton as the third quarterback on the roster. Bauserman is a 23-year old sophomore (he played pro baseball for three years) who knows the whole offense, and can run Tressel's system. But even talking about backup quarterbacks takes us into territory we don't want to ponder. Unless it's garbage time, Bauserman and Guiton can make like the Maytag man.

As a unit, the running backs for the Buckeyes in 2009 will be a faster group than last year, but they'll surely miss Beanie's 5.8 yards per carry average, and the 'thunder and lightning' speed-power combination that helped him achieve it. Sophomore Dan Herron will be the starter at running back...not a small back at about 205 lbs this season, but still at least 30 pounds lighter than the tank that was Beanie. Herron proved himself as heir apparent to the starting tailback job with a strong finish to 2008, flashing speed and toughness against Michigan and Texas in the last two games of the season.
The rushing load in 2009 will be shared by junior Brandon Saine, who showed this spring that he's over the injury problems of 2008, and capable of being the kind of offensive force his ability has always shown was possible. Incoming freshman Jaamal Berry from Miami is one of the top five running back recruits in the country, and he'll give the position some depth if either Herron or Saine should falter. And Pryor's high school teammate Jordan Hall also arrives as a true freshman running back. Redshirt freshman Jermil Martin, who worked at fullback last year, is also getting some snaps at tailback this spring, giving Tressel a bigger back for possible use in short yardage.

At fullback, it looks as if true freshman Adam Homan will open the season as the starter, having enrolled early and made a splash in spring ball. Martin backs him up, and another true freshman, Zach Boren, may end up at the fullback spot as well.

A whole lot of offseason time and effort has gone into tailoring the OSU offense around Terrelle Pryor. And if the coaching staff can get the most out of the talent, it's going to be a fun year. Here's a closer look at the quarterbacks and running backs for the 2009 Buckeyes:

Quarterbacks

Terrelle Pryor - #2 - Sophomore; 6' 6" 238 lbs. Jeannette (PA) H.S.

The Franchise. 2008 numbers: 1311 yds. passing, 12 TD passes, 60.6% completion pct., 631 yds rushing, 6 rushing TD's, 4.5 yds avg.

Pryor is not surrounded by preseason All-Americans in the OSU lineup for 2009, and as a national figure at quarterback, he is somewhat over-shadowed by the Tebow-Bradford-McCoy Show down south. But he's not exactly out of the spotlight either. The Big Ten's Freshman of the Year in 2008, and the conference leader in passing efficiency rating, Pryor returns for his sophomore year bigger, stronger, and possibly even faster than he was in 2008. And it's a good thing, because he'll be tasked with a larger role in the OSU offense than the limited one he was

permitted last year after being named the starter as a true freshman three games into the season.

The coaching focus in the offseason was to work on refining his passing mechanics, familiarize him with the entire OSU playbook, and get him comfortable with the offense the coaches are building around him. In the meantime, Pryor has added 15 pounds of muscle with weight training, all without losing any of his ridiculous speed for a player his size (4.38 40 time this spring, the fastest on the team). But people who would like to see Pryor rushing the football a lot this season should prepare for disappointment. Tressel has no intention of exposing his most important player to the kind of physical punishment and risk of injury that a running quarterback can expect. "I'm not looking for my quarterback to get hit 20 times a game." the head coach said this past week.

So it's likely that most of the designed running plays in 2009 will be for running backs, while Pryor's rushes will probably be more the unscripted variety. And OSU fans would do well to remember that it was only when Tressel converted Troy Smith from an option runner into a pocket passer that he won the Heisman Trophy and led the Buckeyes to the BCS Championship Game. As much as the fans would love to see Pryor "unleashed" to improvise and show off his athleticism, Tressel knows they'd also like to see him survive for all 13 games.

Pryor showed significant improvement as a passer this spring, after closing out the regular season in 2008 with six of his 12 TD passes in the last three games. New OSU quarterbacks coach Nick Siciliano says Pryor's footwork and his throwing mechanics are "night and day" better than where they were when he arrived on campus. Regular readers here know that I admired Pryor's on-field demeanor last season....a hustling, encouraging approach to leadership, not a self-celebrating attention hound. His offseason dedication and effort...with the focus on winning games and nothing else....is adding to the Pryor mystique, and to the buzz of anticipation for the 2009 season.

Joe Bauserman - #14 - Sophomore; 6' 2" 220 lbs. (Woodstock, VA) Lincoln H.S.

