(this is the sixth and final installment in a series of position group previews of the 2009 Buckeyes)

In 2008, the OSU offensive line was probably the biggest area in which the Buckeyes' game-day 'walk' often failed to live up to the preseason talk, a fact that should temper the way that we look at the 2009 version of the line, which appears to have as many questions as it does answers. But the Bucks are returning an impressive blend of experience and young talent that also promises a bit of an attitude adjustment for the coming season.

Two solid years of O-line recruiting by Jim Tressel and his staff have fed the unit with an upgrade in raw talent, but the Buckeyes are unproven in key spots, notably the offensive tackle positions, and the success of the offense this season will depend in large part on the performances they get from their two promising sophomore tackles, Mike Adams and J.B. Shugarts.

Jim Cordle and Bryant Browning return with experience as starters, but both will probably be moved to new spots on the line in 2009, with sophomore center Mike Brewster the only starter likely to be returning to the same position he played in 2008. And one of the few spots on the line thought to be set in stone was unsettled a bit when starting left guard Justin Boren sprained an ankle in early fall practice, sidelining him for the crucial 2-3 week period when the unit should be practicing together before the season opener.

Despite the many uncertainties, there is plenty of cause for optimism about the 2009 offensive line. Three starters from 2008 are gone, and without speaking ill of the departed, it's still fair to say that some of the 'underachievement' of the 2008 line can be attributed to players no longer around. The depth of the 2009 unit is as good as it has been in recent memory, with four promising freshmen joining the celebrated "Brew Crew" of 2008 (Adams, Brewster, Shugarts) and a group of upperclassmen that includes Cordle, Browning, Connor Smith and Andy Miller among others.
Boren, who sat out 2008 after transferring from TSUN, immediately makes the 2009 group a more physical unit inside, and the proposed move of Browning from tackle, (where he started all

13 games last year) to guard....plus the year of seasoning for the center Brewster...should combine to solidify the inside of the line and improve the run-blocking performance. And the relative uncertainty at tackle is addressed in part by the presence of the senior Cordle, who has started for a full year at center (2007) and one at guard (2008) prior to being moved outside in Coach Bollman's attempt to get his best five linemen into the starting lineup.

This spring the starting line looked like this, left to right:

LT: Adams...LG: Boren...C: Brewster...RG: Browning...RT: Cordle

And assuming that Boren is ready to go for the opener, that's the way they'll probably line up against Navy on Sept. 5. One wild card in that prediction is the possibility that Andy Miller might start over Adams at LT, owing to his experience in the system and his excellent footwork. There are also many observers who think that once J.B. Shugarts locks onto the right tackle spot, he'll be there through 2011...and the sense is that it might happen sooner instead of later.

As the lone senior and the most experienced and versatile lineman, Cordle will almost certainly be on the field somewhere, so if Adams and Shugarts can play up to the press clippings and win the two tackle spots, Cordle would likely slide inside to guard, and Browning would become a flexible sixth man, capable of playing anywhere but center.

It's still too early to tell to what extent the four true freshmen might find their way into the two-deep rotation on the O-line, but in Marcus Hall, Corey Linsley, Jack Mewhort and Sam Longo, the coaches have talented kids ready to contribute when called upon. Hall could play at either tackle or guard, while Linsley projects as a guard. Mewhort is probably the most versatile of the freshmen, having played at center, guard and tackle. Longo is probably a tackle long term, and is perhaps the least likely of the four to play in 2009.

It's fitting, I think, to include the tight ends with the offensive linemen on a Jim Tressel-coached team, since their role in his offense traditionally involves blocking and protection more than catching passes and scoring points. But there are indications that in 2009, that is going to change, and some of those indications are coming straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. Tressel has said he will try to utilize the middle of the field more in the 2009 offense, and using weapons like tight ends Jake Ballard and Jake Stoneburner will be part of that strategy.

To what degree the OSU attack will be noticeably different as a result of this strategic shift remains to be seen, but both Jakes are big, sure-handed targets, and especially in the case of Stoneburner, they can run after the catch. Redshirt freshman Nic DiLillo and true freshman Reid Fragel are the backup tight ends on the roster, and will probably see very limited action.

