(One in a series of position group previews for the 2010 Ohio State Buckeyes)

The saying you hear around Jim Tressel's coaching staff when they talk about their tailback depth each year is that they're looking for "a pair and a spare". In other words, two primary backs to carry the bulk of the rushing load, and at least one good backup they can count on to get through the inevitable minor injuries that occur over the course of a 13-game season.

When they take stock of their running back situation for 2010, the coaches are more likely to find they have "a pair...and another pair, and a spare". That's how deep the Buckeye roster is with quality tailbacks. The veteran ball-carriers are back, and the ranks have been bolstered with several emerging young talents at the tailback position.

As a team, Ohio State is returning 95% of last year's rushing yardage...(approx. 2400 of 2540 total rushing yards), and also 95% (19 of 20) of their rushing touchdowns. Most of that production came from the Buckeyes' Big Three of Terrelle Pryor (779 yds, 7 TD), Brandon Saine (739 yds, 4 TD) and Dan Herron (600 yds, 7 TD). Jordan Hall added 248 yards and a one touchdown in 2009, and with that running-back-by-committee pounding the ball on the ground, OSU developed into a powerful rushing team, peaking in the season's second half.

After the loss to Purdue in mid-season, the Buckeyes averaged 240 yards rushing per game

over their last six games, and won them all. No one thinks that was a coincidence, and with the offensive line returning nearly intact, the power running attack will continue to be the basis of the offense in 2010. The Bucks were held under 100 yards rushing three times early in the season, (USC, Wisc., Purdue), and finished 18th in the FBS (3rd in Big Ten) with an average of 195.38 ypg. By contrast, the Ohio State defense gave up just 90 rushing yards per game (7th in FBS).

“Run the ball and stop the run” It’s the formula for winning football that Jim Tressel rode to the Big Ten title and the Rose Bowl in 2009. These things become tired clichés for a reason, you know.

Six Deep...After the Leading Rusher

By leading the team in rushing from the quarterback position, Terrelle Pryor made the overall team rushing stats look good, even though neither of OSU’s primary tailbacks put up great numbers in 2009. It’s always worth keeping in mind as we look at the OSU running backs that perhaps their best running back doesn’t play running back. Still the depth at the position is as good as it’s been in the Tressel decade.

Brandon Saine evolved from “co-starter” (with Dan Herron) to undisputed starter as the season progressed, earning more and more carries with his performance on the field. Saine rushed for 5.1 yards per carry, as compared to Herron’s 3.9 yd. average. He also contributed as a receiver with 17 catches for 224 yards, and two receiving touchdowns in 2009. Herron had 11 receptions for 66 yds and one receiving TD.

Behind those two, the running back depth has been piling up in Columbus. Jordan Hall looked very good in limited duty last year, and redshirt freshman Jaamal Berry is healthy and anxious to show on the field what the coaches have seen him do for a year in practices and scrimmages.

Freshman Carlos Hyde enrolled early and had the benefit of going through spring ball and getting acclimated to college life. All of which gives him an edge on the other highly-touted incoming freshman, Rod Smith, who won’t be starting at OSU until the August 5 fall quarter enrollment.

Anybody Here See a Beanie, an Archie or an Eddie?

What we’re not sure about going into the new season is whether or not there’s a “great” back in this group of talented OSU runners. Saine is clearly positioned to have a breakout season in 2010, and in Berry and Smith, the potential to be special players at OSU *someday* seems to be there. Hall has done nothing but impress with his versatility and poise, and Hyde has a bit of Beanie’s mix of power and elusiveness, but lacks his top end speed. So it remains to be seen if anyone in this running back corps will emerge as an elite back for OSU this season. But then...the fun is in the finding out.

Both Berry and Hall could get enough work in the offense this year to give fans a good look at the future of the position at OSU, and they'll probably both be given a chance to return kickoffs as their proving ground for an increased role at tailback. I think it's safe to say that any FBS program would he glad to have these two as their #3 and #4 tailbacks. Tressel's toughest task may be keeping them both happy in supporting roles.

At fullback, the Buckeyes discovered a pair of good ones in 2009, as two younger brothers of Buckeye starters came in as true freshmen and took over the position. Zach Boren developed into an effective weapon as the lead blocker in the OSU power rushing game, and as a bonus, also showed he can catch the ball out of the backfield...even doing some damage running after the catch. Adam Homan finished the season as Boren's backup, and flashed some solid blocking skills of his own. The position looks to be in good hands for the foreseeable future.

Below are thumbnails and stats on the individual OSU tailbacks and fullbacks...

Tailbacks

Brandon Saine - #3 - Senior (6' 1", 220) Piqua H.S.

Saine backed up Chris Wells for his first two seasons at OSU after arriving as the 2006 Ohio

Mr. Football award winner, and the Div I state champion in the 100 and 400 meters. His 10.38 100-meter time still stands as the state record in that event. He emerged as the first option at tailback last year as a junior, and posted two 100-yard games (Indiana, Iowa) on the way to 739 rushing yards for the season. He has 1071 career rushing yards as a Buckeye, and has contributed 32 pass receptions for an additional 421 yards with two receiving touchdowns. Here's an impressive stat: Brandon Saine has never lost a fumble in three years as an OSU running back, and I can find no record of him fumbling at all.

Saine answered most of the early questions about his durability and running instincts last season, and finished the campaign with a flourish. His longest run of the year came in the fourth quarter of the Iowa game, a 49-yard bolt off left tackle that put OSU up two touchdowns with 11 minutes to go. Then he had a 29-yard TD run on a counter play in the Michigan game. But his highlight reel moment came in the Rose Bowl , when he scored on the first Buckeye possession, taking an sideline pass from Pryor at the Oregon 10-yard line, lowering his shoulder to flatten a Duck defender at the three, and driving into the end zone to give OSU the early lead. Saine earned second team All-Big Ten honors in 2009.

Career Stats - Scout page - Rivals page

Dan Herron - #1 - RS Junior (5' 10", 202) Warren Harding H.S.

Herron was an all-state performer in high school, and has been a contributor in the OSU backfield since 2008, after redshirting his first year in Columbus. He had 439 yards rushing (4.9 yd avg) as a first-year player in '08, demonstrating early why the coaches like to use him near the goal line despite his lack of ideal size. The man they call "Boom" has 13 career rushing TD's at Ohio State over two seasons, including seven last year, to tie him with Pryor for the team lead. He rushed for 600 yards in 2009 to rank third on the team.

Herron is an able receiver as well, with 17 career pass receptions in an offense not known for throwing the ball to tailbacks. He scored the final points in last year's win at Michigan on a perfectly executed screen pass from Pryor for his first career receiving touchdown. Herron's vision and ability to break tackles have been questioned at times during his OSU career, but no one has ever questioned his quickness, his toughness or his nose for the end zone. He's a soft-spoken guy off the field, but OSU has no tougher competitor on it.

Career Stats - Scout page - Rivals page

Jaamal Berry - #4 RS Freshman (5’ 10”, 200) Miami (FL) Palmetto H.S.

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