This the fifth in a series of position group previews of the 2009 Buckeyes

It's logical to assume that if a team is returning three out of four starting defensive backs....but the one who's not coming back was a 1st team All-American and first round NFL draft choice, they're going to have some kind of drop off, no matter what else happens. That of course describes the 2009 Buckeyes minus Malcolm Jenkins, and the point is valid, at least as far as the strength of the starting four is concerned. Gone too to the NFL is Donald Washington, a starter in every game in 2007, and the third corner last year.

But overall, Ohio State still has a veteran group in the defensive backfield coming into 2009. The answer to the big question...who takes over at the corner for Jenkins?....will be either senior Andre Amos or junior Devon Torrence....or both. Amos has an edge in experience, and Torrence in pure athleticism. But either one paired with returning starter Chimdi Chekwa on the boundary side should form a reliable set of starting cornerbacks. If both Amos and Torrence turn out to be productive, and stay healthy, an area of concern could become a strong suit.

After playing as the nickel back in 2007, Chekwa stepped in as a sophomore starter during Washington's two-game suspension at the beginning of the 2008 season, and never relinquished the job, starting 12 games at cornerback, drawing lots of action from teams trying to avoid Jenkins. His performance met or exceeded all expectations, and landed him on the preseason All-Big Ten teams for 2009.

Torrence, a junior from Canton, who converted from wide receiver and has now set aside his professional baseball career, has the proverbial 'high ceiling' as a college and/or pro cornerback. He has incredible physical talent, but is still learning the position. Amos is a 5th-year senior who played in 2006, but major knee surgery and other injuries have limited him in the last two seasons. He has always had the ability to play at this level, and it looks like his time has come.

Behind the first three cornerbacks, redshirt freshman Travis Howard is Chekwa's backup, and a brief look at him in the Spring Game hinted at a bright future. Sophomore Donnie Evege would be the next corner off the bench, at least until coaches get a look at the freshman cornerbacks,

perhaps the strongest position in Tressel's top-ranked recruiting class. Monroeville, PA athlete Corey Brown has Gamblesque skills, and shows the potential to play right away, and national recruits C.J. Barnett and Dominic Clarke would be starting as freshmen at a few other Big Ten schools.

At safety, both Anderson Russell and Kurt Coleman will be third-year starters, and along with Jermale Hines, who plays a hybrid S/LB role in the nickel, they stand out as a real strength of this defense. Coleman, the senior strong safety, was mentioned in the preseason All-American talk, and Hines seemed to come into his own as a defensive force for OSU last year, and is just tapping his potential. All three are hitters and tacklers, although Hines and Coleman are more physical than Russell. The play at safety for this team has come in for criticism in recent years, but the talent and experience here, led by the senior free safety and co-captain Russell, should be peaking in 2009.

The downside of having three-year starters can be a lack of experienced depth at safety, but in Aaron Gant and Nate Oliver, the Buckeyes have guys with a combined five years in the program. The heir apparent to Russell at free safety is redshirt freshman Orhian Johnson, a rangy former QB from Florida, who has worked his way into the spring two-deep. Incoming freshman safety Jamie Wood, enrolled early this March, went through spring ball, and might show up on some special teams as a result. Barnett may also be looked at as a safety.

The experience in the defensive backfield, especially at the safety position, should have a stabilizing and calming effect on some of the young Buckeye linebackers playing in front of them, and a promising OSU pass rush should (in theory, that is) keep the pressure off of a couple of talented, but slightly green cornerbacks until they get comfortable playing regularly. The DB's as a unit are one of the more veteran presences on the team, as even the two guys competing for the one open spot are 5th-year (Amos) and 3rd-year (Torrence) players.

I expect Torrence to emerge as the eventual starter at the field cornerback spot opposite Chekwa, and to prosper there. Amos and Howard are solid backups, and the freshmen will push them to be at their best. The safety positions are in the capable hands of two of the team's senior leaders. I hope the staff can rotate in their eventual replacements with some significant playing time during 2009.

Defensive backs, like linebackers, have to make their marks as young players on special teams at OSU before they play a down from scrimmage. It's always fun to watch the next wave of Buckeye DB's....this time around it's guys like Howard, Wood, Johnson, Brown, Barnett....going all out on coverage and return teams to make the highlight tape and impress the coaches. It's a rite of passage in Columbus, and this year the pool of young talent is impressive.

Here's a closer look at all of the 2009 OSU defensive backs...all 17 of them...

Cornerbacks

Chimdi Chekwa - #5 - RS Junior; 6' 0" 188 lbs. (Clermont, FL) East Ridge H.S.

Chekwa has played in all 26 OSU games in his first two seasons, after redshirting in '06. He functioned as the third cornerback in the nickel defense in '07 before blossoming as a full-time player last year. Picked on all year by teams reluctant to throw to Jenkins' side, Chekwa proved to be a strong man-to-man coverage player as well as a tenacious tackler. He finished the year with 30 tackles (28 solos), broke up four passes and had one interception, an end zone pick of USC's Mark Sanchez to prevent a possible score right before the half.

