

OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL PREVIEW

Buckeyes Deeper Heading Into 2011-12 Season

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

If there has been one consistent source of criticism for Ohio State head coach Thad Matta during his previous seven seasons at the helm of the Buckeye basketball program, it has been with regard to the use – or lack thereof – of his bench.

However, because he has only two upperclassmen on this year's roster, one of whom has yet to play a single minute for the Buckeyes, the coach's incredibly diverse team may leave him no choice in the matter.

"It has the makings for a pretty deep bench," Matta said.

That's particularly the case because the OSU coaching staff has yet to narrow down a starting five despite the proximity of the rapidly approaching season opener Nov. 11 against Wright State.

Categorizing his roster as unique, Matta is still in the process of evaluating what the freshmen can be expected to contribute while ironing out the details of where his returning starters will be best served playing.

"As I met with guys individually the other day, I told them I really haven't put a ton of thought into a quote-unquote starting lineup," he told reporters Oct. 27. "The reason for that is I'm really enjoying the competition that we're getting in practice.

"Leaving things a little bit open-ended right now, in my mind from what I've seen, is helping our basketball team. And I think our guys know this: We've got a lot of improvement to make before we play that home opener."

The following is a position-by-position look at the Ohio State roster for the 2011-12 season (with notable statistics from last season where applicable). Players projected to have major roles are listed first in the breakdown.

Guard

William Buford, 6-6, 220, Sr. (14.4 points per game, 3.9 rebounds per game, 46.2 shooting percentage) – Call it ironic that Buford feels that trying to

shoot himself out of his scoring slump in Ohio State's loss to Kentucky in the NCAA Tournament's Sweet 16 a year ago was a form of selfishness.

It's ironic because Ohio State is likely going to need him to shoot that much in every game this year regardless of the success rate.

In his junior season, Buford was just one of many scoring options for the Buckeyes, but this year Matta will turn to the guard to make up for a good portion of the 24.7 points per game the team lost with the departures of Jon Diebler and David Lighty.

Perhaps making up for some of those points is a reasonable expectation, particularly because Buford solidified himself as one of the go-to scorers on the team a year ago.

Averaging 14.4 points per game despite being surrounded by some of the Big Ten's most lethal offensive weapons, Buford could realistically average more than 20 in his final season as a Buckeye. That will be one goal while completely erasing the memory of last year's Kentucky loss will be another.

"My head wasn't in that game," Buford admitted, referring to his performance against the Wildcats during which he missed 14 of his 16 attempted shots, including a jumper as time expired. "I was rushing shots. I could have done other things besides shoot to help my team win. I just kept trying to shoot to get myself out of that slump.

"After my last performance, I didn't want to leave the school with everything the school did for me. I didn't want to leave on that game. That had a lot to do with my decision to return to school."

Buford suggested that creating offense in other ways was the best way he could have helped the Buckeyes knock off Kentucky, especially because Ohio State lost by only two points as his buzzer-beater attempt clanked off the rim.

Rebounding and finding other players for open looks might have done the trick, and he'll undoubtedly be counted upon to do those things this season, but even his head coach understands why Buford continued to try to score in a game where he was ice cold.

It is a simple explanation that is easily forgivable – he had done it all season.

"Going back and looking at it, the shots that he missed in that game were shots that I've seen him make for three years," Matta said. "I don't think anybody wanted William to make a shot more than I did at that particular juncture just to get him going. I think that helped him go into this summer and prove what he wants to be and drive him a little bit more."

Where Buford is expected to contribute this year remains to be determined because Matta and his staff have yet to decide whether playing the senior at shooting guard or small forward is the team's best option.

Either way, his role as one of the team's primary scorers will remain.

"Watching his progression as a player and as a person has been very gratifying for me as a coach," Matta said of Buford. "I think he is primed to go into his senior year and be a better player than he has been so far.

"With all the guys he has played with, if you stopped and looked back at it, it has been an amazing run. I think he's ready for what's coming at him, but he always knows how much better those guys made him and I think that's a huge step in maturity for William."

A year after taking a big jump in leadership, Buford understands that how many points per game he scores in his final season is just a portion of what the coaching staff is counting on him to do.

"I have to be a leader," said Buford, who could pass such former OSU All-Americans as Jim Jackson, Jerry Lucas and Dennis Hopson as the program's all-time leading scorer with a big year. He begins the season with 1,424 points, 672 behind Hopson's school-record total of 2,096.

"This is my final season and I want it to be a successful year," said Buford, who totaled 520 points last season. "I am going to do everything I can to provide what this team needs on the court and help with leadership off of it."

