

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL PROFILE

Learning From Stars Has Helped Freeman

By MIKE WACHSMAN

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

There have been a lot of changes in the two years Marcus Freeman has been on the Ohio State campus.

The now-sophomore linebacker has changed his look, his jersey number and, if spring football is a true indication, his prospects for playing time.

A little bit of experience goes a long way, and Freeman made a serious push at getting on the field during the Buckeyes' spring drills.

"He's always been a heck of an athlete," OSU coach Jim Tressel said. "But he's got more and more and more reps now. I see him in there studying extra with Bobby (Carpenter) and A.J. (Hawk) and those guys, and I see him in that weight room a little extra bit like those guys are at the crack of dawn and stuff. I thought Marcus made excellent strides."

Hawk is the anchor for a unit many are calling the nation's best linebacking corps, and even he has seen how much Freeman has grown as a player.

"We have a lot of confidence in Marcus," Hawk said. "I'm sure that he can play. He came in early after his senior year in high school, so we don't consider him to be a young guy anymore. I think we have a lot of depth at linebacker, and whoever's in there we have confidence in."

That confidence has been built up by veterans seeing Freeman doing the little extra things that usually make for a prosperous career.

"I knew what you had to go through to become a better player," Freeman said. "You have to watch a lot more film and pay attention. I knew A.J. and Bobby had played a lot, so I just followed them and asked them some things. They helped me to become a better player."

cial teams after reporting to drills out of shape. Freeman said he weighed roughly 260 pounds when he got to Columbus and worked feverishly to take off the extra poundage.

He tipped the scales around 220 for much of the season, and that wasn't enough to stand up to the physical style of play in the Big Ten.

Now a chiseled 240 pounds, Freeman feels ready to take the next step.

"I've grown a lot as a player," Freeman said. "I know the system a lot more and I'm comfortable in it and can run around more and make plays. I'm also in better condition. Last year I was young and didn't know a lot about what they wanted me to do, but now I understand things."

"I'm just going to do the best I can do and let whatever is going to happen, happen. If I get on the field more, that's great."

Freeman finished his freshman campaign with just four tackles, quite a reality check for someone who was used to being all over the field as a prepster.

Teammates praised Freeman as being one of the first to arrive and one of the last to leave during offseason sessions, and that as much as anything could determine how his season goes.

"Marcus has definitely worked hard," classmate and fellow linebacker Curtis Terry said. "He's going to everything with the seniors, working hard in the weight room, studying film. He did a great job this spring."



FILE PHOTO

SEVENTEEN NO MORE — Sophomore-to-be Marcus Freeman got a taste of action last year as a freshman, and the 2005 season figures to be one in which he will gain even more experience while wearing a new jersey number.

If At First You Don't Succeed

Freeman reported to Ohio State last January after graduating early from Huber Heights (Ohio) Wayne and was expected to make the field in 2004.

But he was relegated mostly to spe-

Freeman admitted his head was spinning at the amount of information he had to process, but he's now getting more comfortable with the mental part of the game.

And that should lead to success.

"Marcus is a talented kid," defensive end Jay Richardson said. "He came in with high expectations and had a little bit of a rough start mentally. It's more of a mental thing than anything else, and as you get older you understand the defense more. That allows you to make plays. He's going to help us a lot."

With no more information overload, Freeman can simply concentrate on doing what he does best — making tackles.

"I can just go out there and play and have fun with the game," said Freeman, who got the majority of his work this spring on the strong side. "I'm not worrying about things now. I can just play because I know what I'm doing."

Taking The Next Step

Because of injuries to middle men Anthony Schlegel and Mike D'Andrea, the Buckeyes moved Carpenter inside for much of this spring. That allowed Freeman to get some prep time with the first unit, which he found beneficial.

"I can run with the ones, and that was good for me," Freeman said. "It let me see what they're going through. I'm ready for my day. Bobby's a great player, A.J.'s a great player, Schlegs is a great player. I'm just trying to bond in with them."

The way Freeman has played this spring has allowed the coaches to come up with a few interesting scenarios.

One would be to tinker with a 3-4 look, which would allow Freeman to use his speed to flow to the ball or drop back into coverage.

Freeman admits that prospect makes his eyes light up.