One of the fastest Buckeyes, and a 100-meter state finalist in high school, Chekwa recently anchored the winning OSU 4 x 100-meter relay team at the Big Ten track and field championships in Columbus. He was named Big Ten Defensive Player of the Week for a 10-tackle performance against Purdue in 2007.

Andre Amos - #13 - Senior; 6' 1" 183 lbs. Middletown (OH) H.S.

Amos came to Columbus as a prototypical big Buckeye cornerback, with great speed to go with the size. He played quite a bit as a redshirt freshman in 2006, but had knee surgery after the season and missed most of the 2007 campaign. Last year was a step sideways, with a different injury limiting him to just one game. Now back approaching full physical health again, Amos has the opportunity he has always wanted to start and contribute for Ohio State.

He has added bulk and is probably heavier than the published weight, but he looked quick and physical in the spring. Amos has inspired teammates with his dedication and work effort, going through multiple rehabs, and coming all the way back. He has a chance to write his own 'feel-good' story for the 2009 Buckeyes, if he can shake the history of injuries and make his senior year memorable.

Devon Torrence - #10 - Junior; 6' 1" 193 lbs. (Canton, OH) South H.S.

If Amos is No. 1 at the field corner as the season begins, Devon Torrence is 1a. Torrence appears poised to break out for OSU this fall, having played his first full year as a cornerback in 2008, learning at the feet of some quality players. A two-sport star in high school, he worked with the wide receiver group as a freshman at OSU in 2007, and for his first two summers after high school, played pro baseball in the Astros organization. After last season, Torrence seems to have decided that his athletic future may lie in playing 16 games a year instead of 162. He decided to concentrate on college football full-time, and will focus all of his remarkable athletic talent on playing cornerback in 2009..and hopefully beyond.

Torrence might be the best overall athlete on the OSU roster, and this year his full commitment to football will begin to pay off. As much as the Buckeyes like to play with three coverage

corners on the field at once, OSU fans will soon be seeing much more of Devon Torrence. He'll undoubtedly make some mistakes of inexperience, but rare talent like his can make up for a lot. A healthy competition between Amos and Torrence for playing time can only help the unit as a whole.

Travis Howard - #18 - RS Freshman; 6' 0" 188 lbs. (Miami, FL) Dr. Michael M. Krop H.S.

Howard is another gifted athlete fitting the preferred physical profile for OSU cornerbacks. He stood out on scout team duty as he redshirted last season, and by spring Howard had worked himself into the two-deep at the boundary corner behind Chekwa. An all-state player in Florida, Howard somehow got away from the in-state powers, and may turn out to be another Sunshine State gem snatched by Jim Tressel. He has the size and toughness to be physical at the line of scrimmage in man-to-man coverage, without sacrificing anything in speed or range. He'll probably be on some kick coverage teams, and in the regular cornerback rotation.

Donnie Evege - #30 - RS Sophomore; 5' 11" 189 lbs. (Huber Hts., OH) Wayne H.S.

Evege didn't have much in the way of playing time in 2008 as a redshirt freshman, and he's got a lot of bodies ahead of him at cornerback again this season. His contributions were mainly on special teams last year, and 2009 will probably bring more of the same, barring injuries in the two-deep.

Corey Brown - Freshman; 6' 1" 185 lbs. (Monroeville, PA) Gateway H.S.

OSU coaches are still debating exactly how to use Brown when he arrives on campus this month, but it appears now that wide receiver coach Darrell Hazell might lose the tug-of-war for Brown's services at OSU to cornerbacks coach Taver Johnson. They have Brown thinking defense for now, but it's clear he could contribute early no matter where they line him up. He's a special talent that seems likely to see field time as a true freshman. (The Gamble comparison above probably isn't fair to any 18-year old freshman, but people do think he has that kind of ability)

C.J. Barnett - #14 - Freshman; 6' 0" 185 lbs. (Clayton, OH) Northmont H.S.

Barnett comes to OSU via the same high school program that produced Kurt Coleman, and like Coleman, he was an all-Ohio player at Northmont. Barnett was one of the nation's top-rated senior defensive backs, being named to the Under Armour All-American game, and then enrolling early at OSU and going through spring practice. He hopes to see action early as a Buckeye, and the head start he got this spring may help land him a spot on some special teams. Whatever happens this year, Barnett is another in Tressel's stockpile of talented young DB's for the program's immediate future.

Dominic Clarke - #28 - Freshman; 5' 10" 168 lbs. (Frederick, MD) Tuscarora H.S.

Clarke has been hearing the inevitable comparisons to Malcolm Jenkins since his commitment to OSU, since they're both cornerbacks from the Maryland-DC area that slipped a bit beneath the national recruiting radar before deciding on Ohio State. And the coaches have reason to hope for similar positive results with Clarke. Though he's smaller than the OSU prototype, Clarke is more of a pure cover corner...with excellent technique in the hip turn and the backpedal, and strong man coverage ability. He's another player with a lot of obstacles in his way on the depth chart, and one who might benefit from a redshirt season in the weight room.