Aaron Craft, 6-2, 190, Soph. (6.9 ppg, 2.9 rpg, 4.8 assists per game, 46.1 shooting pct.) – Even with Craft's presence on the roster, the biggest question mark heading into last season was what to do about the point guard position.

That question was directly indicative of how little anyone knew about Craft, who seemed on the surface to be an unlikely candidate to help Ohio State move past the Evan Turner era at the point guard position.

It didn't take long for it to be clear the then freshman was the perfect fit, however, even if the way in which he carried out playing the position was immensely different from Turner.

Finding the floor early in his career because of his defensive prowess, Craft went from being a means to an end to one of the premier defenders in the Big Ten.

Often praised for his high basketball IQ, Craft also excelled last season in helping facilitate others on the offensive end, made plays in transition, finished with a team-best 177 assists and showed glimpses of his ability to score in bunches.

"I played good defense some of the time, but there were also times where I wasn't in the right positions and things like that," Craft admitted. "I worked a lot on my shot this summer and on my defense. I want to be more consistent this year."

Craft won't have the luxury of sneaking up on people again, though, as the sophomore enters the season on the watch list for

the John Wooden Award as college basketball's best player. That comes after earning Big Ten Sixth Man of the Year and All-Big Ten defensive team honors a year ago.

Matta has expressed confidence in Craft's ability to defend effectively, saying on numerous occasions that the guard is one of the best defenders in the nation and can guard just about anyone on the floor. The biggest area the Buckeyes are going to need him to improve upon is scoring, particularly with the absences of Lighty and Diebler.

"There are going to be open shots down there and I need to knock them down," Craft said. "I know the coaches are looking to me to be more aggressive in attempting to score and that is something I am prepared to do."

Craft showed he could be a main scoring threat when his team needed him a year ago, coming out with a career-high 19 points in Ohio State's 69-66 win over Penn State on Jan. 15. Going against former Nittany Lions point guard Tabor Battle for the first time, Craft's scoring outburst came in a game where his defense was what the coaches anticipated relying on.

But it was a night when his teammates were struggling to find a rhythm offensively – which wasn't a common occurrence – and the point guard knocked down 4 of 6 attempts from beyond the arc en route to the win.

Meanwhile, Craft also held Battle to just 5-of-17 shooting, including just one made three-point attempt in 10 tries. Battle – known as one of the most explosive players in the country a year ago – said publicly on his Twitter account months later that Craft was the toughest defender he faced all season.

"What people don't always realize about Aaron is that he can score," OSU assistant Jeff Boals said. "He scored almost 30 points (per game) for his AAU team and was one of the top scoring threats on his high school team. If we need him to score, he can do that for us. We are counting on him to be the whole package this year."

Shannon Scott, 6-1, 180, Fr. – If Craft can prove to be one of Ohio State's scoring options that could mean considerable playing time for the freshman Scott.

Preseason talk of putting Scott on the floor in his freshman season and sliding Craft over to play shooting guard has been prevalent, particularly because the Buckeyes have yet to resolve questions of who will play the point.

Matta said he would be open to playing two point guards on the floor together, citing the 2006-07 season when he used Jamar Butler and Mike Conley Jr. oftentimes simultaneously en route to college basketball's national championship game.

Of course, Scott must prove he's ready defensively before Matta will put him on the floor, but there seems to be a general sentiment that the four-star prospect ranked the No. 6 point guard in the 2011 recruiting class will be an instant contributor.

"The two things he brings to the table are kind of a pure-point guard mentality and a defensive presence," Boals said. "He is very quick laterally and obviously the college game is a little faster than what he is used to, but he's adjusted very well and I think he can definitely contribute."

In his senior season playing for Alpharetta (Ga.) Milton, Scott averaged 13 points, 7.2 assists and 4.3 rebounds per game while helping his team finish with a 29-3 record. As a junior, he averaged similar numbers while leading his team to the state title game.

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OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL PREVIEW