With Todd Boeckman and Pryor backing each other up last year, Bauserman got very little field time in his redshirt freshman year. He had just six pass attempts in mop-up time, failing to get any real opportunity to show his stuff. The only chance OSU fans have had to see Bauserman was in the last two Spring Games, especially 2008, when he threw for 125 yards including a long TD pass. His arm strength is not in question. Bauserman pitched in the Pittsburgh Pirates organization for three years coming out of high school before walking on at OSU in 2007. The Buckeyes had recruited him as a prep player before he made the decision to play baseball, so when he got a second chance to play in Columbus, he grabbed it, eventually earning a scholarship.

Bauserman now has two years in the OSU offensive system, so if he's called upon, he'll know what to do. There were rumors that he was considering a transfer after Pryor committed and his

long term prospects for playing time diminished, but now he's a sprained ankle or a jammed thumb away from being the starting quarterback for Ohio State. The coaches have to feel pretty good about the maturity and familiarity with the system that Bauserman gives them behind Pryor. He's an excellent all-around athlete, with the arm to make every throw in the playbook. And someone has to take those snaps in the 4th quarter with the Bucks up four touchdowns.

Kenny Guiton - Freshman; 6' 2.5" 172 lbs. (Houston, TX) Eisenhower H.S.

Guiton was a late addition to the 2009 recruiting class after the Buckeyes had waltzed with a couple other partners at the quarterback recruiting dance. He's a dual-threat player, but his numbers indicate a passer more than a runner. He passed for 1846 yds, and 21 TD's, rushing for just 140 yards as a senior, after putting up 2592 yds passing and 329 rushing as a junior, with 29 TD's. Having lost backup Rob Schoenhoft to transfer, the Bucks really needed to have a third scholarship quarterback on the roster for 2009, and they feel lucky to have been able to get Guiton, especially since they got in on him a bit late in the process. That said, it would be an unqualified disaster if he were required to see any significant game action this season. A redshirt year is much more likely.

Running Backs

Dan "Boom" Herron - #1 - RS Sophomore; 5' 10" 205 lbs. (Warren, OH) W.G. Harding H.S.

Herron won the backup tailback job last year by doing all the little things right, and by the time the season was over, he had rolled up 439 yards and 6 touchdowns, playing some of his best football in some of the biggest games. Against Michigan, Herron rushed for 80 yards on 8 carries, including a 49-yard burst for a touchdown early in the third quarter that put the Buckeyes up 14, and sucked the remaining life out of the Wolverines. He had two TD's that day, and then against Texas in the Fiesta Bowl, he scored the go-ahead touchdown late in the 4th quarter, ...and you know the rest.

Herron was an all-state performer at Harding, one of the traditional Ohio football powerhouses, but he still remained under the radar a bit in Columbus, as Brandon Saine grabbed most of the publicity in 2007 for incoming running backs. Herron shows good instincts for the position though, and he capitalized on the fact that Saine was injured for a good part of the 2008 season. The extra ten pounds on him from offseason workouts should help between the tackles and in overall durability. It's tough in there, even at 205 lbs., and keeping Herron healthy will be a key to OSU's offensive success.

Brandon Saine - #3 - Junior; 6' 1" 217 lbs. Piqua (OH) H.S.

While Herron was redshirting in 2007, Brandon Saine played in 11 games as a freshman, and gained 267 yards rushing with 2 TD's, and showed some hands with 12 pass receptions for another 160 yards and a touchdown. But he struggled through 2008 with a hamstring injury, and got just 23 carries, for 86 yards. His pass receptions dropped to 3 for 37 yards in 2008. But Saine's return to health this offseason was one of the bright spots of spring football. Not only was he fully healthy this spring, he looked to be running with much more authority and confidence than he had ever before shown consistently as a Buckeye.

A healthy competition between Herron and Saine in the Buckeye backfield, with both guys playing and staying fresh, is the best case scenario for OSU coaches. And it's hard to overstate the importance of keeping both guys healthy and on the field over the long haul, because they are the only two scholarship tailbacks on the roster with any game experience. You're into true freshmen or a converted fullback if either one goes down. Saine is a downfield threat in the passing game, because his hands are decent, and no linebacker can run with him. Tressel has also suggested that Herron and Saine may occasionally be on the field together...with a fullback too...to give trigger-man Pryor more options, and defenses something else to worry about. If his spring performance carries over to the season, this Ohio 'Mr. Football' could see his OSU career start to take off.

