Ohio State's spring football season is finishing up this weekend with the annual Spring Game in Columbus, and the TCF staff will be well represented at the Shoe. Our own David Regimbal will have a report on the game for the site, and I'll be there in my customary spot at midfield in the first row of C-deck to bring back my own impressions.

After taking on the offensive depth chart in the last Leaves , this edition gets into how the Buckeye defensive players line up going into fall camp, and we'll take a look back at last weekend's jersey scrimmage, which was contested before an intimate gathering of parents, recruits and media on a cold and windy Saturday morning at Ohio Stadium.

Offensive Showing

There were all kinds of legitimate excuses available to the Buckeye offense for looking shaky in the annual contest with the defense for the right to wear the coveted scarlet jerseys in practice for the upcoming season.

To begin with, quarterback Terrelle Pryor was wearing the black (no contact) jersey, which meant he could be touch-sacked and would not run the ball at all. And Pryor only played three or four series in the contest, alternating with backups Kenny Guiton and Joe Bauserman. Running backs Brandon Saine, Jordan Hall and freshman Carlos Hyde all sat out the scrimmage with minor injuries, and the windy conditions made throwing the ball more challenging than it would otherwise have been.

In addition, scoring was not given top priority by the offensive coaches, who preferred to see the offense in varied situations. For example, one series had them starting inside their own five yard line, so they could practice coming off the goal line.

All excuses aside though, the entire offensive unit seemed out of sync, messing up several center snaps and fumbling in the end zone for a defensive TD. Passes were dropped, field goal attempts missed and blocking assignments blown, all of which contributed to a less than scintillating show by an offensive unit that had seemed to come together in their Rose Bowl win a few short months ago. If there's any solace to be taken from the uneven showing by the OSU offense on this day, it comes from the overriding impression of the day...

This Ohio State defense is really, really impressive.

I know...not exactly a news flash, but it's encouraging that losing five starters doesn't seem to have weakened Jim Heacock's unit one bit.

Defensive Domination

More so than the Spring Game, when starters are split up between the two squads, this scrimmage is played for pride and bragging rights between offensive and defensive players, and as a result of the lopsided score favoring the defense (78-24) the offensive players were scrambling afterward to explain their rough day.

Defensive tackle Cam Heyward tried to put the best face on the showing for the offensive guys. "They've been kicking our butts for two weeks", he said of the OSU offense this spring, "but we finally just stepped up and made some big plays." That he did.

Heyward is unquestionably the leader of this defensive unit, in addition to being its best player, and Saturday he did what he does best...disrupting the blocking schemes with penetration and his relentless attacking style. Heyward had plenty of help on the OSU defensive line, as Nathan Williams and Solomon Thomas both looked good on the ends, and youngsters Keith Wells and Melvin Fellows showed why they are pushing for playing time at defensive end as well. Thomas and Fellows had two sacks each, as the defensive linemen set up shop in the offensive backfield all day long.

Other defenders turning heads in the scrimmage were redshirt freshmen outside backers Jonathan Newsome and Dorian Bell, budding star Johnny Simon at tackle, and projected starter at safety Orhian Johnson. Simon knocked down two passes, made several tackles for loss, and both caused and fell on Pryor's fumble in the end zone for a touchdown. Paired with Dexter Larimore in the middle of the line, Simon will wreak havoc on OSU opponents in 2010.

It wasn't all futility for the offense Saturday. Backup QB Kenny Guiton didn't dazzle anyone, but he looked comfortable under center, and had some zip on his throws, and seemed to know where he was going with it. It's understandable why some observers feel he has pulled even with Joe Bauserman in the competition to back up Pryor. As for Pryor, he was a pedestrian 5 of 16 passing for about 45 yards (official stats are not kept for this affair) with a handful of touch-sacks and the one fumble.

Jaamal Berry was one of just a few healthy running backs in uniform, and he showed a lot of the quickness and acceleration that were his calling cards as a highly recruited back a year ago. Berry got stripped of the ball by linebacker Dorian Bell on one run, but overall he was the best RB on the field, rushing for about 80 yards on 17 carries. Jermil Martin ran with power and determination, and looked like he could help the team this year, especially in short yardage.

There weren't enough pass completions to single out any of the receiving corps for praise, with the possible exception of DeVier Posey, who had a couple of catches in traffic, but was stripped of a possible TD reception on a nice defensive play in the end zone by Donnie Evege and Orhian Johnson. Taurian Washington had one good chance to maintain his reputation as a standout spring player...but dropped it.

One field goal was the sum total of the offensive scoring, with a couple of other attempts at field goals that were either short or didn't get off the ground due to a bad snap. All in all, a forgettable showing on offense. They've got to be looking forward to playing against somebody else come September.

Spring Depth Chart - Defense

The Buckeyes are replacing five starters overall on the defense from 2009, but only at outside linebacker and one safety spot will they be starting a player this year that isn't an experienced contributor to the defensive unit.

D-Line - Thad Gibson and Doug Worthington are gone at DE and DT respectively, but in Nathan Williams
(DE) and
John Simon
(DT) the Bucks have players returning to those positions with lots of playing time on their resumes. Those two will join
Cam Heyward
and
Dexter Larimore
to make up the starting four in the standard four-man set.

The second unit would be junior Solomon Thomas and either Keith Wells or Melvin Fellows at the ends, with sophomore Garrett Goebel and redshirt freshman Adam Bellamy as the backup tackles. OSU is a bit thin at the DT spots...enough so that at various times this spring, reserve offensive guards Connor Smith and Evan Blankenship have been seen working at DT with the second and third teams. Don't expect to see either on that side of the ball during the season.