2011-12 Projected Starting Lineup

<p>4 • Aaron Craft • G Hgt.: 6-2 • Wgt.: 190 • Class: Sophomore Yr.: GP/GS Min./G PPG RPG A TO Bk. StL 10-11 37-1 29.6 6.9 2.9 177 79 4 73</p>  <p>Despite being Ohio State's sixth man last season, Craft played the fifth-most minutes on the team. His assist and steal totals were team bests.</p>	<p>3 • Shannon Scott • G Hgt.: 6-1 • Wgt.: 180 • Class: Freshman Yr.: GP/GS Min./G PPG RPG A TO Bk. StL True Freshman</p>  <p>Scott was the 2011 Georgia 5A Player of the Year and a McDonald's All-America selection at Alpharetta (Ga.) Milton last season.</p>	<p>44 • William Buford • G/F Hgt.: 6-6 • Wgt.: 220 • Class: Senior Yr.: GP/GS Min./G PPG RPG A TO Bk. StL 08-09 33-25 29.3 11.3 3.7 35 39 12 28 09-10 37-37 34.4 14.4 5.6 116 65 10 41 10-11 36-36 32.4 14.4 3.9 106 66 11 29</p>  <p>Buford is the only Ohio State player with more than one year in a Buckeye uniform and the squad's lone senior.</p>	<p>1 • Deshaun Thomas • F Hgt.: 6-7 • Wgt.: 225 • Class: Sophomore Yr.: GP/GS Min./G PPG RPG A TO Bk. StL 10-11 37-0 14.0 7.5 3.5 17 30 6 14</p>  <p>Thomas, a volume shooter, is nicknamed 'Microwave Offense' because of his ability to score points in short amounts of time.</p>	<p>0 • Jared Sullinger • C Hgt.: 6-9 • Wgt.: 280 • Class: Sophomore Yr.: GP/GS Min./G PPG RPG A TO Bk. StL 10-11 37-37 31.7 17.2 10.2 43 59 20 37</p>  <p>Sullinger, an All-American last season, dropped weight during the offseason after deciding to return to Ohio State.</p>
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2011-12 Ohio State Men's Basketball Roster/Schedule

No.	Name	Pos.	Ht./Wt.	Yr.	Hometown/Previous School
0	Jared Sullinger	F	6-9/280	So.	Columbus, Ohio/Northland
1	Deshaun Thomas	F	6-7/225	So.	Fort Wayne, Ind./Bishop Luers
2	Jordan Sibert	G	6-4/185	So.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Princeton
3	Shannon Scott	G	6-1/180	Fr.	Alpharetta, Ga./Milton
4	Aaron Craft	G	6-2/190	So.	Findlay, Ohio/Liberty-Benton
12	Sam Thompson	F	6-7/190	Fr.	Chicago, Ill./Whitney Young
14	Alex Rogers	G	6-2/195	Jr.	Cincinnati, Ohio/Christian Bros. Univ.
15	J.D. Weatherspoon	F	6-6/215	So.	Columbus, Ohio/Northland
23	Amir Williams	C	6-11/220	Fr.	Birmingham, Mich./Detroit Country Day
30	Evan Ravenel	F	6-8/260	Jr.	Tampa, Fla./Boston College
32	Lenzelle Smith Jr.	G	6-4/205	So.	Zion, Ill./Zion-Benton
44	William Buford	G/F	6-6/220	Sr.	Toledo, Ohio/Libbey
55	Trey McDonald	C	6-8/225	Fr.	Battle Creek, Mich./Central

Head Coach – Thad Matta (Butler, 1990).
Associate Head Coaches – Dave Dickerson (Maryland, 1990). **Assistant Coaches** – Jeff Boals (Ohio, 1995); Chris Jent (Ohio State, 2006). **Director of Basketball Operations** – David Egelhoff (Ohio State, 2001). **Video Coordinator** – Greg Paulus (Duke, 2009). **Athletic Trainer** – Vince O'Brien (Ohio State, 1991). **Associate Strength & Conditioning Coach** – Dave Richardson (Louisiana-Monroe, 1989).

Regular Season Schedule:
Nov. 6 WALSH (Exhibition), 2 p.m.; **11** WRIGHT STATE, 9 p.m.; **15** FLORIDA, 8 p.m.; **18** JACKSON STATE, 9 p.m.; **21** NORTH FLORIDA, 8:30 p.m.; **23** VMI, 7 p.m.; **25** VALPARAISO, 6:30 p.m.; **29** DUKE, 9:30 p.m.
Dec. 3 TEXAS-PAN AMERICA, 9:30 p.m.; **10** at Kansas, 3:15 p.m.; **14** SOUTH CAROLINA-UPSTATE, 7:30 p.m.; **17** at South Carolina, Noon; **20** LAMAR, 8:30 p.m.; **22** MIAMI (OHIO), 8:30 p.m.; **28** NORTHWESTERN, 5:30 p.m.; **31** at Indiana.
Jan. 3 NEBRASKA, 5:30 p.m.; **7** at Iowa, 3 p.m.; **10** at Illinois, 9 p.m.; **15** INDIANA, TBA; **21** at Nebraska, 8 p.m.; **25** PENN STATE, 6:30 p.m.; **29** MICHIGAN, 1 p.m.
Feb. 4 at Wisconsin, 2 p.m.; **7** PURDUE, 9 p.m.; **11** MICHIGAN STATE, 6 p.m.; **14** at Minnesota, 9 p.m.; **18** at Michigan, 9 p.m.; **21** ILLINOIS, 7 p.m.; **25 or 26** WISCONSIN, TBA; **29** at Northwestern, 8:30 p.m.
March 4 at Michigan State, TBA; **8-11** Big Ten Tournament at Indianapolis.