Safeties

Anderson Russell - #21 - Senior; 6' 0" 205 lbs. (Atlanta, GA) Marist H.S.

If it seems like Russell has been starting at free safety for the Buckeyes since Troy Smith was around, it's because he has. He won the job as a redshirt freshman in the second game of the 2006 season, and only a major knee injury, suffered three weeks later and ending his season, has kept him from the job ever since. In 31 career games, Russell has amassed 146 total tackles. three sacks and three interceptions, and in the process has emerged as a leader and co-captain for the team. As the quarterback of the secondary, Russell has improved and gotten stronger over the course of his OSU career, and had his best year in 2008, with 67 tackles, three forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries. Along with Coleman, he took some heat in 2007 when the two first-year starters combined for zero interceptions, letting several go through their hands. They responded last year with six picks combined, two by Russell. The 2009 Bucks will be counting on another steady performance from Russell as their last line of defense.

Kurt Coleman - #4 - Senior; 5' 11" 195 lbs. (Clayton, OH) Northmont H.S.

The other graybeard defensive back for the Buckeyes, Coleman enters his third year as the starter at the strong safety position, and he joins Russell as an established leader for the defense. In 2008 he led the team with four interceptions, and led all defensive backs with 78 total tackles. Coleman's aggressive, hard-hitting style of play earned him second team all-conference honors in 2008, and has him being mentioned among the top safeties in the nation coming into his final season in Columbus. No returning player has played in more career games than Coleman's 37, and his 151 career tackles also leads the team. No position on the 2009 Buckeyes returns more experience than safety, and OSU fans may not fully appreciate these two long-time starters until they're gone.

Jermale Hines - #7 - Junior; 6' 2" 210 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Hines burst onto the scene in 2008 playing the 'Star' position for the OSU defense, a linebacker-safety hybrid spot used when the coaches want to gain speed with a 5th defensive

back on the field in the nickel, without giving up run-support and tackling ability. Hines' overall athleticism fits the bill perfectly, and he responded to the opportunity in 2008 with 31 total tackles, including 23 solos and 2 tackles for loss. He also broke up three passes and recovered two fumbles in 11 games played. Hines is equally comfortable rushing the passer off the edge or covering a receiver downfield. He is a very strong tackler and plays in an aggressive, attack mode at all times. With a year of experience behind him coming into 2009, look for Hines to take the next step as a big-play defender for the Buckeye defense.

Orhian Johnson - #19 - RS Freshman; 6' 2" 178 lbs. (Gulfport, FL) Boca Ciega H.S.

Even though he has yet to see any game action for Ohio State, Orhian Johnson has turned enough heads in practices and on the scout team to be listed as the backup to Anderson Russell at free safety as the 2009 season begins. The redshirt freshman from Florida, who played quarterback in high school, has shown great range and play-making ability to this point, and needs only to master the mental aspects of the OSU defensive system in order to project as a contributor this season.

Nate Oliver - #14 - RS Sophomore; 6' 0" 215 lbs. (Lakewood, OH) St. Edward H.S.

Oliver was one of the top safeties in the country coming out of St. Ed's two years ago, and after redshirting in 2007, he got a chance to contribute on special teams last year, chipping in with eight tackles while playing in all 13 games. He is listed at the strong safety spot behind Coleman, although Hines would probably have first crack at that position if anything were to happen to the starter.

Aaron Gant - #8 - Senior; 6' 0" 194 lbs. (Orchard Lake, MI) St. Mary's H.S.

Gant has appeared in 32 games for the Buckeyes in his career, almost exclusively on special teams, and has totaled 23 total tackles in that time. As a senior, he is competing with Johnson to be Russell's backup at free safety. He sat out most of spring ball this year after having a knee scoped, but should be back to 100% for fall practice.

Rocco Pentello - #25 - Sophomore; 6' 0" 194 lbs. Westerville (OH) South H.S.

Pentello is another decorated high school player, twice earning all-state honors as a quarterback and safety at Westerville. He's entering his third year in the program, and is looking for an opportunity to play meaningful minutes as a Buckeye. He'll probably have to make his mark as a special teams player in 2009.

Zach Domicone - #16 - RS Freshman; 6' 3" 215 lbs. Beavercreek (OH) H.S.

Domicone is a young safety with a legitimate size-speed combination that landed him an offer at Oklahoma before he was persuaded to stay home and become a Buckeye. He took a redshirt year in 2008, so he's looking for his first action at OSU. He's another two-way high school player who excelled as a quarterback and defensive back at Beavercreek.

Jamie Wood - #23 - Freshman; 6' 1" 187 lbs. Pickerington (OH) Central H.S.

The only pure safety recruit in the incoming freshman class of 2009, Wood was rated among the top 10 players overall in the Midwest Region by Super Prep, so expectations are high for the young man from the Columbus area. Wood played in the Army All-American game in San Antonio after starring for three years in a winning high school program at Pickerington. He enrolled early at OSU and could be on the fast track to playing time.

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

Linebackers

Wide Receivers

Defensive Line

Quarterbacks and Running Backs

(next...Offensive Line)