"In practice we've done a little 3-4," Freeman said. "We all have to be ready because you don't know what they'll do."

There's still a bit of a learning curve for Freeman, but he feels the spring was a productive one for him and the Buckeyes defense.

"There's a lot of stuff I have to improve, a lot of little things," Freeman said. "Overall I did OK. I still have to work to get better. We have a really good defense, in my opinion."

For those who have been keeping track, Freeman has dropped weight, picked up experience and become someone who seems ready for action.

Oh, yeah — that little thing about the number.

Freeman went from 17 in 2004 to 1 this spring, and he definitely was the one at linebacker for much of those drills.

The reason for the switch was fairly simple.

"Me and Todd (Boeckman) were both 17, Todd's a great player and I'm not a big fan of doubling up on a number," Freeman said. "I saw 1 was coming open and I'm just trying to make a name for myself with number 1."

If spring was a precursor, then that number seems to be appropriate.

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL PROFILE

Junior LB Has A Big Decision To Make

By CRAIG MERZ
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Contributor

Marcus Freeman still has a bowl game to play, but he knows a decision on his future at Ohio State is forthcoming.

Certainly the junior outside linebacker's credentials – including being 10th nationally in tackles – warrant a serious look by NFL teams. But his stock in the draft could vary as widely as the weather in Columbus. In other words, warm one day and cool the next.

For now, Freeman says he is leaning toward returning to the Buckeyes in 2007, but of course college football players are like aging boxers who retire seven or eight times – never say never.

"I love Ohio State, and I believe I'll be here for a while longer," he said in the days leading up to the Michigan game. "Right after that game, you start considering it, but I picture nothing but playing another season here. That's all I've been concentrating on and what I plan to do."

Obviously, if it appears that big money could come his way by entering the NFL draft in April, Freeman's stance could change. Or staying another season at Ohio State could improve his standing and ultimately reward him with a bigger contract.

It is coming down to crunch time for Freeman, who will turn 22 on Jan. 10 and has a young daughter.

"I remember talking to my dad," he said. "He said that's the one thing I don't want you to put into consideration – taking care of your family because that's why your father is here.

Her mother has a job and she'll be taken care of. So that's definitely not a consideration to go pro or being here next year."

There's no doubt head coach Jim Tressel and his staff would love to have another season to watch Freeman develop.

Although he enrolled at Ohio State early out of Wayne High School in Huber Heights near Dayton and appeared in 12 games as a freshman in 2004, he lost nearly the entire following season as a medical redshirt. Freeman played in the 2005 season opener but suffered a knee injury and had arthroscopic surgery. A staph infection developed thereafter, and by the time he had recovered later in the season it was decided he should take the redshirt.

Freeman returned with a vengeance in 2006 and was the team's third-leading tackler with 71, including 15 in the national title game loss to Florida. That meant the expectations for him were raised going into this season.

"I think Marcus Freeman is a guy who stands out to me. Sometimes you see a guy who you feel like the light's come on, and he's excited about this year," defensive coordinator Jim Heacock said prior to the season. "I think he had a good offseason and really focused on becoming a good football player."

The coach was right. Freeman was OSU's defensive attack force player of the week against Northwestern after carrying the bulk of the workload at his position when sophomore Ross Homan was injured.

"Marcus was kind of thrust into a situation where he was going to play more than normal," Tressel said. "Normally he and Ross Homan kind of shared time and they were each sharing 30 snaps or so, and Marcus ended up taking the

bulk of the work.

"But Marcus took advantage of that, got more snaps, more reps, more production. I really thought he flew around the field, and that was the best I've seen Marcus play."

The following week, Freeman was the team's defensive player of the week vs. Minnesota with 11 tackles, including seven solos, and repeated as the attack force winner in the win at Purdue when he had seven stops, including six unassisted.

Afterward, Purdue head coach Joe Tiller said the linebacker trio of Freeman, Larry Grant and James Laurinaitis was "the best I've seen in a long, long time. We thought we'd be able to throw the ball underneath better than we did. We didn't because their linebackers are so darn fast and really helped in the coverage."

Freeman was also the team's defensive player of the week against Penn State.

His on-field exploits are well-documented, but Freeman made it a point this season as a fourth-year junior to become a leader.

