

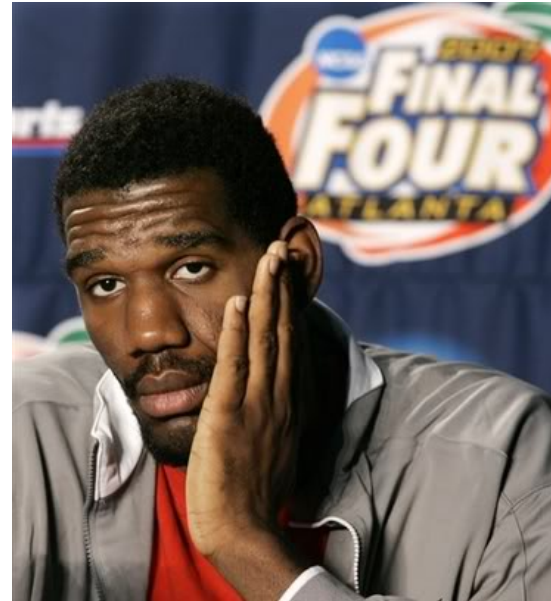
## Preview: The National Championship Game

Written by {ga=furls}

Sunday, April 01 2007 7:00 PM -

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What a year for the Buckeye Nation. Trips to both the football and basketball national championship games. And a chance for redemption for the former, tonight, as the Buckeyes and Gators go toe to toe for the title this evening at 9:20 PM EST. Do the Buckeyes have a chance? After reading this piece you will know, as Furls goes deep to thoroughly break down tonight's game ... in a way only he can. GOOOOO BUCKS!!!!!!!!!!!!



I was recently sent by the government of the United Nations ( [Caddyshack](#) reference) to SEC country, to further investigate the nuances and properties of SEC speed.

*(note to readers: Furls was recently reassigned from Columbus to South Carolina by the U.S. Navy. I'm not kidding.)*

While here, working undercover, I informed several people that I mistook for northern "transplants," (who would've known that native southerners would still have ½ of their teeth in their twenties) that I am a Buckeyes fan and sportswriter for The Cleveland Fan. In the course of our conversations, these SEC fans remarked in their own self-absorbed arrogance, that Buckeyes fans must be hoping for a chance to even the score against their Gators. Actually, I would prefer to beat Michigan again.

The universe has aligned itself properly and the Buckeyes basketball team will be awarded a chance at redemption, a chance to reclaim their collective "manhood", which they left in Gainesville several months ago. According to several [articles](#) , it appears as though the Buckeyes need not even attend the game, for according to the media (the same one that said that they lacked the offense and veteran leadership to make a deep run in the tournament) this game was decided in December and apparently Florida is the only team that has grown over the last three months.

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Those of us that follow Ohio State basketball closely can see the fault in this reasoning. The Ohio State team on the court right now is barely even similar to the team that lost to Florida in December. In that game, a very young freshmen laden team went on the road to a very tough venue and got punched in the face; it is easy to look at the final score and see that. What is a lot harder to see from the box score is that Ohio State was actually in that game for the first 23 minutes, as a matter of fact, the score was tied at 40 before the wheels fell of the wagon for the Buckeyes.

The game really started to get away from the Buckeyes when Oden picked up his third foul, early in the second half. Even when he did return, he just never fell back into his comfort zone. While he was in the game, Oden showed that he could dominate the low post even against Florida's superior forwards. Keep in mind that this was only Oden's fifth game, and at this particular point in the season his right hand may as well have been amputated.

Mike Conley logged 37 minutes in that game and played very well against the same Florida players that will be guarding him tonight, Taurean Green and Lee Humphrey. It is doubtful that Green and Hunter, a junior and senior respectively, have improved substantially since December, but it is pretty clear that Conley has. Conley is now one of the very rare point guards that can take over a game both off the dribble and with pinpoint passing.

Additionally, David Lighty and Othello Hunter have emerged as terrific post defenders. Lighty at 6'5", 220lbs, plays much taller than his height would lead you to believe. Even still, guarding the 6'10" Horford will be a tall order (excuse the pun) for Lighty, and this, probably the most important match up of the game, will fall squarely on the shoulders of Othello Hunter.

The way I see it, there are three possible scenarios in which the Buckeyes will be able to successfully defend the low post:

1. Greg Oden is able to log substantial minutes. If Oden is able to play 30 minutes in this game (a pretty big if) it allows Ohio State to put Othello Hunter on the floor as a four. Hunter should be able to hold his own, to some extent, with Horford. Although Hunter is only 6'7," he

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has the arm length of a seven footer and as a result, he is able to match up favorably with players several inches taller than he is.

