The next time you see the Ohio State football team play a regular season game, chances are you're going to need a program. They won't look anything at all like the 12-1, 5th-ranked 2010 version of the Buckeyes. Eleven starters have graduated, including seven on defense, and four key returning skill position players on offense will sit out the first five games of the season. By my count that means 15 new regulars will line up when the Buckeyes host Akron on September 3rd.

The 12-month long recruiting season is closing out for 2011's freshmen. We're less than two weeks away from national signing day, and the OSU staff has 21 commitments as this is written, with no more than two or three additions likely. The services that rank such things have this Buckeye group pegged anywhere from
3nd
to
7th
to
11th
in the country.

All the standard recruiting disclaimers apply. As always, it's as much art as it is science. But Jim Tressel clearly continues to operate in the big leagues in terms of talent acquisition, losing only the occasional stud from Ohio, a state that produces lots of them. He maintains a strong presence in Florida, and swoops in to snag elite players from Indiana, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Michigan, seemingly at will.

The OSU Recruiting Machine

That's about as good a job as any northern school can expect to do these days. In the Scout ranking , for example, Notre Dame is the only other school in the top ten not located in the South or West regions of the country. Those regions produce more talent, and proximity to home is still the biggest factor in a deciding a recruit's college destination. It's almost as simple as that.

Still, there's a certain kind of high school football player that relates to what Jim Tressel offers in the Ohio State program no matter where he grows up, and Tressel is, like his forebear Woody Hayes, a master "in the living room" with parents of recruits. As long as Ohio continues to produce top-level football talent...and it shows no sign of slowing down...Tressel should keep getting the best of it.

The formula for 2011 follows the recent pattern for the OSU staff. (Likewise, the early commits for 2012 .) It goes like this: Get the best in-state players to sign on as early as possible....pick up a blue-chip regional recruit or two along the way, and then stay in the chase for some of the top national recruits who wait till signing day to decide on a school....then add the best of the annual Glenville crop right around signing day.

The Buckeyes got commitments from the two best defensive linemen in the state, Kenny Hayes of Toledo Whitmer (pictured at top) and Canton McKinley's Steve Miller , way back in the fall of 2009. The nation's top-rated quarterback, Braxton Miller was in the fold by early June. Of the 21 current commits for 2011, 17 had verballed to OSU by July 2. With two weeks to go, Tressel is still in the hunt for a top-rated linebacker and a wide receiver from out of state, and everyone expects massive Glenville offensive lineman Aundrey Walker to sign with OSU by February 4.

If the staff can't fill that last spot or two with the caliber of player they want, it's possible they'll bank one or more slots for next year, because the 2012 class is loaded, and the number of scholarships available will be limited. What I'll try to give you below is a quick look at the incoming freshmen and their possible impact on the OSU two-deep this fall, and then project

what that two-deep will probably look like by Labor Day with the returning talent on the roster.

Offense:

The only returning OSU starters on offense for the 2011 opener will be right tackle J.B. Shugarts, center Mike Brewster, tight end Jake Stoneburner and fullback Zach Boren. Even at that, it's hard to project any of this year's incoming freshmen into significant playing time. Perhaps the best possibility is at quarterback, where Braxton Miller will benefit from enrolling early in January and going through spring ball.

Quarterback:

Incoming Freshmen:

Braxton Miller - (6' 3", 185 lbs. - Huber Hts. Wayne) - Rated No. 1 or No. 2 among the nation's high school QB's, Miller was offered by everyone from Alabama to Florida to USC. He'll have a shot at the job for the first five games because there's no clear leader among the current backups on the roster. More on Miller from an April Buckeye Leaves . And here are some
YouTube highlights
.

Projected 2011 Starter:

Until Terrelle Pryor returns from his suspension, this is as wide open a position battle as any on the team for 2011. Perennial backup Joe Bauserman has the most playing time, but he has looked fairly pedestrian in his time on the field. Redshirt freshman Taylor Graham has impressed the coaches, but his next snap in a game will be his first. Sophomore-to-be Kenny Guiton has shown flashes, but Miller can do everything Guiton can do, and he has a better arm. I can't even hazard a guess as to what Tressel and his staff will decide. Talk to you after the Spring Game on this one.

Running Back

Incoming Freshmen - None

Projected 2011 Starters: - The reason there are no running backs in the 2011 class is that the Bucks are loaded with young backs in junior Jordan Hall ,sophomores Jaamal Berry , and Carlos Hyde , and redshirt freshman Rod Smith , and they decided not to further crowd the pipeline. On top of that, they already have commitments from the state's top two running backs for 2012 in Warren Ball and Brionte Dunn .

Smith got raves in bowl practices and may be too good to keep off the field. With Boom Herron returning, there just aren't enough carries to go around. Until Herron gets back from his suspension, the guys who fumble least in practice will probably play., and the first five games will serve as an audition for 2011 and beyond. The depth at RB is as good as it has been in several years.

Offensive Line:

Incoming Freshmen:

Brian Bobek - (6' 2.5", 278 - Palatine IL, Wm. Fremd) - Rated the nation's No. 1 center by Scout. Bobek (pictured) did a nice job in the Army All-American Game this month as the East's starting center.

Chris Carter - (6' 4", 350 lbs - Cleveland JFK) - projects as a guard at OSU...not a highly rated recruit prior to the OSU offer. Now a 3-star and ranked #27 nationally by Scout. If nothing else, he's got a great Buckeye name.

Tommy Brown - (6' 5", 300 lbs. - Akron Firestone) - Another under-publicized recruit offered by OSU in the early going. Good athleticism for a big man, but still a project. Could end up at guard or right tackle.

Antonio Underwood - (6' 3", 295 lbs. - Shaker Heights) - Another early signee now rising up the rankings owing to his OSU offer and a good senior year. Scout has him as a 3-star and the No. 22 ranking at guard.

Possible Addition to 2011 Class:

Aundrey Walker - (6' 6", 355 lbs. - Cleveland Glenville) - This kid is all but a mortal lock for OSU. He started at RG alongside Bobek in the Army A-A Game this month, and nobody moved him. He may be the biggest offensive guard I've ever seen...at any level. He's a 4-star prospect and rated the nation's 9th best guard by Scout.

Projected 2011 Starters:

At tackle, returning starters J.B. Shugarts and Mike Adams will both be seniors, and sophomore Andrew Norwell should capably hold down Adams starting job while he serves his suspension. Marcus Hall is back with three years of eligibility remaining, and will be a factor at either tackle or guard.

Both guard spots are open, and along with Marcus Hall, third-year sophomores Corey Linsley and Jack Mewhort look like the best bets to start. If he signs with OSU, Walker has a shot to earn some freshman playing time if he shows up in shape and turns out to be a quick learner. Mike Brewster returns at center for his fourth year as a starter, and Corey Linsley will back him up. None of the freshmen on the offensive line is likely to make a big impact in 2011.

Wide Receiver:

Incoming Freshmen:

Gary Houston/Ohio High