"Coach Tressel told us, 'You guys are going to have to step up and help the few seniors we do have lead this team.'" Freeman said of himself and the team's other fourth-year juniors. "That's something we have accepted."

Although Laurinaitis was elected the defensive captain for the season, a second player from the defense is named captain for each game. Freeman was selected for the Akron, Kent State and Wisconsin games.

"I think our leadership has come with the belief that some of those fourth-year guys and third-year starters really feel like they need to contribute to that leadership," Tressel said.

Playing for the Buckeyes is a dream come true for Freeman.

"I'm only an hour away, my father's from Columbus, and I've always been an Ohio State fan," he said. "Even in recruiting you look at other schools, but no matter what I was going to be a Buckeye fan. I kind of knew in the back of my head if I had a chance this is where I would end up. My top three (choices) were Michigan, Notre Dame and Ohio State was No. 1.

"I remember being recruited at Notre Dame by Coach (Tyrone) Willingham. I was really impressed by him and the tradition there. And even Michigan, even though it's such a great rivalry, they have tradition there. They always



JOSH WINSLOW

STAY OR GO? – Marcus Freeman is one of several juniors on the Ohio State team who will face a decision soon on whether to return for their senior season in 2008 or jump to the NFL. Freeman said before the Nov. 17 game with Michigan that he plans to return.

have great teams. It's something I considered when being recruited. It wouldn't have fit for me being from Ohio, though. My love for college football was always here. I'm glad I'm here."

Getting a chance to play against Michigan has also been a thrill.

"As a kid you hear about this rivalry and you get to be a part of it – that's something not many people get to do," he said. "It's something you never forget.

"I remember the '97 game when Charles Woodson had the punt (return) touchdown because he was such a huge name that year. I remember seeing him do pretty good against Ohio State.

"The biggest game I remember is the '03 game. I hadn't committed yet and I was still a huge fan (of Ohio State). I knew they had a chance to go to the national championship if they won that game. Watching that, I think I fell asleep right after halftime. I woke up. It was a close game and Michigan ended up winning. It shows the rivalry and the tradition of this game."

One of those traditions is receiving the gold pants pendant for defeating Michigan.

"I thought you got a real pair – a big pair of gold pants," Freeman said with a smile. "I didn't know what it was. When I got here in '04, we won my first pair of gold pants. I found out it was a little charm – then you hear the story about it and then you realize the true significance of winning those gold pants. It's a huge accomplishment.

"My first pair I gave to my mother. The second pair I gave to my father and the third pair I gave to my brother."

As Freeman reflects on his career at Ohio State, he said fellow linebacker Grant has been a major influence but he reserves the most praise for one person.

"It starts with the head man," he said. "You learn so many core values from Coach Tressel – not just about football but manhood. When you first get to college, you're still an 18-year-old kid, and when you leave college you're a 21-, 22-year-old man. He's taught me a lot about growing up and about life."

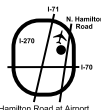
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"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

January 19, 2008



JOSH WINSLOW

ONE MORE YEAR – Ohio State fans breathed a collective sigh of relief Jan. 14 when linebacker James Laurinaitis announced he would return in 2008 for his senior season. Only defensive end Vernon Gholston decided to leave school early for the NFL, giving the Buckeyes a chance for their fourth straight Big Ten championship and third consecutive national title game appearance.

One More Run

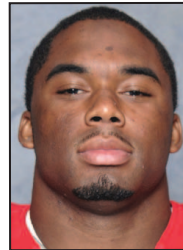
Most Key Juniors Decide To Remain; Gholston Chooses To Leave Early

By **ADAM JARDY**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Thirteen might be the new lucky number for Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel. At the team's bowl media day in Columbus on Dec. 13, Tressel told reporters that 13 of his players had submitted paperwork to the NFL to inquire about their draft status. Although the number seemed a bit high, the fact that the coach was encouraging his younger players to explore their options was no surprise.

The surprise, this time, was in the fact that of the 13 players to file their paperwork, all but one, defensive lineman Vernon Gholston, will be returning for another season in scarlet and gray.

