A couple of familiar names at safety are gone, but there will still be plenty of experience in the Buckeyes' defensive secondary this fall, with two seniors returning as starters at the cornerback positions, and two four-year players back at safety. Corners Chimdi Chekwa and Devon Torrence have three years of starting experience between them, and they'll again be keys to a Buckeye pass defense that was 2nd in the Big Ten and 13th in the nation against the pass a year ago.

Replacing 2009 safeties Anderson Russell and Kurt Coleman is perhaps the biggest challenge for the OSU defense in 2010, but the move of last year's Star back Jermale Hines to free safety, combined with the emergence of 3rd-year sophomore Orhian Johnson should make that transition relatively painless. Replacing Hines in the hybrid Star role (nickel back) will be Tyler Moeller, like Hines a converted linebacker, and another veteran presence for the Buckeye secondary.

Defensive backfields all over college football would love to be lining up behind the kind of front seven that coordinator Jim Heacock puts on the field with some regularity for Ohio State, so when you look at pass defense statistics, you have to keep in mind it's an 11-man job. But some numbers from last year give a sense of the job the secondary did for OSU.

As a team, Ohio State allowed just 10 touchdown passes in 13 games, and collected 24 interceptions, which tied for second in the FBS (Texas, 25). The Bucks finished second to Iowa in the conference, allowing 171.5 passing yards per game, and they led the Big Ten in preventing 3rd down conversions, allowing just a 30.9% conversion rate. Take that ability to frustrate opposing passers, and consider it in tandem with the stout OSU rushing defense (90.77 ypg, 7th in FBS) and the pass defense stats look even better.

(One quick aside: As evidence that taking just one team stat in isolation can be misleading, consider that the top-ranked team in the FBS in passing yards allowed per game in 2009 was Eastern Michigan, a team that went 0-12. There's no need to pass against a team this

bad....they were 120th, dead last, against the run, at 276 yards per game allowed.) (2009 NCAA stats)

Stockpiling Talent

Having lost just three contributors from last year's roster of 17 DB's, the Buckeyes are as deep as ever behind the starters in the secondary. As the #3 cornerback, sophomore Travis Howard is a special talent, and if he's over his injury problems, he's good enough to keep the starters on their toes trying to hold him off. And Donnie Evege is now in his fourth year in the program, and is showing he can make plays at corner as well as on special teams.

Redshirt freshmen Corey Brown and Dominic Clarke will undoubtedly have to pay dues on special teams before they get a shot at playing time from scrimmage, but the Bucks are well-protected with this kind of talent six-deep on the cornerback depth chart. Add to that enviable depth two promising true freshmen corners, Christian Bryant and Bradley Roby, and the long term picture brightens even further. And it looks now as if freshman Adam Griffin, a local kid with some kind of OSU connection, will also be working at cornerback as a first-year player.

The backups at safety range from the veterans, senior Aaron Gant and junior Nate Oliver, to the promising youngsters C.J. Barnett and Jamie Wood. Third-year man Zach Domicone has already made a contribution as a special-teamer, and incoming freshman Chad Hagan combines great size with above average speed.

These Guys Are Big

One notable feature of the 2010 OSU safeties is their overall size as compared to a year ago. With Hines (6' 1", 215), Moeller (6' 0", 210) and Johnson (6' 2", 203) as the projected starters in the nickel defense, the Buckeyes are featuring two guys who were listed as linebackers a year ago, and there is a legitimate concern that they might not match up well in coverage with some very quick and fast multiple receiver groups that opponents may throw at them.

It's not a problem until it becomes a problem, but you can be sure that there will be some experimentation with other options at the nickel back in some of those situations. A player with more speed and coverage skills, like Travis Howard, or Jamie Wood, or C.J. Barnett might replace Moeller in some of those matchups. Just something to keep your eye on.

Success Breeds Success

Recruiting some of the nation's best defensive backs has become an ongoing success story for the OSU coaching staff (you can read more about how the DB depth chart looks a couple years out here). Much of the credit for the recent success of Buckeye DB's has to go to position

coaches Taver Johnson (cornerbacks) and Paul Haynes (safeties), and of course to Defensive Coordinator Jim Heacock, in addition to the whole recruiting team. But the tradition of great DB's at Ohio State predates the current assistant coaches.

You've got to recruit above average raw talent in order to develop great college football players, but we've seen often enough how the former doesn't necessarily lead to the latter. For whatever reasons, Ohio State has been able to produce NFL-caliber players, and especially so at the defensive back positions. It's no coincidence then, that the most talented high school defensive backs want to be offered by the Buckeyes.

It's a Family Tradition...

Down through the years, Ohio State has churned out NFL defensive backs like Kellogg's makes corn flakes. The list of former Buckeye cornerbacks in the NFL is studded with stars like Antoine Winfield, Nate Clements, Shawn Springs, Chris Gamble, and Malcolm Jenkins...and those are just a few of the big names. From Ahmed Plummer to Ashton Youboty to Donald Washington to former walk-on Antonio Smith, NFL scouts know that Ohio State cornerbacks are capable of playing at the pro level if they've made it as starters in Columbus.

At safety, the big time NFL success stories from OSU are a couple of decades older....they haven't turned out a Jack Tatum or a Neil Colzie or a Tim Fox for a while....but in Mike Doss, Donte Whitner, Will Allen, and Donnie Nickey, OSU safeties since 2000 have still earned more in NFL paychecks than the GDP's of several third world countries. Kurt Coleman will likely be adding to those numbers this fall as the deep OSU tradition of producing NFL defensive backs rolls on.

I'd wager a dollar or two that several of the current OSU Buckeyes on the lists below will eventually play on Sundays too...but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Fasten your seatbelts and pack a lunch....there's a whole bunch of DB's to talk about....

Cornerbacks

Chimdi Chekwa - #5 - Senior 6' 0" 190 lbs. (Clermont, FL) East Ridge H.S.

DeSALES
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