

Buckeyes looking for leaders in spring practices

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By RUSTY MILLER

The Associated Press

COLUMBUS — Most of the most notable players from a team that went 12-0 last season are back for Ohio State in 2013.

Yet when spring practice begins today, second-year coach Urban Meyer will still be searching for leaders.

The players who set the pace for last year's perfect record weren't necessarily the stars. Defensive end John Simon was but more of them were like Zach Boren, who split time between linebacker and fullback. They took ownership of the Buckeyes and helped erase the memories of a 7-loss season in 2011.

"That's a huge void," Meyer said after the season about the departing seniors. "We're in the evaluation phase of who can fill those roles. Make no doubt about it now, that that was a huge part of a successful season."

So even though the Buckeyes welcome back Sports Illustrated cover boy Braxton Miller, a junior quarterback already trumpeted as a Heisman Trophy contender, along with running back Carlos Hyde, linebacker Ryan Shazier and cornerback Bradley Roby, Meyer will be wondering what players will pick up the slack in the leadership depart.

Here are some frequently-asked questions by Ohio State fans — and a guess at some answers — as the Buckeyes begin their spring workouts.

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— What's the team's strength? Since only four of the players listed on the 2-deep offensive depth chart for the season-ending win against Michigan, was a senior, it stands to reason that the offense will be ahead of the defense. The only losses are TE Jake Stoneburner, RT Reid Fragel and FBs Boren and Adam Homan. That leaves a plethora of quality players on that side of the ball: Miller, Hyde, receivers Corey Brown and Devin Smith and linemen Jack Mewhort, Andrew Norwell, Corey Linsley and Marcus Hall. —Where are the biggest holes? Without question on the defensive line. Simon, Garrett Goebel and Nathan Williams, three vocal leaders, were seniors who have moved on. On top of that, Johnathan Hankins elected to give up his final year of eligibility to jump into the NFL draft. Roby could have done that, too, but decided to return, along with safeties Christian Bryant and C.J. Barnett. "You have the two safeties back now and you have Roby. So that's three out of four (spots in the secondary) that's stable — where our D-line is not stable and our linebacker position is not stable," Meyer said after Hankins announced his decision in January. "So you throw the back end in that, we're dealing with an unstable defense. That's big." Adolphus Washington, Tommy Schutt, Joel Hale, Michael Bennett, Noah Spence and Steve Miller are all holdovers who are in the running for playing time up front. —Any other problem areas? Meyer referred to it above: Linebacker. It's a sign of how little faith he had in the position a year ago that midway through the season he moved a starting fullback (Boren) to supplement the linebackers — and Boren hadn't played there since high school.

Shazier had a fine season in 2012 but beyond him there are question marks. Camren Williams, Conner Crowell, Joshua Perry and David Perkins — all freshmen last fall — will be tested to see if they're ready to take over.

— How good can the backfield be? Superlative. Miller has been working on his passing after completing 58 percent of his throws for just 170 yards a game. The powerful Hyde should be even better this season, with fifth-year senior Jordan Hall pushing him for carries and playing time. Rod Smith and Bri'onte Dunn add depth at running back, with Kenny Guiton again backing up Miller.

—Everything OK in special teams? Drew Basil is back to handle the kicking chores but he may end up doing double duty. Gone is punter Ben Buchanan and there really isn't a player waiting in the wings. — Any other new additions or subtractions? Let's not forget the 24 recruits signed in what most scouting services called one of the top-5 classes in the country. Some of them may be able to step in right away and contribute but that's always a risky proposition. For now, let's just say that Meyer and his staff added someone to take over for Miller (J.T. Barrett), some promising backs (Dontre Wilson, Ezekiel Elliott) and defensive linemen (Joey Bosa, Tyquan Lewis, Tracy Sprinkle), a couple of athletic corners (Eli Apple, Cameron Burrows), a 5-star safety (Vonn Bell) and some fleet receivers (Jalin Marshall, Gareon Conley) among many others. Apple, Barrett, Burrows, Lewis and Sprinkle are all on campus and are learning the

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system this spring. Oh and you can include this on your list of additions: Cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs is now also in charge of special teams. —Anything else that concerns Meyer? Well, he's not crazy about the bowl ban last year costing his program a lot of valuable practice time in December. He vowed the players would have to make up for that NCAA-mandated vacation by doubling their efforts during offseason conditioning. Even though that bowl ban falls away and the Buckeyes are eligible to go anywhere they are wanted after the 2013 season, Meyer still is upset that Ohio State faces recruiting limitations. He wanted to sign more players to his bumper crop but had to leave three off the list. As he added, "That could be three Braxton Millers. It's not easy to deal with." —What's the spring schedule? The Buckeyes practice today and Thursday, then the players are off over spring break before returning March 19. The workouts will continue until the annual spring game which, because of concrete work being done at Ohio Stadium, will be played this year at Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati on April 13. —And what about the 2013 schedule? The season opens on Aug. 31 at the Horseshoe against Buffalo. Subsequent home games include San Diego State, FBS team Florida A&M, Wisconsin, Iowa, Penn State and Indiana. The lone non-conference road game is at California on Sept. 14. In the Big Ten, the Buckeyes travel to Northwestern, Purdue, Illinois and, on Nov. 30, archrival Michigan. (Remember: Ohio State is raising ticket prices this fall, so it'll cost you \$9 more per ticket — a 13-percent increase). And, yes, the Buckeyes are eligible for the Big Ten title game this year. It is Dec. 7 in Indianapolis. For optimistic Buckeyes fans, tickets are not available yet.

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