Suddenly, a third consecutive trip to the BCS National Championship Game does not seem like a far-fetched proposition. The final announcement filtered in the evening of Jan. 14 when Butkus Award winner and Big Ten defensive player of the year James Laurinaitis announced that he would put off the NFL draft and millions of dollars for one final go-round with his teammates.



Vernon Gholston

"There are a lot of things that money can't buy, and some of those things are the experiences of a senior season," Laurinaitis said in a statement. "Going through those things with my teammates next year is what I look forward to the most."

Laurinaitis' announcement capped a one-week period following OSU's loss to LSU in the national championship game that saw five of the six players projected as having the potential to leave early instead opt to return to Columbus.

Last year, the Buckeyes lost three of four juniors considering leaving early. Kirk Barton opted to return while Anthony Gonzalez, Ted Ginn Jr. and Antonio Pittman did not. Add to that the fact that the men's basketball team lost three freshmen to the NBA after just one season in Columbus and a pretty clear picture was being painted.

Namely, that few would come back to OSU given the opportunity to jump to the pros and cash in on the success enjoyed in college.

This time, though, a funny thing happened on the way to becoming a millionaire. Staring down all they had worked for, a handful of players did something

surprising.

They blinked. And, with the exception of Gholston, they came back.

OSU stood to lose six starters – offensive tackle Alex Boone, defensive back Malcolm Jenkins, linebackers Marcus Freeman and Laurinaitis, wide receiver Brian Robiskie and Gholston.

First to return was Robiskie, who entered the season as OSU's No. 1 wide receiver and finished with 55 catches for 935 yards and 11 touchdowns and made it clear Jan. 10 he would be returning for his senior season.

Next was Jenkins, a first-team All-Big Ten selection. The university issued a press release Jan. 11 stating that the native of Piscataway, N.J., would be returning for his senior season.

Less than an hour later, a release came across announcing that Gholston would head to the NFL, leaving three more early-departure candidates still undecided.

An article appeared in the Dayton Daily News the following morning stating that Freeman would be returning for one more season, and that news was followed up later that afternoon when Boone announced on a local Columbus

TV program that he, too, would be coming back.

Add it all up, and the Buckeyes could be in the driver's seat for another run to the title game. If that happens, it may have all started in early January with a commitment by some of the team's top talent to return, rather than take an early shot at the pros.

For that the Buckeyes have two former players to thank. First is linebacker A.J. Hawk, who opted to return for his senior season and was rewarded by being selected with the fifth pick of the 2006 NFL draft by the Green Bay Packers.

Tight end Rory Nicol, a player who submitted his paperwork but was never rumored to be leaving early, attributed some of Hawk's influence to the decisions being made by his teammates.

"People have fun in college," he said. "College is fun. OK, there's all that money and all those other things, but why did A.J. Hawk come back? Believe me, I know A.J. Hawk and I'm still good friends with him. He came back because he had so much fun in college. That's what he came back for, the people.

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- A profile of OSU tailback Chris "Beanie" Wells (Page 12)

- What columnists from around the country had to say about the BCS National Championship Game (Page 13)

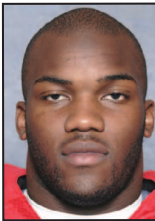
- A look back at the highs and lows of 2007 (Pages 14-17)

- A roundup of the basketball Buckeyes' latest Big Ten contests as well as a profile of freshman swingman Eric Wallace (Pages 18-20)

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Chris Wells

COVER STORY: ONE MORE RUN

Lonely NFL Life May Have Swayed Some

Continued From Page 1

"Yes, there's some stupid things to do that we don't like to do. After a long day we have to go bowling as a team and we don't get in until 9. Yes, there's those types of things, but those are the things you're going to remember. That's the reason why people come back."

In addition, Laurinaitis also said that he planned to talk to Hawk to get his advice on what to do about his senior season.

After Hawk, there is the legacy created by Gonzalez, whose decision to leave early could end up having an even greater long-term effect on the OSU program than his choosing to stay for one more year would have.

One year ago, the senior-to-be held a tearful press conference in the team meeting room at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center and announced his intentions to forgo his final season and head to the NFL. Describing it as the toughest thing he ever had to do in his life, voice wavering, he said the pros of leaving simply outweighed the cons.

