

# Ohio State football: Work on mat can be edge on line

Buckeyes past, present excelled as wrestlers, too

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BY **KEN GORDON**

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Size doesn't impress Luke Fickell.

Each year, Ohio State's co-defensive coordinator evaluates dozens, maybe hundreds of high school football players while recruiting.

They're all big, all fast, all strong.

But tell Fickell a kid is a standout wrestler, and he'll get a gleam in his eye. Now he's interested.

"We talk about competitiveness, and I don't think there's a better sport to look at someone's competitiveness than wrestling," Fickell said. "You can tell (with wrestlers), it's something that's one-on-one competitive, and that's what we're trying to look for.

"You can't define it. You don't know what someone has got inside their chest and their heart, but if you know they've been one on one and they've got that competitive nature ..."

Fickell knows. He was a three-time state champion wrestler at DeSales, and as a defensive lineman at Ohio State he set a school record for consecutive starts (50).

Since then, several Buckeyes have gone from being high school wrestling stars to successful football careers, including offensive lineman Alex Stepanovich and defensive tackle Tim Anderson, each now in the NFL.

This season, defensive tackle Dexter Larimore appears ready to uphold that tradition.

He was the nation's top-ranked heavyweight wrestler two years ago at Merrillville (Ind.) High School. Just a redshirt freshman, Larimore had a stellar spring and will see extensive playing time this fall.

Technique has a lot to do with what makes wrestlers successful linemen. They are accustomed to being tied up, pretzel-like, with an opponent.

"I know a little bit more about leverage than some defensive linemen do," Larimore said, "so it helps that I can just keep a little bit lower center of gravity. I just try and work guys into kind of backwards positions for them, but it's kind of natural for me."

Offensive coordinator and offensive line coach Jim Bollman said he notices wrestlers tend to be adept at getting their hands in proper position, which is a key to blocking or defeating a block.

"The quickness and strength of their hands inside is becoming a much bigger part of the football game nowadays," Bollman said. "And I think that (wrestlers) have a little bit of a head start."

But as Fickell said, it's the intangible desire that translates well to football. Wrestlers famously have a warrior mentality. Injuries and fatigue are no excuse.

"When you're a wrestler, you have to put a lot on yourself if you want to be good," Stepanovich said. "It teaches you that every day in wrestling you're not going to feel good. You're going to have bumps and bruises. You've got to be able to grind it out. I think that helps in football."

Larimore said he thinks wrestling makes him better equipped to handle adversity, such as the heat and humidity the Buckeyes practiced in last week.

"Wrestling is so hard and just so physically taxing on your body, that I get out there (for football practice) and a lot of guys will mentally break: 'It's hot,' and I just keep working and trying to get better," he said.

"I just can basically push myself to a point where I physically can't go anymore. I think wrestling instills that mentality."

Another wrestler is in the Ohio State pipeline. Defensive tackle Garrett Goebel of Lombard, Ill., recently orally committed to the 2008 recruiting class. He won his state's heavyweight title in the spring.

"My nasty attitude comes from wrestling," Goebel told the *Chicago Sun Times*. "You can't be a nice guy and be an accomplished wrestler. You have to want to stick a guy's nose into the mat."

"In football, I want to hurt the other guy. I want to knock him down all the time."

He sounds like Fickell's type.

*Dispatch reporter Bill Rabinowitz contributed to this story.*

[kgordon@dispatch.com](mailto:kgordon@dispatch.com)