Though his weakness is considered to be his jump shot, Scott's better-than-average on-ball defending skills could make it easier for the staff to have him on the floor with Craft, who spent all of his freshman season locking down opposing point guards.

"(Shannon) has done a great job in the offseason working on his jump shot," Boals said. "With other guys demanding a lot of attention on the floor, he is going to get wide-open jump shots, and it will be critical for him to knock those down. And, of course, we are going to need him to step up defensively."

Lenzelle Smith Jr., 6-4, 205, Soph. (1.2 ppg, 0.8 rpg, 4.6 minutes per game) – Labeled a player who was going to come in as a freshman and push for playing time at point guard, Smith instead was sidelined for a good portion of last season after enduring a wrist injury that needed surgery.

Appearing in only 20 games, Smith's playing time was typically limited to mop-up duty, but that could change this year as the Buckeyes continue to have open competition in practice for the shooting guard spot.

A three-star prospect, Smith was ranked the nation's No. 24 point guard in the 2010 class and is also viewed by the staff as the pure point guard type. However, his ability

to knock down shots from long range could make him an ideal candidate for playing time at shooting guard.

As a senior in high school, he averaged roughly 20 points and eight rebounds per contest at Zion (Ill.) Zion-Benton and garnered first-team all-state honors. As a sophomore, he led his team to the state title game, averaging 13.6 points and 7.2 rebounds per contest.



Lenzelle Smith Jr.

Jordan Sibert, 6-4, 185, Soph. (2.1 ppg, 1.0 rpg, 8.3 mpg) – Assuming Craft playing at shooting guard is one option for Matta and not the primary set for his Buckeyes, Ohio State will be searching for a consistent two-guard to replace the sharpshooting Diebler.

That won't necessarily be an easy task for any one person given that Diebler rarely left the floor and was the Big Ten's most prolific shooter from beyond the arc a year ago, but Sibert envisions shooting for that goal is how he can find his way onto the floor.

"My goal is not to necessarily fill Jon Diebler's shoes, but I want to be that next shooter," he said. "I want to be the next shooting guard coming up. I have put in a tremendous amount of time in the spring and in the summer, and I think I have earned the respect of my teammates and I think that's a good role I can fit into."

Sibert admitted he has a lot of growing to do defensively, while the coaching staff has stressed a need for him to be able to dictate where opposing offensive playmakers move.

The offense, however, will be there when he is ready to make the transition into a steady contributor, whether that means off the bench or in the starting lineup. As a senior at Cincinnati Princeton, Sibert was a first-team all-state player who averaged 18.7 points per game. Known as an excellent spot-up shooter, he feels that he learned enough from Diebler a year ago to help replace him.

"It is a mind-set, and being behind Jon I learned a lot," Sibert said. "To be a great shooter, you have to perform and act like one. You can't take a shot off, you can't take a play off, and you have to work constantly to be that guy."

It's hard to imagine Sibert could garner a lot of playing time and even separate himself from Smith if Matta isn't completely comfortable with the sophomore's defense. However, Sibert's ability as a scorer could lead to an array of different lineups early in the season with various looks that include both Smith and Sibert on the floor at different times.

Alex Rogers, 6-2, 195, Jr. – Ohio State added Rogers as a walk-on after he transferred from Christian Brothers University in Memphis. Rogers, who attended high school at Cincinnati Oak Hills, started 34 of the last 55 games he played at Christian Brothers before completing the transfer. He averaged 5.1 points per game last season.

Rogers is permitted to practice with the team this year but will not be eligible for competition with the Buckeyes until 2012-13.

Forward

Deshaun Thomas, 6-7, 225, Soph. (7.5 ppg, 3.5 rpg, 47.9 shooting pct.) – Thomas seemingly never met a shot he didn't like during his freshman season, so Matta introduced him to the bench.

Perhaps that's why the statistics don't quite tell the story of what Thomas is capable of doing offensively, though he did take opportunities as a freshman to provide the Buckeyes with scoring bursts that led to wins.

Expected to make the jump to the starting lineup this year, his minutes are going to dramatically increase, which should in turn translate into the sophomore becoming one of the leading scorers for the Buckeyes.