Although Gonzalez was a first-round pick by the defending Super Bowl champion Indianapolis Colts and snagged 37 catches for 576 yards and three touchdowns, apparently all was not well for the player dubbed "Gonzo."

"I talk to Anthony Gonzalez all the time, and he talks about how he doesn't have

any friends and it's different in the NFL," Nicol said prior to the team's appearance in the 2008 title game. "Guys go home to their families and etc. He's a single guy, he doesn't have a girlfriend. He's like, 'I live at home by myself.'"

Other teammates seemed to pick up the image of the lonely Gonzo, whiling away his time in the NFL while pining for one more year of college. Regardless of how true that picture might be, it has left an important mark on a group of players in the same position as Gonzalez found himself in one season ago.

"I knew the right decision for me was to follow my heart and figure out what's important to me right now," Laurinaitis said. "That's the decision to remain at Ohio State, have a great senior season and graduate with my degree in communications next year. I am very satisfied with that decision."

But Does It Help?

For Jenkins and Laurinaitis, their decisions to come back were arguably the biggest surprises of them all. A second-team All-American as a junior, Jenkins had been projected as a surefire first-round draft pick should he opt to turn pro after his junior season.

In his mock draft posted Jan. 4, Scout.com's Chris Steuber had pegged Jenkins to be taken seventh in the draft by the New England Patriots. ESPN's Scouts Inc. has listed him as the No. 11 prospect in the



MARK HALL

RETURNING IN '08 – Ohio State linebacker Marcus Freeman (1), shown here in action against Kent State, will return along with fellow standouts James Laurinaitis and Malcolm Jenkins to bolster the Buckeyes on defense in 2008. Freeman finished this past season with 109 tackles, second on the team to Laurinaitis.

country, four spots behind Laurinaitis and two behind Gholston.

But even armed with that knowledge, Jenkins said the same thing Gonzalez had said during his junior season. He appreciated the status that comes with being a senior at OSU and wanted to enjoy that. Unlike Gonzalez, though, Jenkins stuck to his word and came back.

"I have received a lot of good advice from coaches, friends and family and it has boiled down to one message. Figure out what's important to you and follow your heart," Jenkins said in a statement. "I don't feel that I've accomplished everything I can accomplish in college football, and there's still a lot for me to conquer and shoot for – the national championship, another Big Ten championship, the Thorpe Award. And I really look forward to the honors and perks associated with being a senior on this team."

That sentiment was almost to be expected by the emotional leader of the team. After perceiving what he thought was a team more focused on preparing for the NFL than Florida a season ago, Jenkins made sure his teammates were not looking past LSU this time around.

"Nobody's talking about going to the NFL, so we're just making sure we're focused on this game," Jenkins said after learning OSU had been selected to play in the title game. "We brought that up in the preseason amongst the leaders on the team. We knew what happened last year and what was going on. We decided that wasn't going to happen this year. We were going to stay focused and not let outside things influence us."

Each of the team's players claimed not to know what another was thinking about coming or going after the season because it was understood that each player had to do what was best for himself and his family.

Like Jenkins, Laurinaitis was viewed as a certain top-10 pick. The most recent mock draft on Scout had the linebacker going to the Patriots with the No. 7 pick. In his three years at OSU, Laurinaitis has been a two-time consensus All-American and was a finalist for the Lombardi, Nagurski, Lott and Bednarik awards as a junior.

As a sophomore, he took home the Nagurski Award, given annually to the nation's top defensive player, and followed that up by receiving the 2007 Butkus Award as the nation's top linebacker.

But the desire to enjoy his senior season

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COVER STORY: ONE MORE RUN

won out in the end for Laurinaitis, who said he consulted his family, close friends and former players in addition to spending time in prayer to help make his decision.

For different players, doing the best for their families means different things. The case of Laurinaitis, whose father was a famous professional wrestler for years, is different than that of Freeman, who has a 1-year-old daughter he is taking care of.

Before submitting his paperwork to the NFL, however, Freeman said his family had warned him not to let his family situation dictate whether he stayed or left.

"I remember talking to my dad and he said, 'That's the one thing that I don't want you putting in any consideration of, taking care of your family, because that's why your father is here,'" Freeman said. "Her mother has a job and she'll be taken care of. That's definitely not going to be a consideration to go pro."

