This was supposed to be the weekend we were talking about the Final Four and Ohio State...you know...at the same time. Since it didn't work out that way, and we're about ready to file away Thad Matta's Buckeyes till November, I thought we'd do what we always do around these parts when the present disappoints. Look to the future.

Three of the seven contributors from Matta's 34-3 OSU season are moving on, but the program got a boost when Jared Sullinger and William Buford both signaled their intentions to return for next season. While those decisions aren't final and binding just yet, the prospect of a core of Sullinger, Buford, Aaron Craft and Deshaun Thomas returning for the 2011-12 season makes the Buckeyes the odds-on favorites to repeat as Big Ten champions...at least.

We've seen what those four can do. So the rest of this column will deal with the other nine players on next year's Buckeyes, with a focus on the five incoming freshmen and one player eligible after transferring to OSU. (We'll also try to get through an entire column on OSU without using the "T-word")

Waiting to See Half the 2010 Class

While Sullinger, Craft and Thomas were delivering big performances as first-year players, the other half of Matta's touted 2010 freshman class was riding the pine. Jordan Sibert and Lenz elle Smith
got mostly garbage time minutes, and
J.D. Weatherspoon
missed a big chunk of the season due to academic ineligibility, and played in only 10 games for a total of 54 minutes.

To be fair to Sibert *(pictured above)* he did play some quality minutes late in the regular season and in the Big Ten Tournament when Craft had some foul trouble, averaging just over 8 minutes in the 25 overall games he got into. Sibert is a very good defender, and it's a testament to the talent on the team that the 2010 Gatorade Ohio Player of the Year, and a guy rated in the nation's Top 100 recruits didn't see more action than he did. At 6' 4", he's basically a 2-guard, with the potential to guard some bigger players, much like Lighty did.

Smith told reporters at tournament time that the wrist he had surgery on before the season never got back to 100% over the course of the year, and it will probably be May or June before he's fully recovered. He's also known for his defensive talents, and for his skills as a passer more than as a pure shooter on offense. At 6' 3", he's got good size for a point guard, and with him healthy the Buckeyes' point guard position will be much deeper than they were this past season. More on that in a minute.

Weatherspoon makes it seven returnees for next year, as long as he makes the requisite academic progress. Officially a power forward coming in, the 6' 7" Weatherspoon averaged 13.5 points and 6 boards for Columbus Northland, the nation's top ranked high school team...one whose coach and star player were both named Sullinger. It remains to be seen if Matta will utilize him as a power forward, as the Bucks will have a lot more frontcourt size and PF options next season. Weatherspoon is a good outside shooter, and perhaps a bit undersized to play the 4 in the Big Ten.

Forever Young

Even considering that everyone with remaining eligibility will be back, Matta will have a younger team than he did this year, with five freshmen, six sophomores and Buford as the only senior. Boston College transfer Evan Ravenel will have two years of eligibility after sitting out this season, so Matta will technically have a junior on the roster too.

Thad Matta's recruiting class of 2011 was was his second straight Top Ten group, as four of his five commitments showed up on the Top 100 lists of all the talent evaluators. Center Amir Williams, point guard Shannon Scott, forward LaQuinton Ross and swingman Sam Thompson were all found on the top prospect lists for ESPN, Rivals, Hoopniks, Scout, MaxPreps, Hardwood Elite, NY2LA, and Slam. Rounding out the list of newcomers is another big man, center Trey McDonald from Battle Creek, MI, ranked by Scout as the No. 15 center in the nation.

ESPN ranked Matta's class the nation's 4th best, while Rivals had them at No. 10, in both cases putting the Buckeyes first among Big Ten teams. Before looking more closely at the new kids on the block, let me just engage in a little wild speculation about who we might see getting court time in 2011-12, and why.

Cracking the Matta Rotation

We've learned a few things about how Thad Matta operates in seven years, among them that he likes to go with a 7-9 man rotation, depending on the players at hand. Another is that If you aren't serious about playing tough defense 100 percent of the time, you're not going to play. Sibert and Smith each have a year in the system, and both are solid defenders, so any freshman that aims to play in the backcourt will have to show Matta he can defend *and* score.

There will be one starting spot up for grabs, and it will probably be someone fitting the mold of a swingman...big guard/small forward type, to fill the role played this year by both David Lighty and Jon Diebler. I'm assuming here that Deshaun Thomas will be in the power forward spot, with Sullinger in the pivot, Buford at one of the 2-3 wing spots, and Craft at the point.

This year's Buckeyes played without an ideal power forward (or maybe just with their ideal power forward Sullinger playing center). With Thomas taking over that job next year as a starter, that leaves all of Matta's new big men essentially competing for the 7-15 minutes a game that Dallas Lauderdale played in 2010-11, plus whatever additional rest Matta might want to give his two starting big men. At least now he'll look down his bench and have several big bodies to choose from.

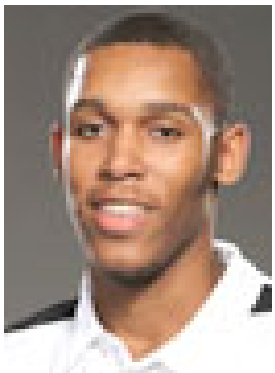
Of the two freshman centers, Amir Williams and Trey McDonald, and the transfer Evan Ravenel, my guess is that Ravenel might be the first option to spell the starters...and I say that without having seen him play a minute. Williams was a McDonald's All-American, but from what I've seen of him, he may need to get stronger and demonstrate more "hands" on offense and "feet" on defense than I've seen on film before he makes an impact at OSU. McDonald is heftier than Williams, but he also appears very raw, and I wonder how much he can help as a first-year player.