Incoming freshmen Jonathan Hankins at tackle, and ends J.T. Moore and Darryl Baldwin join that D-line group in the fall, but the Bucks will miss the depth of reserves they lost when last year's backups Todd Denlinger, Rob Rose and Lawrence Wilson all moved on. Still the line will be a major strength of the team, especially with the All-American-to-be Heyward leading the way.

Linebackers - The strongside linebacker spot vacated by sometimes-starter Austin Spitler is the only starting spot up for grabs in the LB unit, and for all practical purposes it has been grabbed already - by junior Etienne Sabino . A special teams standout for two seasons, Sabino will join returners Ross Homan and Brian Rolle in the OSU linebacker corps. The two seniors-to-be, who combined for over 200 tackles in 2009, are primed for another season of cleaning up anything that gets past that defensive line.

The depth at linebacker on the 2010 Buckeyes is a luxury they have not often enjoyed. Storm Klein is making so much noise at MLB that there is talk that he could supplant Rolle at that spot, or at least force Rolle to one of the OLB slots at times. Jonathan Newsome has really come on as a playmaker at OLB this spring, and redshirt freshman Dorian Bell is determined to play his way into the action on the outside as well. Another redshirt freshman, Jordan Whiting is also a challenger to see the field at the "Mike" or the "Sam" spot, and although he is coming off a surgery in the offseason, Andrew Sweat is close to winning a spot in the two-deep at the "Will" position.

Sweat was limited this spring, but the second unit right now would probably be Klein (MLB), Newsome (SLB) and Sweat (WLB), with Bell, Whiting and Tony Jackson as the 3's. There are three more linebackers coming in this fall in Scott McVey, David Durham and Jamel Turner, but the best they can realistically hope for is some special teams duty in 2010, if that.

The other wild card in the contest for playing time at LB for the Bucks is the impending return of Tyler Moeller to the field. Moeller missed the entire 2009 season with a serious head injury requiring surgery

to relieve pressure on his brain, and has participated in spring workouts, but without full contact. His ability to get medical clearance to play in the fall is still up in the air, but he has been quoted as saying he wants to start hitting as soon as fall camp begins.

Moeller probably would have been the starter last year at the Sam LB spot, and his aggressive blitzing and sure tackling would be a big lift for this team wherever he lines up, if he is eventually cleared to return. He has been working at the Star (hybrid S/LB) position and also at strong safety in addition to linebacker, but it will be fall before we know what his status is.

Defensive Backs

The biggest question mark going into the 2010 season for OSU on defense has been the replacements for two 3-year starters at the safety spots, where Anderson Russell and Kurt Coleman had been institutions since 2007. From the looks of things this spring, those questions have been answered quite satisfactorily. Jermale Hines , the senior from Cleveland, who served mostly as the starting "Star" back for OSU in 2009, and was officially listed as an outside linebacker on the roster, will shift to safety this season.

Hines was smallish for a linebacker, but at 6' 1", 216, he's a big safety, and his experience starting and playing in a variety of defensive sets over the last two years means he's anything but a newcomer to the defensive backfield. It looks like he'll be joined in the starting lineup by sophomore Orhian Johnson at the other safety spot. Johnson is another big, rangy safety at 6' 2", 203, with good ball skills and tremendous overall athleticism. He's a former high school quarterback who has been in the system for two years now learning the position, and if spring ball is the yardstick, Johnson is measuring up.

The competition to back up at safety will involve junior Nate Oliver and senior Aaron Gant , sophomore Zach Domicone , and two redshirt freshmen, C.J. Barnett and Jamie Wood . Oliver, Barnett and Wood have also all been getting some reps this spring at the Star position, as the starting spot at Star seems to be very much up in the air (and could still end up involving Moeller). Moeller and Domicone are officially listed on the Spring Depth Chart (pdf) as second team at safety, but I think it would be Oliver and Barnett if they had a game tomorrow.

The starting corners for the Buckeyes both return from 2009 in Chimdi Chekwa and Devon Torrence , both seniors. You can count the big plays these two gave up in the passing game last year on the fingers of one hand, so the Bucks are feeling very good about their cornerback situation, especially considering the quality of the guys behind the starters.

Sophomore Travis Howard and redshirt freshman Dominic Clarke were thought to be the likely backups at corner following the 2009 season, but Howard missed all of spring ball with an injury, and that gave junior
Donnie Evege
an opportunity to emerge with a fine spring showing and assume, at least for the moment, one of the second team spots. And redshirt freshman
Corey Brown
is a blue chip talent in that secondary who will eventually be playing at cornerback for OSU...it's just a matter of when.

The OSU defense this spring has me convinced that the 2010 unit that could be even better than the 2009 group. Everyone knows what Heyward, Homan, Larimore, Rolle and Chekwa can do. And it's reasonable to project breakout seasons from some of the guys who became starters or major contributors last year for the first time...like Hines, Torrence, Simon, and Williams. I just named nine guys out of 11 on the defense. Trust me, you're going to like new starters Sabino and "O.J." Johnson too. The depth on defense is the best of the Tressel era. The coach (Heacock) is one of the best at his job in college football.

And despite what happened last Saturday, the offense can play a little bit too.

But just to be on the safe side...remember the spring football motto at OSU this year..."Don't Believe the Hype"

Links:

OSU - Spring Football Media Guide

OSU - 2009 Year in Review - pdf

(photo credit - Jim Davidson)