Still, Freeman reportedly was set to leave in the aftermath of the loss to LSU but changed his mind once again and opted to come back.

"I think any competitor would want to come back and take another shot at this," he said after the game. "I know everybody in this locker room that comes back next year will have that same motivation to get back here and show that we aren't a mediocre team, that we can be the best team in the nation. I think that's going to be fuel for a lot of people."

In Boone's case, perhaps it should not be a surprise that he opted to stick around for another year. After all, it's exactly what his close friend Kirk Barton decided to do one season ago.

The prevailing school of thought is that offensive linemen can only improve their stock with another season of college football. Like Freeman, though, Boone said the loss to LSU made him initially waver on whether he would return for one more season.

In the end, he decided to protect Todd Boeckman's blind side for another year instead of going to the NFL and facing the likelihood of being a second-round pick – a decision Barton endorses.

"Offensive linemen, their stock usually doesn't go down, it usually only goes up with an extra year," Barton said. "It's not like a receiver where a receiver won't get any faster. Offensive linemen get stronger every year, they get better, better footwork."

Gholston Bucks Trend

It was not a funny question, but it still elicited a laugh from Gholston.

Seated at a table surrounded by media members from across the country, the senior-to-be was one of the team's designated spokesmen at the annual Big Ten Media Kickoff Aug. 1 in Chicago. In between fielding questions about the team's lack of senior leadership and hopes of returning to the national championship game, the monstrous defensive end was asked if his junior season was going to be his "money year," a term coined by former OSU wideout Santonio Holmes prior to his junior season.

"A couple of years ago we read a great book by John Maxwell, 'Today Matters,' and that's pretty much how I live my life," he said after an initial laugh. "The things that I do today will affect my future."

The writing was on the wall, then, that a big season would likely serve to springboard him to the next level. Gholston terrorized opposing offenses throughout the season and finished with 15½ tackles for loss, including a school-record 14 sacks. The latter total

broke Mike Vrabel's single-season mark set in 1995.

Gholston capped his Big Ten career with three sacks against Michigan while frequently being matched up against projected top-10 draft pick Jake Long.

In a statement, Gholston said it was simply his time to go.

"I reached this conclusion through strategic meditation with my close family, coaches and teammates," he said. "The decision to enter the 2008 NFL draft will best serve our interests and future."

While in Chicago before the season, Gholston hinted at his family situation playing a role in his decision following the season. When Gholston was just 13, his father passed away after a lengthy battle with multiple sclerosis. As a result, Gholston became a more spiritual person, he said.

From there, the desire was born to not only take care of his mother but also to try to help find a cure for the disease that took his father from him.

"First of all I'm a Christian, so that's going to be, if I have an opportunity, the

biggest place where I can contribute as far as helping people come to Christ," he said. "But I could definitely see myself getting into something like helping with MS funding and things like that. I know it's a disease out there and a cure hasn't been found for it."

Outlook For Next Year

With Laurinaitis' decision, the plethora of talent that is returning for one final season in scarlet and gray should give the Buckeyes as legitimate a chance at challenging for a national title as anyone else.

With Laurinaitis' return, the Buckeyes will be replacing just four starters from the title game in Gholston and departing seniors Barton, linebacker Larry Grant and fullback Dionte Johnson.

They will need all hands on deck early when they head to California to take on USC in the third week of the season for the first installment of a home-and-home series between the perennial powers.

In his release, Jenkins cited that game as one of the reasons he opted to come back for another year.

Laurinaitis cited a sense of unfinished business.

"I know I can still improve as a player, and I know there is still much more for me and for the Buckeyes to accomplish," he said. "My love for this university, my love for the people of the state of Ohio and my love for teammates and friends is so great that I want to stay a Buckeye for another season. You only get to do this once, so I want to take full advantage."

Johnson, the outgoing senior captain, said he feels the team will get back to where it has been the last two years with attitudes like the ones displayed by Laurinaitis and Jenkins.

"I see it in a lot of guys' faces," he said. "I can feel that we're going to be right back here. It's just unfortunate this is my senior year because I want to help lead them again, but at the same time there's a lot of pain in their eyes and their hearts. I believe they'll be back."

If they do get back, they will likely have a one-week period in early January to thank.

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