Ravenel is 6' 8", 260, and at least we know he has played two years of ACC basketball at Boston College. We also know that as a sophomore he scored 8 points and had 4 boards and two blocks in a win over North Carolina. The experience alone might give him a leg up over an 18-year old freshman, no matter how highly ranked. (It is my fond hope that both Williams and McDonald prove me wrong and tear it up as freshmen)

OSU's other incoming McDonald's All-American *will* contribute next season, and I would suggest right now that Buckeye fans are going to love Shannon Scott. The point guard from Georgia is coming to a team with a very capable point guard in Aaron Craft, but Thad Matta will have to find a way to get this kid on the court. Scott
(pictured)
was scintillating in Wednesday's McDonald's All-Star Game, playing great defense, penetrating and dishing the ball to the scorers, and showing exceptional quickness, ball-handling and hustle. There was a point guard in that game named Kabongo (seriously) who is headed to Texas, and who might have been a bit quicker and flashier than Scott, but I couldn't have been more impressed and excited based on what I saw of the son of the great Charlie Scott.

And that starting swingman job? Based on my recent crash course on the OSU recruits...(and mind you, we're talking at least an hour or two of Internet research and some intense YouTube viewing)...I came away thinking that LaQuinton Ross and Sam Thompson could both help this team a lot next year as perimeter players for Matta. OSU fans who thought the Buckeyes suffered from a deficit of athleticism in the NCAA tournament compared to teams like Kentucky and UNC will be encouraged by what these two kids bring to Columbus. One or the other of them could very well be starting by mid-season. Check out some of the linked video clips below, and see if you don't agree.

Here's a little breakdown on each of the new guys....



Amir Williams - C - 6' 10", 220 Detroit Country Day School, Detroit, MI
Williams has rankings from just about everyone that say he's one of the country's top center prospects. He's slight of build (an inch taller than Sullinger, and 40 pounds lighter) so he'll need to get stronger. He's ranked the #2 center by Scout, #3 by ESPN and #7 by Rivals. They say he runs the floor well, and the video I've seen shows some good shot-blocking timing and instincts. What I don't see in his highlights is a polished offensive force, and I'm concerned about his hands...he seems to get the ball stripped away a lot (again, small sample size). Watching him in the McDonald's game the other night with the nation's best, I didn't see an "active" player on either end. I suspect it will take a year in the system before he really contributes at OSU.
ESPN Profile - Rivals Profile - video - video - video - video

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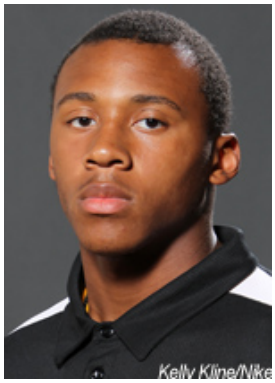

Trey McDonald - C - 6' 9", 230 Battle Creek (MI) Central H.S.

Scout has McDonald rated the nation's #15 center, and ESPN ranks him at #23. He's listed at 230 lbs, but in the clip below he looks heavier than that. There's not a lot of video out there on this guy, and in the one video linked below (#50 in white), he shows some decent post moves, but on this day (before his senior season...April 2010) he did some serious damage to the rims. He is said to run well and have good hands, and most reports say he has improved a lot in his last year in school. McDonald looks like he has the frame to potentially get huge with some weight work. The scouts seem to think he has plenty of upside, but it might be a stretch to think he'll play early for Matta.
ESPN Profile - Rivals Profile - video

Sam Thompson - SG/SF - 6' 7", 185 Whitney Young H.S., Chicago, IL
Explosive is the word that comes to mind watching highlights of Thompson. Matta grabbed a Chicago kid named Evan Turner a few years back, and it looks like Thompson could be another keeper. ESPN ranks him the #45 overall player in the country, and Rivals has him at #46. It's hard to recall a Buckeye player with this combination of size, quickness and vertical game in recent years. He's a high-flyer and a guy who prides himself on his spectacular dunks, as this collection of two dozen dunks in a little over a minute demonstrates. He'll have to play defense to see the court in Columbus, but he shows some impressive ups in shot-blocking as well in the clips below. As a freshman, you could see him giving Matta some
instant offense
off the bench that the coach hasn't always possessed in recent seasons.
ESPN Profile - Rivals Profile - video - video - video - video - video

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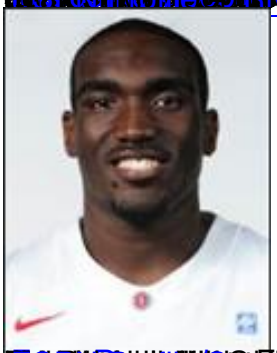
LaQuinton Ross - SF - 6' 8", 200 Life Center Academy, Burlington, NJ
If Thompson is the explosive prospect, Ross is the smooth glider and more of a pure shooter. At 6'8" he's a long-strider who can get wherever he's going in a hurry without always looking "fast". Originally from Murrah, Mississippi, Ross transferred to Life Academy in New Jersey for his senior season. ESPN rates him the #14 small forward in the country, and the 46th best player overall. He has dazzled some of the scouts...for example MaxPreps has him ranked the #7 overall player in the country. This video appears to be junior year film of his Mississippi team playing a tournament in Vegas (Ross is #1 in white). Scouts say he'll need to improve on defense and put some more muscle on his lanky frame. I guess the comparison on the current Buckeyes would be Buford. You can't tell everything by watching video...they are highlight films after all...but the athleticism is unmistakeable.
ESPN Profile - Rivals Profile - video - video - video - video

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