The experts disagree as to just how good the Ohio State defensive line is going to be in 2010, but on one end of that line there is a consensus of opinion - Cameron Heyward is an All-American. The senior from Georgia is one of two returning starters in the defensive front four for the Buckeyes, and the two new starters were both key contributors in the rotation last year for defensive line coach Jim Heacock.

The difference between this year and last is that the depth in the second and third units is less experienced than last year's reserves, a factor that accounts for some of the questions nationally about the overall strength of the 2010 defensive line. There's a case to be made that this year's group is more talented top-to-bottom, but the depth is still unproven after you get past the starting foursome.

Reloading

The 2009 defensive line for OSU was a veteran unit, with junior Thad Gibson and senior Doug Worthington starting at end and tackle respectively, and senior backups Todd Denlinger, Rob Rose and Lawrence Wilson providing experience off the bench. All five are gone now, after Gibson left early to enter the NFL draft, so this year's line is considerably younger, with Heyward and starting tackle Dexter Larimore the only seniors in the 12-man group.

That's where the negatives end however, with the defensive line situation for the Bucks in 2010. It's no slight to Rose, Denlinger or Wilson to acknowledge that the best performances by backups in 2009 were turned in by this year's two first-time starters, Nathan Williams and John Simon. Williams was a force to be reckoned with all year as Gibson's backup at the Leo end position, and Simon burst onto the scene in Columbus as a true freshman at defensive tackle, and by mid-season was playing important minutes in crucial games.

So the starters will be Heyward and Williams at the ends, and Larimore and Simon at the tackles. That's enough talent and experience to rank the Buckeye unit behind only Iowa among Big Ten teams in the eyes of most of the pundits.
11W begs to differ
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As for the reserves, with very few exceptions they'll be getting their first significant playing time in Scarlet and Gray, so experts and fans alike will be seeing the fruits of the last two or three years of the Buckeyes' defensive line recruiting for the first time. There's a lot to like.

First Impressions

Backing up the starters at the ends are junior Solomon Thomas and redshirt freshman Melvin Fellows. Both are skilled pass rushers with great speed, and at 6' 5", length off the edge. Sophomore Garrett Goebel and redshirt freshman Adam Bellamy are the first defensive tackles off the bench for Heacock, and Bellamy is taking reps at end as well.

Of the second teamers, Thomas has the most game experience, and he's running with the starters at the moment, with Nate Williams out for a week or more with a knee sprain. Fellows clearly has star potential, and he figures to play a lot when they move Heyward inside on obvious passing downs.

There are three true freshman defensive linemen on the roster, and all three have been flashing the goods in August practices. J.T. Moore has moved into the backup spot at the Leo spot behind Thomas while Williams sits out. Moore is smaller and quicker than the massive Darryl Baldwin, who has also been having a good camp, getting reps at both tackle and end.

One of the most pleasant surprises of August so far has been the performance of mammoth 335 lb. tackle Jonathan Hankins, who has been blowing up both the first and second team offensive lines with power and quickness in the middle of the defense. He brings an element of size and immovability that makes him unique on this roster of OSU tackles.

What They Say

Preseason rankings of position groups by team are always just a click away on the college football magazine and sports websites, and the opinions on this OSU defensive line are all over the board...from Lindy's #4 rating to Phil Steele's #17 rank, and others who decline to include OSU anywhere in the top 20 or 25. One guy whose opinion matters is D-Line position coach and OSU defensive coordinator Jim Heacock, who is on record this summer as saying this year's line "will be the best ever to play at Ohio State".

If that sounds familiar, it well might. Heacock later allowed that he says the same thing most every year to help motivate his troops. One thing we do know is that his starters will be a load for every OSU opponent to handle. How his talented reserves develop will be one of the more

intriguing stories for Buckeye fans to track as the season goes along. Reacting to Heacock's bold statement, and mindful of some great Ohio State defensive lines of the past, Lindy's Sports was skeptical, saying, "the coaches like the energy and speed of the kids...but it's a long way to best ever"

Indeed it is. And as I say repeatedly...the fun is in the finding out. Here's a closer look at the 2010 OSU defensive linemen...

Defensive Ends

Cameron Heyward - #97 - Senior 6' 5" 288 (Suwanee, GA) Peachtree H.S.

The Buckeyes' 2010 defense was solidified last January on the day Cam Heyward decided to wait one more year to be a millionaire and come back to OSU for his senior season. He's every body's preseason All-American this summer...
(and by the way, the federal investigation into how he wasn't first team All-Big Ten last year is just about ready to issue their report)
. Heyward led the nation's defensive linemen in tackles with 46, including 10 TFL and 6.5 sacks. He was consistent, with healthy stretches of outright dominance. Penn State offensive linemen are just recently getting over their recurring nightmares about Cam Heyward, for example. (OSU-PSU 2009 vid). He is also a primary reason OSU practices are crawling with NFL scouts this week.