Playing his high school basketball for Fort Wayne (Ind.) Bishop Luers, Thomas was concerned only with scoring, and that mentality led to more than 3,000 points in his prep career and regard as one of the most electrifying recruits in the 2010 class.

But Matta quickly helped Thomas realize there's more to finding success in Big Ten basketball than scoring. The teaching moments have apparently sunk in.

"The most noticeable thing with Deshaun that I've seen is his basketball instincts have gotten quicker," Matta said. "He has a much more natural flow to how he's playing right now and he has a better understanding of what we expect. I think that was the thing that we were kind of on him about last year."

"He's really developed a keen awareness of what the little things in the game of basketball can do for him, be it an extra pass or offensive rebounding position. He's also seeing things better defensively, so I've been extremely pleased probably with him maybe more than anybody with the strides he's made."

Developing the nickname "Thomas the Tank" for a variety of different reasons – most notably because as he himself has said, "You can't stop the tank from shooting" – Thomas' development on the defensive end will play a key factor in Ohio State's matchups.

He has the potential to play small forward or power forward, and the Buckeyes will rely on him to make up for rebounds left by the departures of Dallas Lauderdale and Lighty. Last season, though, Thomas showed in his limited minutes that he was an excellent offensive rebounder, but it was admittedly for a predictable reason.

"If I don't touch it (on offense), I am going to get the rebound and put-back," he said. "That's my mentality and it always has been. I always want the ball in my hands, and sometimes the only way to get it is by grabbing it off the boards. They call me 'Thomas the Tank,' and I wanted to do anything to get in and grab the ball."

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OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL PREVIEW

Sullinger Set To Lead Ohio State's Frontcourt

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Matta doesn't mind what Thomas' approach is as long as it leads to rebounding the basketball and keeping the mentality of a scorer while understanding that not every shot is a good shot.

"This has always been my dream is to be a leader and step up and make big shots and big plays for this team," said Thomas, who shed 10 pounds during the offseason. "My mind-set is always the same, but I am going to take good shots this year. I am going to knock them down, too, but I also have to play within the realm of what we're trying to do."

Evan Ravenel, 6-8, 260, Jr. - Ravenel has been with the program for over a year, and he's finally in a situation where he can contribute after sitting out last season per the NCAA's transfer rules. Ravenel was motivated to move to Ohio State from Boston College prior to the 2010-11 season after Eagles head coach Al Skinner was fired.

Stressing the importance of playing with a group of people he considers family, Ravenel said he fit in from the moment he arrived in Columbus.

"That's one thing this team has always done - they've always made me feel a part of the team," he said. "That's why I like Ohio State so much. Not just as a team, but all of Buckeye Nation and my classmates."

Acknowledging that not being permitted to play made for a tough season, Ravenel now adds much-needed size off the bench for the Buckeyes, and the redshirt junior has the ability to play either center or power forward.

While there's still no role set in stone for Ravenel because the Buckeyes may opt to use sophomore big man Jared Sullinger in a variety of different ways, the main message from the coaching staff has been for the big man to get to the boards.

In the 2009-10 season for Boston College, Ravenel averaged 2.4 rebounds per game despite playing just over 10 minutes per contest. Regardless of where the Buckeyes play him and for how long, he's content just to be back on the court.

"I'm very excited with whatever my role is," he said. "I want to be a great team player and win games. We have a strong winning tradition here and I hate losing. That's one thing Coach Matta says - he wants players who hate to lose, not ones who like to win."

J.D. Weatherspoon, 6-6, 215, Soph. (1.8 ppg, 0.8 rpg, 5.4 mpg) - Having been declared academically ineligible for the winter quarter, Weatherspoon contributed a minimal amount in his freshman season, though he did show signs of incredible athleticism in the short time he was on the floor - 10 early-season games in November and December.

Since returning to the team during the NCAA Tournament once he regained his eligibility for spring quarter, Weatherspoon said his life has been smooth sailing, both on the court and off it.

"It was a minor setback for a major comeback," he said. "Everything is really good right now. I have taken care of all my classes - no math, which was the biggest problem - and everything is going well. I can concentrate on basketball and not worry about not being in a good place with my academics."

True to Matta's form, Weatherspoon likely won't find a major role if it isn't earned defensively. The sophomore said the coaches have communicated to him that they'd like him to take a Lighty-like role, and he has



SONNY BROCKWAY

READY FOR ACTION - Boston College transfer Evan Ravenel is eligible to play this season and will add depth to the Ohio State frontcourt.

been preparing himself accordingly.

"Helping out the team with a lot of rebounds, by grabbing all the rebounds I can on both ends of the floor and stopping the other team's best guy, that's what they want me to do," Weatherspoon said. "They want me to guard the one through four positions and even the five if they need me to. That's not easy, but I am working toward that."

