



The Oklahoma football team will have a much different look when it takes the field in 2013. The Sooners will have a drastically revamped defense when the new season begins, but it could also have a much different looking mode offensively.

For the first time since 2008 the Sooners will have someone other than Landry Jones at quarterback. Jones was thrust into action as a freshman in 2009 when Sam Bradford went down due to injury, and he went on to start 50 games over the course of the rest of his career. Jones never passed for fewer than 26 touchdowns in a season from 2009-2012.

ISD talked to John Shinn, who covers the Sooners for The Times Newspaper. Shinn says Blake Bell, who was Jones' backup in 2012, is the odds-on favorite to win the starting job this spring.

"OU hates to name a starter until they absolutely have to," Shinn explained. "All indications are it's him. They keep trying to tell us there's going to be a competition for it, but they went out of their way last year to say Bell was their number two quarterback. They never really had done that before, so that tells all of us that it's his job."

The 6'6", 260 pound Bell has been OU's short yardage and red zone quarterback over the last two seasons. He scored the first rushing touchdown allowed by the Notre Dame defense when the Irish beat the Sooners 30-13 on Oct. 27 last season in Norman.

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Bell rushed for 201 yards and 11 touchdowns last season and has a total of 24 career rushing TDs. The lefty has just 19 career passing attempts for 115 yards in two seasons though, which means OU's traditional air-it-out offense may have a different feel next fall.

"I don't think they're going to throw it 50 times, and they're definitely going to use his legs," Shinn said of what he expects to see from the Oklahoma offense this spring. "He's a lot more than just a lower your shoulder kind of guy. It's kind of retooling your offense to take advantage of an athletic quarterback I would say more than anything."

Other than quarterback, the biggest offensive loss the Sooners will suffer is at left tackle. Last year's starter, Lane Johnson, is currently projected as a first round pick in April's NFL Draft. He is the only starter on the line OU loses though, and there are two options to take his place.

"I'm not sure whether they'll move Tyrus Thompson or Daryl Williams to the left side," Shinn said. "Both of them started at right tackle last year, but you're replacing a first-round pick and those guys don't just grow on trees."

The team's top two leading receivers, Kenny Stills and Justin Brown, are both gone as well. They had 959 yards and 11 touchdowns and 879 yards and five touchdowns, respectively in 2012. Brown was a Penn State transfer.

Defense

The changes Oklahoma will see on offense are nothing compared to the defense. OU must replace eight defensive starters from its 2012 team and, based on performance, Shinn believes that could be a good thing.

"I think their biggest questions are all defensively," Shinn said. "They really fell apart there late in the year. They had to score 50 points to beat West Virginia and Oklahoma State. They really struggled in those areas. Notre Dame lit them up, which was something they weren't expecting

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either. Pretty much from late October on that defense did not play well."

Beginning with the Notre Dame game on Oct. 27, Oklahoma allowed an average of 34.1 points over its last seven games. That included their 41-13 Cotton Bowl loss to former Big 12 rival Texas A&M.

The most sizable losses are up front, where defensive tackles Jamarkus McFarland and Casey Walker and defensive end David King are all gone. Chuka Ndulue is the only returning starting defensive lineman. He led OU with 5.0 sacks last season.

The back end of the defense takes a hit as well. Safety Tony Jefferson (team-high 119 tackles) declared for the NFL Draft after his junior year, strong safety Javon Harris, who led the Sooners with six interceptions and had the second-most tackles with 86, has graduated and cornerback Demontre Hurst must also be replaced. While replacements on the defensive line will likely be on a trial by fire basis during the spring, the secondary has more depth to work with.

"When you play in the Big 12 OU pretty much played with six DBs all the time," Shinn explained. "Two of those guys they used in those situations will be back and they will just move into the base package instead of just in the nickel and dime packages."

Senior cornerback Gabe Lynn (10 starts in 2012) and safety Julian Wilson (two career starts, but 23 games played in 2011 and 2012) are the two Shinn referenced who will give the Sooners back end experience. Cornerback Aaron Colvin is also a "top flight" DB in Shinn's opinion who has 25 career starts under his belt heading into his senior season in Norman.

The Sooners also lose middle linebacker Tom Wort. He was OU's top linebacker in tackles with 53 last season. He played a lot against Notre Dame due to the more traditional style of offense the Irish run, but was not on the field nearly as much against those spread offense opponents in the Big 12.

Shinn says there are indications Oklahoma will switch from a 4-3 to a 3-4 defensive scheme next year. Part of the reason is to make-up for the losses they have on the defensive line and

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another is to take advantage of returning weak side linebacker Corey Nelson's pass rushing ability. Shinn believes Nelson should be OU's best pass rusher off the edge.

Special Teams

The Sooners expect to replace punter Tress Way with junior college transfer Jed Barrett. Way averaged 44.2 yards on 53 punts in 2012. He had 13 punts of 50-plus yards and had 22 punts that put opponents inside their 20 yard line.

Brown was Oklahoma's punt returner to begin the season, but Jalen Saunders took over during the season and he returns for 2013. Saunders averaged 17.6 yards on five returns thanks to an 81-yard return for a touchdown.

Coaching Staff

News came out of Norman this week that offensive line coach James Patton has left the Oklahoma staff to join Kevin Wilson's staff at Indiana. Shinn indicated Patton's departure was less than amicable and said more staff changes could be on the way in the near future.

"We appreciate the contributions that James made to our program over the last seven seasons," head coach Bob Stoops said of Patton in a statement. He was a valued member of a staff that helped us win five Big 12 championships."

Despite the previously mentioned lackluster performance of the Oklahoma defense in 2012, Stoops' brother, Mike, is not going anywhere anytime soon. Mike Stoops rejoined the Oklahoma staff last season after a 2004-2011 stint as the Arizona head coach. Bob and Mike could be seen yelling at each other on the sidelines last fall, but Shinn says it is essentially just brotherly love.

"There's something about where they're from," Shinn said of the Stoops family sideline

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demeanor. "Everybody's just used to yelling at each other. To them it doesn't matter. That's just how you communicate when you've got 85,000 fans in the stands. They want to be heard and that's how they do it. To them it's not an issue. They were like that in 1999 and I imagine they'll be like that in 2019. It's just a part of their DNA."