Here's a more detailed look at all the offensive linemen and tight ends for the 2009 Buckeyes:

Offensive Tackles:

Jim Cordle - #64 - Senior; 6' 4" 297 lbs. Lancaster (OH) H.S.

The senior citizen of the offensive line with 26 career starts, Cordle projects as the starting right tackle as of this writing. When Mike Brewster took over as the starting center after three games last year, Cordle moved over to guard, and continued to make the line calls for the offense as an assist to the freshman. He'll start at his third different position for the Buckeyes this fall, moving outside to tackle, giving line coach Jim Bollman an experienced hand with an in depth knowledge of the system. One of three 5th year seniors in the starting lineup, Cordle will be one of the recognized leaders on the OSU offense in 2009.

Mike Adams - #74 - Sophomore; 6' 8" 322 lbs. (Dublin, OH) Coffman H.S.

Adams was one of the nation's top offensive tackle prospects in the class of 2008, and was recruited by every major program, but there was never any real doubt that this manchild from the Columbus area would become a Buckeye. His career got off to a slow start due to a shoulder problem that stemmed from his high school days, and eventually required surgery. He played just enough in 2008 to lose the redshirt, but got enough action behind starter Alex Boone to be projected as the starter at LT for 2009 and beyond. Perhaps unfairly compared to OSU great Orlando Pace, Adams' combination of massive size and rare athletic ability has made such comparisons inevitable. Now 100% healthy, Adams is in a spirited competition with Andy Miller for the starting job, but his play in the spring and in early fall practices indicates he's ready to start fulfilling his sky-high potential. The play of #74 at left tackle, protecting the blind side of Terrelle Pryor, is a major key to the Buckeyes' success in 2009.

J.B. Shugarts - #76 - Sophomore; 6' 8" 305 lbs. Klein (TX) H.S.

Shugarts is Adams' complement as the other "bookend" tackle from the class of 2008. Like Adams, he endured a shoulder surgery last year, although Shugarts' procedure was done after the season, requiring him to miss spring ball as a precaution. He saw action at right tackle in about half of the games in 2008 and while he made some mistakes, he never looked overmatched. Shugarts has reportedly been working diligently in the weight room all off-season, and the resulting improvement in his already impressive physique could make it hard for the coaches to keep him off the field this fall. He has demonstrated a bit of a "nasty" streak in his style of play that many think the OSU offensive line has lacked in recent years, and which (along with Boren and Brewster) could be more in evidence in 2009 as Shugarts works his way into increased playing time.

Andy Miller - #55 - RS Junior; 6' 6" 280 lbs. (Washington, PA) Trinity H.S.

Miller is a 4th year junior who was recruited to OSU as a tight end, and has made a successful conversion to the interior offensive line since his redshirt freshman year of 2006. He has filled in at both guard and tackle over the last two years, and moved briefly back to tight end in 2008 due to injuries there. Miller had an excellent spring this year, and his goal is to be the starting

left tackle when the Buckeyes open the campaign against Navy in September. His long arms and quick feet have helped him to do well in pass protection, an area in which his primary competitor for the job, Mike Adams, has occasionally struggled, and the competition for the starting job has been closer than many expected it to be. Miller figures to be at least the primary backup at LT unless and until one of the true freshmen beats him out for the job.

Josh Kerr - #73 - RS Junior; 6' 4" 286 lbs. Strongsville (OH) H.S.

Kerr was an all-state player at Strongsville and played in the Big 33 game after his senior season, but his playing time at OSU so far has been limited, in part due to injuries. He has worked at both guard and tackle in his time as a Buckeye, but has concentrated at tackle recently due to the relative lack of depth there last season.

Marcus Hall - #79 - Freshman; 6' 5" 300 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Hall is another in the long line of nationally recruited talents from Glenville to decide on OSU for their college football careers. He was first team all-state in Ohio, made the Parade All-American team, and was then selected to play in the Army All-American Game, so the young man's talent is a matter of consensus agreement. He arrives in Columbus having played mostly at the tackle position in his prep career, but he may project as a guard at OSU. Hall is an excellent all-around athlete, having also competed in basketball and track and field in high school. He is another good example of the quality depth that the OSU coaching staff is developing behind the Buckeye starters.

