

2018 Brings Depth to the Zips Front Seven

by Marcel Ulrich • April 26, 2018 • ZipsNation.org

While every NCAA Division 1 football program loses roughly 25% of its roster each season, the established ones don't rebuild, they just reload. Unfortunately for Zips fans, the bulk of their 30+ year Division 1 history has been spent in a perpetual rebuild loop. As the 7th edition of the Terry Bowden-led Zips football team prepares for the 2018 season, nowhere are the benefits of program continuity and growth more evident than on the defensive side of the ball. And the transition from a rebuilding, to reloading unit more apparent.

Flashback to the 2016 season – the Zips defensive line had lofty expectations to build off the previous year's success, where they anchored the MAC's #1 ranked overall defense. But a devastating series of early season injuries to seasoned starters Jamal Marcus, Se'Von Pittman, Deon'Tae Moore and Brock Boxen forced the Zips to finish their season with a cast of inexperienced understudy linemen. The lack of quality defensive depth, coupled with the mid-season loss of starting QB Thomas Woodson (shoulder), turned a promising 4-2 start into a disappointing 1-5 finish.

While the 2018 Zips Football Program is technically only two seasons removed from 2016, when viewed from the standpoint of talent and depth, it seems like a lifetime ago.

One constant in the first six Bowden-era seasons that will not carry over to 2018 is legendary Defensive Coordinator Chuck Amato. A major contributor to the Zips rise to the top of the MAC East, he decided to hang up the whistle in February after 45 years of coaching. He's replaced by former Zips defensive line coach Todd Stroud.

How deep is the Zips defensive line this season? It seemed like a good idea to ask the new Zips defensive coordinator for his thoughts.

"Oh golly...right now we've got a really nice problem because we've got ten kids that we feel good about rolling in at any time," said Stroud. "We have our first four sorted out on the line, but we'll need to figure out who's going to back those guys up."

"Jamal Davis and Brian (Reinke) have been really steady for us at defensive end. Brock (Boxen) and Brennan Williams will play in the core (tackle). Behind those guys we've got three or four tackle candidates that are in the mix, but none of those guys have really separated themselves this spring. Josh Ward is also a senior defensive end that we expect to give us quality depth this upcoming season. He's a very solid player."

But unlike 2016, there is plenty of depth behind the senior linemen, and several impactful newcomers are making some noise.

"Davonte Jest, he returned from Hutchinson (Junior College) this semester. He got a concussion last week, so he was unfortunately out for the spring game. He looks very good. Sophomore DeAndre Brimage, he's a local kid that continues to improve. He's a big 300 pounder...very sturdy, and comes off the ball really well. Then there's Matt Hanson, a redshirt freshman from the Miami area that's probably as talented as any of them. He was listed as a defensive end last season, but he's gone from around 240 to 270 pounds. If he continues to gain a little more weight we might give him a look at the core too."

"Someone that's really come on this spring is Andy Jean-Baptiste. At six four and a half, 268 pounds, he's another one we think will put on a little more size. And then we have two newcomers to the group. Justin Sampson, he's as talented as anyone...he can play end or linebacker...heck, he can probably play at wide receiver. He's that talented. And we have Dylan Meeks from Dr. Phillips HS in Florida. He's just a playmaker."

"Those last six guys I mentioned have multiple seasons left with us. That's really exciting."

"Right now we've got a couple 'hybrid' guys that can help us at both defensive end and on the inside. It'll be interesting to see how that plays-out when fall camp starts. It's a good problem to have."

"We've got a great staff. Marcus Wattley has been doing a nice job with the defensive linemen. He's been outstanding and I've really been impressed with him."

As one would expect, having served alongside Amato at NC State, Florida State and Akron, Stroud said to expect a similar defensive scheme to what Zips fans have seen over the past few seasons. But, with a few new twists. *"You know...we've put in several different wrinkles this spring. There're other things we could have done, but when you have 10 seniors coming back...experienced guys who've been in the system for three full years...most will be very subtle changes when compared to what we've done in the past."*

While not technically a "wrinkle," noticeable defensive changes include new positions for a couple seniors. *"We've moved Brian Bell to 'mike' linebacker, which probably suits his body type a bit more. Ulysses (Gilbert), with his skill set, is a much better cover guy. So depending upon the coverage we're in, you'll probably see him lined up the field a little more against receivers, and playing coverage a little more for us."*

On the topic of linebackers, Stroud seemed pleased with the addition of former UCLA, South Florida and Cincinnati defensive coordinator Joe Tresey to the Zips staff.

"Joe is our new linebacker coach. He was here (Akron) before, in '02 or '03 I think, under Coach Owens. Outstanding coach. Great pedigree. He's been around a while. He's kind of like me...he's coached at every level of football, from the high school level up. Great guy with great energy. And we're kind of on the same page as far as personnel goes."

Stroud added, *"We've moved the pieces around a little bit at the linebacker position. That's where you see the most change from 2017 to 2018. We still need to figure out who the 'will' linebacker is going to be. We have senior DeMarcus Lloyd back (injured in 2017) and James King, another Miami-area kid. They're battling it out for the starter job."*

Is the veteran Stroud excited about becoming a Division 1 Defensive Coordinator? *"It's something that, at my age, you aren't really expecting it to happen at this point in your career. But I've prepared my whole life to do this, so I'm excited at the opportunity for sure. We'll do a great job with the defense this year."*

If defense does indeed win championships, Zips fans should keep their December calendars clear. The Zips defense isn't rebuilt, it's reloaded.



Brian Bell's move inside may have the linebackers pointed in the right direction.



Coach Stroud takes over an experienced defense in 2018.