Heyward's versatility is an extra tool in Heacock's bag, and it's what sets him apart as unique among last year's outstanding Big Ten crop of defensive linemen . He's equally effective playing inside or out, and has become very adept at Heacock's style of attacking...shocking the offensive lineman right off the snap, to create the space and physical edge he needs. The rare combination of quickness, power, size and athleticism has been apparent in Heyward since he started for the Buckeyes and made Freshman All-American in 2007. Over three seasons, he has amassed 112 tackles and 12 sacks, and showed marked improvement each year.

Heyward is a quiet but genial young man who recently said that he passed on the NFL and came back because he felt he owed it to Ohio State. On the field, that genial side is well hidden, and Cam Heyward is always in attack mode. Now the season he came back for has arrived, and his role as a defensive leader for OSU is unquestioned.

Scout page - Rivals page

Nathan Williams - #43 - Junior 6' 3" 260 (Washington CH, OH) Miami Trace H.S.

Williams has seen regular action for two years now backing up Thad Gibson, always seeming to make the most of his limited playing time with an attention-getting impact on the field. He had 26 tackles as a sophomore in 2009, including 8 TFL and 3.5 sacks. Williams' brand of speed and agility are not often found in defensive linemen (how many defensive ends played running back in high school?) and his great upper body strength has helped him excel as a bull-rushing penetrator and a reliable tackler in his first two collegiate seasons. An Academic All-Big Ten performer in 2009, Williams has the potential to be an all-conference player on the field as well. The knee sprain he suffered in practice the other day isn't thought to be too serious, and he should be ready for Miami if not for Marshall.

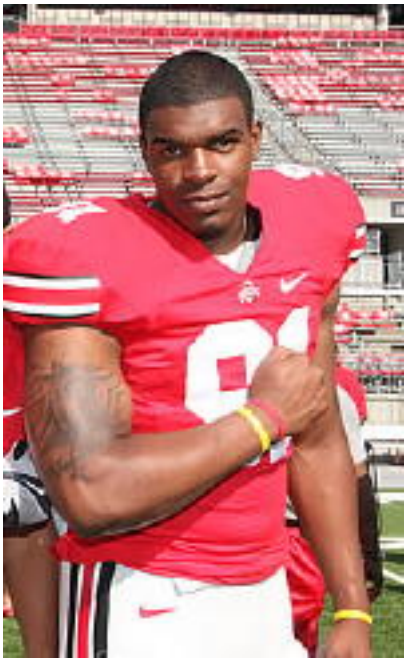
Scout page - Rivals page

Solomon Thomas - #98 - Junior 6' 5" 226 (West Chester, OH) Lakota West H.S.

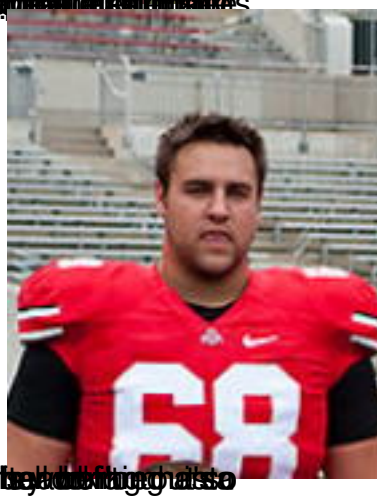
Thomas is still waiting for his first opportunity for extended playing time in Columbus, and with the injury to Williams, that chance may come sooner than anyone expected. Thomas has made his mark at OSU mainly as a pass rushing end, where his speed is put to best use. He may be a bit light for an every down defensive end in the Big Ten, but he has shown the athleticism and toughness to compensate for the lack of heft. His exposure to OSU fans has mainly been in Spring Game action to this point, where he has been a sack machine. He is entering his fourth year in the program, having redshirted his first year in 2007. Thomas played in eight games in 2009, registering six tackles. He knows what's expected of him in 2010, and plans to be ready when opportunity knocks this fall.

Scout page - Rivals page

Melvin Fellows - #91 - R-Freshman - 6' 5" 249 Garfield Hts. (OH) H.S.



Considered one of the gems of the 2009 OSU recruiting class, Fellows was a 5-star recruit, and the #3-rated defensive end in the country last year. He redshirted 2009 in a senior-heavy defensive line group at OSU, but he looks ready to break out this fall. Fellows is one of those guys you want to be the first off the bus...the 'look test' and all that. OSU fans will soon be able to judge for themselves how that "look" translates to "game" on the field, but Fellows has been in the two-deep at end since the calendar turned to 2010. In spring ball, you could easily see why the coaches feel they have to get him on the field. He was a all-state player and Under Armour All-American at Garfield Hts. This year he'll back up Heyward, but should be on the field a lot as Heacock uses as many as eight or nine linemen in a variety of formations, and when he moves Heyward inside, Fellows should be the first end off the bench.

Scout page - Rivals page

J.T. Moore - #50 - Freshman 6' 1", 246 Boardman (OH) H.S.