Sam Longo - #59 - Freshman; 6' 6" 280 lbs. Bellbrook (OH) H.S.

Longo is another promising offensive tackle prospect in the class of '09 for line coach Jim Bollman. He was an outstanding two-way lineman in high school at the same school that produced starting OSU inside linebacker Austin Spitler. Longo has the frame to potentially add 20-30 pounds as he matures in college without losing any of the athleticism and range that helped him excel on defense at the prep level. Longo had an impressive out-of-state offer list despite playing for a relatively small program in rural Ohio. Give him a year or two in the program, and the Buckeyes could have a future starter at offensive tackle.

Offensive Guards:

Justin Boren - #65 - Junior; 6' 3" 315 lbs. Pickerington (OH) Central H.S.

Boren grew up and went to high school in the Columbus area, but his dad had been a standout linebacker at Michigan, so when it came time to make a college choice, he decided to go north.

Two years later, after starting all 13 games as a sophomore in Maize and Blue, and with a coaching change imminent in Ann Arbor, Boren made the difficult decision to come home...to OSU. Boren sat out 2008 under NCAA rules, but after seeing him practice with the scout team all year, OSU coaches knew what they had....an immediate starter at left guard for 2009, and an impact starter at that. Boren was the best Buckeye offensive lineman all spring, and his name has been popping up on all the preseason all-conference team projections. Boren should bring a power and an explosiveness to the guard position that represents an upgrade for the Bucks over last year. And then there's the attitude...an aggressive, mauling style of play that should be more than welcome in Columbus as they welcome home their native son.

Bryant Browning - #70 - RS Junior; 6' 4" 312 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

Browning is the projected starter at right guard for the 2009 Bucks, moving inside from his 2008 position at right tackle to take advantage of his strengths...superior lower body strength and run blocking prowess...and to get him back to what is probably his natural position on the inside. With Browning and Boren flanking center Mike Brewster, the Buckeyes will have a powerful inside blocking group, which should translate to a more effective inside rushing attack. Browning was a decorated player in high school, winning all-state honors and Big 33 game recognition before coming down the Glenville pipeline to OSU. He comes into 2009 second only to Cordle among OSU offensive linemen in terms of game experience, with 13 career starts in Scarlet and Gray.

Connor Smith - #77 - RS Junior; 6' 4" 321 lbs. (Cincinnati, OH) Colerain H.S.

After redshirting as a freshman in 2006, Smith has worked as a backup for the last two seasons, trying to earn a starting spot as a Buckeye. Smith was an outstanding lineman at Colerain, a program that runs the football almost exclusively, and he has struggled at times in pass protection since coming to OSU. He enters the 2009 season as the backup to Justin Boren at left guard, and the recent injury to Boren should give him an opportunity to work with the first team in practice for a couple of weeks to try to earn some playing time in the regular rotation. Smith is the son of Joe Smith, a defensive lineman for OSU in the early 80's.

Evan Blankenship - #68 - RS Sophomore; 6' 3" 290 lbs. (Monaca, PA) Center Area H.S.

Blankenship is entering his third year in the program, and is listed on the spring depth chart as the backup to Browning at right guard. He has had only limited field time (in 2008) as a Buckeye, although reports on his performance in spring ball this year were mostly positive. He will compete with one or more of the incoming freshmen (Mewhort was listed as a backup at this spot as well) for playing time as the season goes along.

Corey Linsley - #71 - Freshman; 6' 4" 280 lbs. Boardman (OH) H.S.

Linsley is a prototype offensive guard, possessing outstanding lower body strength, which he put to good use in winning the state championship in the discus throw as a senior at Boardman, where he was also a state finalist in the shot put. Fall practice observers say he has made a

positive impression early in camp, and he could be pushing for a spot in the two-deep at guard before too long.

Centers:

Mike Brewster - #50 - Sophomore; 6' 5" 296 lbs. (Orlando, FL) Edgewater H.S.

