A few weeks ago we looked at the 2011 Ohio State offense , with all of its uncertainties, suspensions and inexperience, and tried to identify some keys to their success this season. There is little doubt that the unproven Buckeye youngsters at the skill positions on offense are going to struggle in the early going.

But there is also little doubt in Columbus that the Buckeyes defense will be stout enough to keep the team in every game while the offense gets settled. Because that's what they do. Throughout the Tressel years, under current coordinator Jim Heacock and his predecessor Mark Dantonio, an effective Ohio State defense has become a tradition. It is expected...counted upon.... often taken for granted.

Well, maybe you've heard...the Tressel Era is officially over. But Heacock remains to coach the Buckeye defense...at least for one more year...and for a program starved for good news, that is one huge chunk of it. This week we'll take a quick look back at last year's Buckeye defense, and then profile the personnel you'll see on the field in the 2011 version.

The 2010 Defense and the Heacock track record...

2010 was a fine year for the Ohio State defense, even by the high standards set by Heacock.

They were 4th in the FBS in total defense, and 3rd against the rush . Only Wisconsin and Michigan rushed for over 150 yards as a team against them. Opposing teams have never been able to make a living running the ball against Heacock's Silver Bullets.

But as they say, there are lies, damned lies and statistics.....and stats do sometimes lie. Teams with terrible pass defenses often have pretty good rush defense numbers, because opponents find it easier to throw the ball on them. Ohio State is not one of those teams.

The Buckeye defense gave up only *five* pass completions of more than 30 yards all last season...and four of those were in lopsided wins over Eastern Michigan and Minnesota. The team gave up nine touchdown passes all year, two of those by Ryan Mallett in the bowl game. That performance ranked them 8th in passing defense among the 120 FBS teams.

In the ultimate statistic...scoring defense, the 2010 Buckeyes were ranked 5th nationally, at 14.3 points per game. And if you take out the four special teams scores the team gave up, the points actually surrendered against the defense was 12.2 ppg. Just three (Wisconsin, Miami, Arkansas) of their 13 opponents scored more than 20 points against the Bucks, and Miami needed two kick return scores to do it.

I know....ancient history. But Jim Heacock makes a habit of fielding stingy defenses over the last decade or more. It has been the reliable, annual defensive productivity supplied by Heacock that made what we called "Tresselball" on offense even remotely possible. Just using the NCAA total defense ranking of the 120 FBS teams as an indicator, OSU has finished ranked 4th (2010), 5th ('09), 14th ('08), 1st ('07), 12th ('06) and 5th ("05) under Heacock over the last six seasons.

That is the stuff of which six straight conference titles are made. And it is the reason the staff and players feel good about the 2011 OSU defense, despite the loss of seven starters from that stellar unit of a year ago. That, and a look at the talent backed up on the defensive side of the OSU roster

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Defensive Line

Cameron Heyward has gone over to the dark side , *(and Dex Larimore signed with the Saints)*, but the rest of the defensive line standouts return for OSU in 2011, and the presence of five highly-rated freshmen guarantees some nice depth for that group.

OSU opponents will have to deal with some configuration of Nathan Williams, Johnny Simon and Johnathan Hankins on the Buckeyes defensive line, with Adam Bellamy and Garrett Goebel rotating in to what will usually be a four-man front. Versatility is key to what Jim Heacock asks of his defensive linemen, and he moves his players around a lot on game day.

Starters

John Simon looks like he could be peaking in this his junior year. While mainly an inside player at defensive tackle his first two seasons in Columbus, he was used at the strongside defensive end spot at times last year, and this spring he probably lined up at SSDE as often as he did at tackle. Simon's strength is legendary, and he was simply unblockable at times in spring ball. He was one of 12 players on the preseason Big Ten "Players to

Watch" list , and is ranked 1st Team All-Big Ten by *Lindy's* , among others. Expect a lot more national recognition for John Simon *(pictured at top and #54 at bottom)* before the 2011 season is over.

Nathan Williams *(#43 at right)* will be entering his third year as the starting stand-up "Leo" end, where his speed game can be used to rush the passer (4.5 sacks - '10) or drop off in coverage. (interception vs. Miami at :57 mark). This spring they showed a 3-man front of Simon and Bellamy at the ends and Hankins on the nose, with Williams (6' 3", 255) floating freely behind the line looking to shoot a gap into the backfield. He's extremely strong with his hands, and once his mitts are on a ball carrier, he's down. Williams made preseason 3rd Team All-American and 1st Team All Big Ten by Phil Steele.

330-pound guys aren't all that hard to find in America. Guys that size with the feet, the quickness and the agility of Johnathan "Big Hank" Hankins are a lot tougher to identify. The sophomore from Michigan can be a load to handle from either the 3-technique tackle spot, or on the nose. Center Mike Brewster has raved about the potential Hankins has as a player. The man just completely disrupts the offensive backfield when he penetrates. Hankins' conditioning is said to be improving, and if he can be productive for four quarters, he'll be a major force in the middle.

Garrett Goebel would probably start at the nose in OSU's base four-man front if there were a game tomorrow. That's where the coaches think he performs best, which means more time at the 3-technique for Hankins. Goebel goes 6' 3", 290, and brings the wrestling background OSU loves in their defensive tackles. He's a 4th-year junior who also saw some time at DE last year.

Adam Bellamy , the redshirt sophomore from Aurora has taken advantage of his playing time at both SSDE and inside at tackle. He played in every game in 2010, contributing 11 tackles and 2 TFL. When Simon goes down inside, you'll often see Bellamy at the strongside end position. At 6' 4", 302, Bellamy can also hold his own at defensive tackle. He'll be playing a lot in Heacock's tackle rotation with Hankins, Goebel and Simon, and #93 will get your attention.

Backups

At defensive end, the returning Buckeye backups are Melvin Fellows , the oft-injured 3rd-year sophomore pass-rusher from Garfield Hts, Darryl Baldwin , a 6'4", 290-lb redshirt freshman from Solon, and Boardman product J.T. Moore , another redshirt freshman who had a good spring backing up Williams at the Leo spot, and who could hold that position down at least until Solomon Thomas returns from his 5-game suspension, or until one of the freshmen unseats him.

At defensive tackle, after the four-man rotation above (which contains no seniors), it's converted offensive guard Evan Blankenship , Baldwin, who gets reps at tackle as well, and a host of walk-ons, before you get to a couple of promising true freshmen.

Freshmen

The first two commits to the Class of 2011 were the two best defensive ends in Ohio, Kenny Hayes of Toledo Whitmer and Steve Miller from Canton McKinley. Both kids were nationally recruited, and either or both of them could see the field early this year, especially if Fellows doesn't show more durability and productivity than he has so far. Chase Farris and Michael Bennett

are both highly-rated, versatile linemen who could be projected either inside or outside as collegians, and
Joel Hale
impressed everyone this spring when he came in early and turned heads at defensive tackle right away.

Linebackers

The Buckeyes lost five of their top six tacklers from a year ago, and the top three (Brian Rolle, Ross Homan and Jermale Hines) were linebackers who are gone in 2011. Those three seniors alone racked up 214 tackles last year, so it would be crazy to say they won't be missed this season.

This OSU linebacker corps is not as deep with returning players as the team is in some other position groups, but as with the defensive linemen, the starters are very solid, and there is a strong-looking crop of incoming freshmen to bolster the depth chart.

Starters

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