The 2011 college football season is only 60 days away. It really sneaked up on us because...boy, that off-season sure flew by this year, didn't it? Nothing going on in Ohio State football for sometimes minutes on end. It is actually a quiet time for the public face of the program right now, outside of some 2012 recruiting activity. The players won't report until August 8 and 9, the dates for freshmen and returnees respectively. And preparing OSU's answer to the NCAA this summer is the job of Athletic Director Gene Smith and President Gee, not that of Luke Fickell or his coaching staff.

Fickell's office is not a quiet place these days, you can be sure. He has about one month to plan....everything...and three more weeks to practice before the Akron Zips come to Columbus on September 3rd. Okay, he has four weeks to practice.

Knowing that Jim Heacock is running the defense must allow Fickell at least a few moments of fitful sleep. The Buckeyes lost some good defensive players in Heyward, Rolle, Homan and Larimore, but there are talented and tested players moving up and...did I mention that Heacock is in charge?

Never knowing what you'll get.....

So we already know *what* the defense will be, and we know pretty much *who* it will be, at the starting positions at least. It is the 2011 Buckeye offense, on the other hand, that will be unwrapped this fall like the proverbial Gumpian box of chocolates, with all the uncertainty that entails.

The Buckeye player suspensions hit the offense at its four most important positions: quarterback, wide receiver, running back and left tackle. The "skill positions" as they say...and yes, lately the quarterback's blind-side offensive tackle is included in that group by most football people. Most important or not, they are the ones we keep stats on, and the ones that score touchdowns.

No matter who ends up as the starter at QB for the Buckeyes, it will be his first significant playing time in an OSU uniform. The same goes for wide receiver, and to a slightly lesser extent, the running back and offensive tackle spots as well. There is a lack of experience, and in the case of the offensive tackles, a lack of numbers...in all four position groups.

In addition to the suspensions, which remove the team's best tackle (Adams), their top rusher (Herron), top passer (Pryor) and 2nd best receiver (Posey) from last season, the staff is replacing two three-year starters at offensive guard (Boren and Browning), the team MVP and leading receiver (Sanzenbacher) and the starting placekicker (Barclay).

Small wonder most of the pundits have Wisconsin as the preseason favorite in the Leaders Division of the Big Ten...(someday I might get used to saying those division names...I still can't make myself start typing the capital "B" and the capital "G", with that "1" in between them .)

My standard rule of thumb for years has been that a first-year starter at quarterback usually translates to one or two losses in conference play. There are exceptions of course, (Craig Krenzel being one) but you can usually just write down two L's when you're starting a newbie QB in the Big Ten.

Then there's the problem of taking away the team's touchdown makers, either through graduation or suspension, and figuring out where the points are going to come from, especially prior to October 8th. Herron (16 TD), Sanzenbacher (11), Posey (7), Saine (5), and Pryor (4) totalled 43 touchdowns rushing or receiving in 2010. Returning backs and wide receivers eligible for the first five games this year totaled 5 last season. Returning tight ends Stoneburner (2) and Fragel (1) had three more.

Please don't say "Somebody is going to have to step up"

Okay, you win...but if Ohio State in 2011 is going to beat most of the good teams, and continue the Tressel tradition of almost never losing to the mediocre ones, it will be on the performances of offensive players who have not yet made their marks as Buckeyes.

I list below some of the players I think are major keys to OSU's offensive success in 2011. In some cases they are names you already know...guys that have flashed the skills but haven't received the playing time as regulars. Others are players the public has only seen in limited game action...or spring ball....but that I think must play big roles in this offense if they are going to succeed...

O-Linemen

Andrew Norwell - offensive tackle - The 6' 5", 308 lb. tackle from Cincinnati Anderson is probably the leading candidate to start at left tackle during the suspension of all-Big Ten tackle Mike Adams. Norwell played very well in spot duty as a freshman in 2010, after coming to OSU as one of top-rated tackles in the country. His development is crucial to the OSU offensive line in 2011, and even more so for 2012 and 2013, after Adams and J.B. Shugarts are gone.

Marcus Hall - offensive tackle/guard - Hall is a big, talented lineman from Glenville who took a redshirt year in 2010, not only because he was playing behind an entrenched and experienced set of offensive linemen at OSU, but also because it was felt he needed to get his academic house in order. Hall (6' 5", 321 lbs.) had an excellent spring, playing both guard and tackle, and he has a good chance to wind up as one of the best five offensive linemen to start the new season. Barring injuries, he's likely to play more guard than tackle in 2011, but could still wind up outside as an upperclassman. Like Norwell, Hall has three years of eligibility remaining.

Running Backs

Jaamal Berry - tailback - Berry *(#4 above)* is one of the guys who made the most of his limited opportunities last season. The 5' 10", 200 lb speedster from Miami will be featured this year because he has a dimension of acceleration that none of the other OSU backs possess. He has tremendous quickness and a lateral cutting ability that makes him elusive in the open field or in traffic. Berry averaged 8.3 yards on his 32 carries in 2010 for a total of 267 yards rushing, with one touchdown. OSU coaches aren't expecting 8 yards a pop again this year, but they are expecting more big plays out of this sophomore as his carries increase.

Rod Smith - tailback - OSU fans got their first look at the 6' 3", 220 lb. redshirt freshman in a Buckeye uniform this spring, and he immediately began evoking comparisons to Chris Wells, Eddie George or Robert Smith. Nice company. With Smith, it's power combined with speed and toughness. He rarely goes down on first contact, and it usually takes more than one guy to do the job. He'll be sharing carries with the other young OSU backs, but Smith has the look of a special player.

[redacted]

[redacted] wouldn't be the craziest thought.