Jaamal Berry - #4 - Freshman; 5' 11" 193 lbs. Miami (FL) Palmetto H.S.

The favored formula for tailback numbers at Ohio State is for "a pair and a spare". And with Herron and Saine as the presumed pair, freshman Jaamal Berry will likely be cast as the spare. Berry was supposed to be one of two highly-ranked Florida running backs arriving as freshmen for the Buckeyes, but the other, Carlos Hyde , failed to qualify academically, and will attend Fork Union for a year. Berry's path to OSU wasn't without obstacles either. He was arrested on a drug charge this spring in Florida, although it turns out the misdemeanor conviction won't affect his eligibility to play this fall. After the incident, Berry came immediately to OSU's campus, got enrolled in classes and began to get acclimated to college life. Now Jim Tressel takes over the young man's education.

Berry is an explosive back, with great upper body strength, and at least 4.4 speed. On film, he shows remarkable acceleration from his change of direction in the backfield, through the hole at the line, and into the secondary. The quickness and acceleration is what sets him apart from other running backs from what I've seen so far. He has the ability to catch the ball as well, and if he can gain Tressel's confidence early, I can see him possibly helping out on kickoff returns. Berry is one of Tressel's prize 2009 recruits, and he's probably in the two-deep by the second week of practice.

Jordan Hall - Freshman; 5' 9" 185 lbs. Jeannette (PA) H.S.

Hall arrives at OSU having already established a playing relationship with his Buckeye quarterback. He starred with Terrelle Pryor at Jeannette High School as a running back, receiver and return specialist, so he'll be reunited with his friend and teammate in the Fall. Hall

could surprise people with his toughness and versatility. He's a very good receiver out of the backfield, and while he's not the fastest back, he is elusive in the open field, and could end up returning kickoffs or punts early in his career. If you assume healthy bodies above him on the depth chart, he might be a good redshirt prospect, but I suspect he'll eventually see action on some special teams this year.

Fullbacks

Adam Homan - #49 - Freshman; 6' 4" 235 lbs. Coldwater (OH) H.S.

Homan is a true freshman who enrolled early this January, and looks to have grabbed onto the starting fullback job with both hands. Adam is the younger brother of starting Buckeye linebacker Ross Homan, so his bond to OSU football actually goes back farther than January. Like his brother, Adam played middle linebacker in high school, as well as running back, but he could see that playing offense provided him the quickest route to playing time in Columbus. Early returns from spring ball were very good, as Homan has demonstrated good instincts for lead-blocking, and he gives the Buckeyes a big presence and a hard-nosed style in the running game.

Jermil Martin - #41 - RS Freshman; 6' 0" 227 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Martin worked with the scout team in 2008 and saved a year of eligibility, so he's still looking for his first game action as a Buckeye after coming down the Glenville pipeline to Columbus. After the announcement that Carlos Hyde wouldn't be enrolling at OSU this year, coaches mentioned that Martin had been getting work at tailback this spring, giving them a little more size at the position coming off the bench. Martin was an all-state defensive player in high school, playing defensive end for Glenville as well as running back. I still think his role on this team is as a fullback.

Zach Boren - Freshman; 6' 3" 255 lbs. Pickerington (OH) H.S.

Another brother act for the Buckeyes, Zach joins brother Justin, a starter at guard for OSU. The coaches still haven't decided where to use Boren, another fullback-inside linebacker talent, but the prospect of a guy this size leading a tailback through a hole is intriguing to think about. He moves pretty well for his size, and just looks like a football player. Winner of defensive player awards in high school, Boren might be bringing his defensive mentality to the fullback position...and that just might work.

Terrelle Pryor will be getting most of the publicity and attention among the 2009 Buckeye offensive backs, but Boom Herron and Brandon Saine are just as crucial as pieces to the offensive puzzle for the Buckeyes this season. Those two will have to prove that they can be offensive threats in their own right, in order to take defensive focus and pressure off of Pryor. The running back position is a little thin, especially given the injury history of Saine coupled with the relatively small size of Herron, and the complete lack of collegiate experience for anyone else on the roster. It remains to be seen if Berry can make a significant contribution to the offense as a freshman. With some luck, the OSU coaches won't be pressed to find out too early in the season.

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

Linebackers

Wide Receivers

Defensive Line