"I feel like I am so athletic that I can guard just about anybody. Coach Matta told me my athleticism is my God-given talent and you can't take that away and that I should use that to my advantage."

Averaging 13.5 points and 6.0 rebounds per game during his senior season at Columbus Northland, Weatherspoon acknowledged he has worked on his shot all summer and supplementing the offense when he's on the floor is a must.

Though Lighty is best remembered as a defensive specialist, Weatherspoon understands the former Buckeye also offered boosts on offense countless times during the course of his career.

But Matta said Weatherspoon is very aware of how he'll get into games.

"I think J.D. has learned maturity," the OSU coach said. "He's got a very good work ethic about him. His maturity level has improved. He's a very, very good athlete, and from that perspective he's understanding what his role is going to be on this team. What he needs to do is defend and rebound for us."

Sam Thompson, 6-7, 190, Fr. - A tall, athletic wing who scores naturally and gets to the basket in a flash, Thompson has often drawn comparisons to fellow Chicago native Turner.

If comparisons to Turner - arguably one of the best players in the history of the program - weren't enough to draw excitement from Buckeye fans, comments made Oct. 27 by Matta at Big Ten Media Days certainly did the trick.

"(Sam is) probably the best athlete that I've ever coached," Matta said. "He's a tre-

mendous kid and doing all the things he needs to do to contribute for this basketball team. I've been very pleased with his ability to shoot the ball."

Though there's no telling just how much the freshman will contribute in his first year, the versatility to play multiple positions - even guard if need be - could work in Thompson's favor.

After averaging 17.6 points, 8.7 rebounds, 5.5 assists, 3.3 blocks and 2.0 steals per game in his senior season at Whitney Young, Thompson comes to Ohio State ready to contribute in any way he's needed. He led his high school team to a state championship in 2009 and a runner-up finish in 2010.

Center

Jared Sullinger, 6-9, 280, Soph. (17.2 ppg, 10.2 rpg, 54.1 shooting pct., 31.7 mpg) - Despite losing game-altering talent when Lighty, Diebler and Lauderdale graduated, the return of Sullinger has kept Ohio State in the conversation for best team in college basketball.

Turning his back on what certainly would have been a lottery pick in last summer's NBA draft, Sullinger instead opted to work vigorously on his body during the offseason after keeping a promise to Matta that he'd be at least a two-year player.

"Jared had told me a year ago that he was going to be here for at least two years," Matta said. "And so there was no shock and awe in my mind when he announced that he was coming back."

Perhaps there was more gratitude on the part of Matta, who unlike any other coach in college basketball has become accustomed to losing one-and-done talent over the years.

Now having the primary piece around which to build his team, the coach has raved about the reigning Big Ten Freshman of the Year and the improvements Sullinger has made to his body.

Over the summer, Sullinger dropped 25 pounds and lowered his body-fat percentage from 16.7 to 12.1, giving him a newfound agility that could have him in a position to be more versatile on the floor. Playing power forward or away from the basket could be a real possibility for the sophomore.

"I took working out seriously," Sullinger said. "This season is going to be a totally different type of game. We're more athletic, we're faster as a basketball team and we have to play up to speed with Coach Matta telling me he wants me to play the four and five (positions). I have to be able to be ready to guard the four and be able to shoot the open shot and even be able to handle the ball more."

The expansion of Sullinger's game has to be bad news for other teams in the Big Ten since coming up with ways to defend the big man during his freshman season left most opposing coaches lost for ideas.

"They beat us by 25 at their place last year," Purdue head coach Matt Painter said. "It could have been 45 because they called off the dogs. And I really had no game plan because I don't know how to stop Jared Sullinger."

Sullinger has been named the preseason Big Ten Player of the Year - the first Buckeye to earn the honor since Scoonie Penn in 1999.

"The biggest improvement is the quickness of my feet this year," Sullinger said. "I am moving a lot quicker, getting off the floor a lot faster and that's going to help my game elevate to the next level."

Ranked No. 3 in the nation in the preseason USA Today coaches' poll, Ohio State will rely on Sullinger to create scoring opportunities and rebound at will while creating difficult mismatches for opponents. And while earning preseason plaudits is nice, Sullinger is still out to prove something on the floor.

"As far as Coach Matta talks about it, preseason doesn't mean a thing to what we are trying to do," Sullinger said. "We're thinking about March and trying to make it to the Final Four the first week of April."

Amir Williams, 6-11, 220, Fr. - Sullinger's new versatility could mean an expanded role for Williams, who has reportedly added 25 pounds of muscle to his frame despite missing the first five weeks of conditioning while getting his high school academics in order.