Brewster was the self-appointed ringleader of the highly-ranked 2008 OSU recruiting class, dubbed the "Brew Crew" in his honor, and it only took him three games of his freshman year to land a spot in the starting lineup at center for the Buckeyes. It's an unusual circumstance for a player to become a team leader before he even arrives on campus, but that describes the role Brewster played in bringing together the members of the 2008 freshman class. His ascension to the starting center job was overshadowed by Terrelle Pryor's promotion to starter at QB the same week, but the two then worked together for the last 10 games of the season, as the Buckeyes were the only team in the country to play true freshmen at both center and quarterback. Brewster was rated as one of the top ten overall players in the country as a senior, and he was the only one of the three top-rated offensive linemen in the 2008 class to start a game as a freshman for OSU.

Andrew Moses - #66 - RS Senior; 6' 3" 280 lbs. (Columbus, OH) Bishop Watterson H.S.

Moses lettered for the Buckeyes as a backup center in 2008, in his fourth year in the program. He was a walk-on for OSU in 2005, and his experience should serve as an inspiration to anyone considering doing something similar. He is listed as a backup to Brewster at center, although if something were to happen to Brewster, it's a sure bet that Jim Cordle would be the player called upon first to step in as his replacement. Cordle started at the position for the entire season in 2007. Moses graduated from OSU this Spring, and is an Academic All Big Ten student.

Jack Mewhort - #74 - Freshman; 6' 7" 290 lbs. (Toledo, OH) St. Johns Jesuit H.S.

Mewhort's inclusion here as a center is more of a guess than an informed projection. The versatile lineman from Toledo played center in the Under Armour All-Star Game after winning all-state honors in Ohio as a senior. His height and frame...and his prep experience...would suggest a career at offensive tackle, but after enrolling early and going through spring ball at OSU, Mewhort showed up on the spring depth chart....at guard. Another recruit with a frame that could carry another 20-30 pounds of muscle, Mewhort could ride his size and his versatility to an early debut and a productive career as a Buckeye.

Tight Ends:

Jake Ballard - #86 - Senior; 6' 7" 256 lbs. Springboro (OH) H.S.

Ballard has played in more games as a Buckeye (38) than any other player on the OSU offense. Sharing time last year with Rory Nicol, Ballard was used primarily as a blocker, often in two-tight end sets, and proved to be an outstanding edge blocker, providing key blocks on several of the longest running plays of the OSU season. He caught just 5 passes for 73 yards all season though, and didn't have a touchdown pass, after scoring three TD's earlier in his career. His counterpart Nicol had just six catches in 2008, including the only two TD passes caught by OSU tight ends. If you're scoring at home, that's an average of less than one catch by a tight end per game, a statistic that Coach Tressel has vowed to improve in the 2009 campaign. Ballard's size, agility and good hands make him a target worth looking for more often.

Jake Stoneburner - #11 - RS Freshman; 6' 5" 240 lbs. (Dublin, OH) Coffman H.S.

Stoneburner was a Top 100 player in national rankings as a high school senior, and came to OSU as a wide receiver. In camps and all-star games he earned a nickname which is roughly abbreviated as BTMFTNCC. The first two letters stand for 'big' and 'tough', and the last four stand for 'that nobody can cover'. You figure out the rest. As a tight end, Stoneburner has the requisite size and hands, but his speed is what makes him a real match-up problem in the middle of the field for opposing defenses. He is still learning the finer points of the tight end position, but as the season goes along, he figures to develop as a key offensive weapon for this team.

Nic DiLillo - #81 - RS Freshman; 6' 5" 237 lbs. Madison (OH) H.S.

DiLillo took a redshirt year in 2008 and worked with the scout team. Look for him to get some special teams duty this year as he tries to work his way into some action from scrimmage on offense. DiLillo was a two-sport standout in high school, scoring over 1000 points in basketball at Madison.

Reid Fragel - #88 - Freshman; 6' 7" 260 lbs. (Grosse Pointe Farms, MI) Grosse Pointe South H.S.

Fragel is an incoming freshman who has the frame and the feet to be considered eventually for a move inside to tackle. For the moment though he will compete at tight end, and learn the ropes. A likely redshirt candidate in 2009.

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

Linebackers

Wide Receivers

Defensive Line

Quarterbacks and Running Backs

Defensive Backs