Coaches have been impressed with Williams' ability to jump, which could help Ohio State immensely on defense when combined with his 6-11 frame.

Sullinger, however, has been most impressed with the freshman's dedication in the weight room.

"The last five weeks, he really changed his body," Sullinger said. "He put on some weight, got faster, and is able to run longer than he used to. He just has to be ready to bang in the Big Ten. It's a physical conference and if you're not ready to bang, you might as well get out of the Big Ten."

After averaging 18 points, 12.6 rebounds and nearly 5.0 blocks per game during his senior season at Detroit Country Day, Williams was third in the Michigan Mr. Basketball voting and earned McDonald's All-America accolades.

"The thing we see with Amir is every day he gets better," Matta said. "And with his size, he's getting a sense of urgency to how he's playing. I think that's been an excellent thing for him."

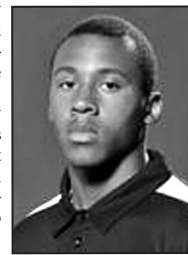
"Going against Evan and Jared every day has really heightened his awareness to what level he has to compete."

Trey McDonald, 6-9, 225, Fr. - In his senior season at Battle Creek (Mich.) Central, McDonald earned all-conference and all-city honors and was named his team's most valuable player.

With the keen ability to rebound the basketball, McDonald's ability to knock down 15-foot jumpers could give Matta options in creating mismatches for opposing defenses. Though McDonald could be used at power forward, it's likely the Buckeyes will stick with him at center because he needs work on his ball-handling skills.

Getting on the floor as a freshman at center could be tough for McDonald given the competition at that position, but Matta said he has done what he can to effectively compete.

"The strides he's made from the beginning of preseason practice to now have been amazing," the coach said. "I give Trey a lot of credit. Whatever you ask him to do, he does. He wants to be a guy that can contribute to this program."



Trey McDonald

OHIO STATE MEN'S BASKETBALL PREVIEW

Matta Counting On Youth To Win This Season

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Thad Matta tried to find a way to sum up an entire summer's worth of strategizing with one simple answer when asked how he planned to replace three senior starters from last year's team.

It wasn't a surprise when he couldn't do it.

"How much time do we have?" Matta asked, only slightly joking.

Three integral parts of what helped Ohio State achieve a 34-3 overall record and a second consecutive Sweet 16 berth in the NCAA Tournament – David Lighty, Jon Diebler and Dallas Lauderdale – are all gone from this year's roster.

Senior William Buford and sophomores Jared Sullinger and Aaron Craft return, which should certainly help ease the aforementioned losses given that each player had an integral role in helping the Buckeyes achieve great success a year ago.

But everyone else on the roster is a freshman, sophomore or a junior transfer who sat out last season, meaning all share the common trait of inexperience.

"We are such a unique team with one senior and a junior who has never played for us," Matta said. "Then you get to the sophomore class (with Sullinger) and there stands a college All-American."

The return of Sullinger instantly makes Ohio State one of the teams to watch nationally. The Buckeyes have been widely considered a top-five squad and the favorite to win the Big Ten championship in most preseason publications.

But that sets up an astronomical challenge for Matta, who faces a task that resembles one he has long considered to be the hardest coaching obstacle he's encountered in his career.

"One of the toughest years I have had in coaching (was the year after the team made its 2007 Final Four run)," Matta said. "We had won 35 games and the next year, in some ways looking back on it, we had a group of guys that felt an entitlement to win. We have addressed that with these guys so they have an understanding that the work must be put in."

Following the 2006-07 season during which the Buckeyes advanced all the way to the NCAA Tournament championship game, the team finished 24-13 and in fifth place of the Big Ten standings. The season culminated in an NIT championship, but the 13 losses stand as the most ever by a Matta-coached team in his 11-year career.

"I think (the sense of entitlement is) one of the biggest obstacles we're going to have to overcome," Matta said. "There must be a level of maturity, a level of intensity in everything that we do and knowing that it is going to be a challenge. They have to learn to accept the challenge and attack the challenge."

Yet to even come to a projected starting five, Matta does know that whatever lineup trots onto the court in the season opener Nov. 11 against Wright State will encompass players who haven't played major roles on his team.

Because of that, the coach isn't quite sure this year's team is currently ready to make the run many feel is inevitable.

"I don't think today we are ready defensively," Matta said Oct. 13. "We're going to have to be much sounder defensively than we were last year because there were

so many interchangeable parts of what we were doing. That's something that has to transpire and transpire quickly because the season is here already."

Matta has long been known for being a defensive-minded coach, so youthful players at Ohio State know getting onto the floor early in their careers is directly contingent on how well they can adapt to the college game defensively.

Perhaps that's the reason freshman point guard Shannon Scott is projected to be a primary piece in the game plan. Matta and assistant Jeff Boals have both raved about how quickly he's picked up the defensive scheme.

The son of former North Carolina and NBA great Charlie Scott, the freshman point guard's biggest weakness is considered to be his outside jumper. But sporting defensive prowess could allow the Buckeyes to slide him in on the ball while shifting Craft to the two-guard. Scott is a quick distributor who doesn't necessarily have to rely on scoring when on offense.

Comparisons have been made early to the 2007 team that employed a similar attack with Jamar Butler and Mike Conley Jr. on the floor, but that set will likely be just one of many options Ohio State has while figuring youth into the plans.

"It wouldn't be hard to have both Scott and Craft on the floor because of what I have seen defensively from both of them," Matta said. "I think they could collectively create a lot of havoc out there."

But with Scott off the floor, one of the major concerns Matta will face is who will play off the ball at shooting guard while Craft is running the point. At this point, the coach admitted he has no idea how that situation will turn out.

Though Buford most certainly can take the reins at shooting guard, sophomores Jordan Sibert and Lenzelle Smith Jr. could both be relied upon if Matta prefers to play Buford solely at small forward.

Considered to be almost a lock at the position before the season, LaQuinton Ross instead was ruled ineligible, and the 6-8, 195-pound wing has returned to Jackson, Miss., to work on his grades.

That leaves Sibert and Smith in competition for the spot. Both showed glimpses of effectiveness in limited roles a year ago. The 6-4, 185-pound Sibert doesn't sport the same wingspan as Smith (6-4, 205) but is viewed as a more natural scorer.

Matta's bench, typically known in the past for being incredibly short, could be used more than ever, starting with featuring both sophomore guards.

"We are expecting to use the bench more this year because we have a lot of good players even though they haven't shown it in a game yet," sophomore forward Deshaun Thomas said. "We have no idea what the rotation is going to be, but in practice we can see that everyone is capable of making plays. The competition in practice has been great, and that will only make us better as a team."

Who will likely make up for bigger portions of the rotation will be players who can most effectively resemble what Lighty brought the last five seasons. Though there are no players on the team who can effectively guard all five positions on the floor as Lighty did, Matta said he's challenged the

team to be more aggressive on the defensive end.

Thomas will be counted on to pick up the scoring slack left by the 24.7 points per game Diebler and Lighty combined to account for last year, but the 6-7, 225-pound sophomore's ability to defend will be integral in ensuring the Buckeyes don't face matchup problems regardless of whether he's playing small forward or power forward.

Sophomore J.D. Weatherspoon could also be called on at forward after showing glimpses of rebounding ability in limited time as a freshman.

"The coaches have told me they want me to be like David Lighty," Weatherspoon said. "I know that's what I have to do to get on the court so I am going to do the best that I can to play hard and good defense."

The Buckeyes return their best rebounder in Sullinger, but the loss of Lighty will put the onus on the entire team – guards included – to make up for his lost presence on the boards.

With Sullinger back, Ohio State has perhaps the deepest roster of big men it's had in the Matta era with such players as junior transfer Evan Ravenel as well as freshmen Amir Williams and Trey McDonald coming off the bench.

"All of us have been working very hard on defense and rebounding," Ravenel said. "We know what our roles are going to be on the team. We are playing with one of the

best big men in the country, but Jared can't do it all. We need to make plays, too."

With talk that Sullinger could spend some time at power forward, which could underline his ability to shoot and play away from the basket, Williams could be called upon early for playing time at center.

Despite missing the first five weeks of summer training while getting his academics in order, Williams gained 25 pounds of muscle on his 6-11 frame during Ohio State's summer conditioning program and is listed as 220 pounds on the roster.

The intriguing part about his game comes from early impressions he's left in practice, showing unmatched ability in his vertical jump, which leads to more rebound proficiency and blocked shots.

"(Amir) has the ability to challenge shots around the basket," Matta said. "He has rebounded the ball well, and the biggest thing is he has had a great work ethic to get better."

Matta believes he has the puzzle pieces to put together a team that moves through the Sweet 16 and advances deeper into the tournament, but the youth is what is standing in the way of the coach setting even bigger goals. Team members, however, don't doubt their ability to live up to the preseason hype.

"We have the talent," Sullinger said. "Now it is the simple fact that we have to listen to Coach Matta and understand where he is coming from. We're young, so he has to be on our butts hard this year and it is going to be interesting to see how everything turns out."



Thad Matta

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