2. Get Joakim Noah in foul trouble. This is actually surprisingly more difficult than it seems. While Noah is a high effort, emotional guy, he is only averaging two fouls per game, but he has not been challenged down low yet. He will be geeked up for this game and if the Buckeyes can put him on the bench early, it will force the Gators to put either Chris Richard or Al Horford in the middle. This scenario is good for the Buckeyes regardless of whether or not Oden is on the floor, because it allows the Buckeyes to either have Horford on Oden or Horford on Hunter with Terwilliger matched up with Richard (if he is in the game).

3. And finally, should Ohio State find themselves in the worst possible scenario, Oden on the bench with Noah and Horford on the floor, David Lighty is going to have to find a way to defend Horford. Lighty plays with great athleticism and even better body position and leverage, but these factors alone will not be enough to enable him to defend Horford. Lighty will have to work tirelessly to deny Horford the ball, and should Horford get the ball the Buckeyes will need a very quick double in the post as Horford is not a particularly adept passer. Horford is only a 64% free throw shooter, so hard fouls may not be a bad idea if he does get the ball with superior position.

If the Buckeyes are unable to force one of these three scenarios, it will be up to their guards to play the passing lanes in an effort to deny the ball to the post. This could be problematic if Humphrey and Green are feeling it from deep.

Ohio State's guards are going to have to play right on top of their marks in this one, because Florida, unlike any other team Ohio State has played in the tournament, can hurt you inside and out. Lee Humphrey and Taurean Green both shoot greater than 40% from beyond the arc, and neither of them requires a lot of space to shoot. The Buckeyes are going to have to play them outside the arc like in the Tennessee game, but unlike the Tennessee game, Ohio State cannot afford to sell out inside to do so. Butler and Conley can do this, but at what cost? If they play that far out, then they will be susceptible to dribble penetration, leaving Oden vulnerable to touch fouls playing help defense. You cannot ask Oden to defend the paint less aggressively, that effort is what makes him the dominant force that he is, all you can do is protect him by player better defense at the point of attack.

Corey Brewer is going to be a tough match up for Lewis offensively and defensively, but it is going to be one of the keys to the game. Lewis' offense has been fantastic through the tournament, but this will be his toughest test by far. Brewer plays good defense and can penetrate or shoot from the outside, like Lewis, but at 6'9" Brewer has a substantial height advantage.

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As I wrote earlier, in a role reversal from the football match up, the media is not giving Ohio State much of a chance against Florida and Vegas apparently agrees. As of right now, Ohio State is a 4.5 point underdog, but I suspect that number will get bigger as game time approaches. There a bunch of reasons why the media is right, Florida is bigger, more experienced, they are playing good basketball right now, and they thrashed Ohio State earlier this year. All of this is absolutely true, but there are also several reasons why the media is looking at this wrong.

Since Florida soundly defeated UCLA, the media has made Florida sound invincible, how soon they forget. It was just one week ago, that these same Gators were given all they could handle by an overmatched, out-talented, undersized Butler team, and before that a middle of the pack Big Ten team, Purdue, took the Gators to the limit. In both of these games, Florida struggled to shoot well from the perimeter and faced gritty, tough play in the post. Neither of these teams have the guards that Ohio State does, and neither of those teams has the size that Ohio State does, so I have to sit back and think that the Buckeyes have a much better chance than people are giving them.

Much has been made of Florida's win over UCLA. Just for kicks, lets take a look at that impressive UCLA win for a second. While UCLA made the final four, they were not particularly impressive along the way. They did knock off Kansas, but looking back, it appears as though the Big 12 may have been a tad bit overrated (insert sarcastic comment here). A&M, Texas, and Texas Tech were all letdowns in the tournament, and Kansas appears in retrospect, to be a paper champion that probably should have lost to Southern Illinois.

Actually, UCLA barely escaped elimination at the hands of the Big Ten's third best team, Indiana. The Hoosiers were able to hold the Bruins to 54 points in that game and may have won, had they not gone cold down the stretch. While I am an obvious Buckeye homer, I am less impressed by Florida's victory over the Bruins than the national media.

In the end, I like the Buckeyes to figure out a way to get it done. It is going to be hard for the Gators to take the Buckeyes seriously because they soundly defeated them earlier this season. Frankly, much like the football Buckeyes, the Gators appear to be drinking their own Kool-Aid. I say let them.

Here is what I expect to see:

~Oden will play a more conservative game, watching his fouls, and perhaps allowing a bit more "nonsense" underneath than he normally would. Sitting on the bench for 17 minutes in the first half of the National Semifinals would have to be considered one of life's hard lessons.

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~Ohio State will continue to mix defenses effectively, and will focus on the perimeter players. If you can keep them from shooting the lights out than you can really slow Florida's scoring down.

~The officials will allow more "business" underneath than they did in the last round. I doubt that the NCAA likes having its officials determine key game matchups with touch fouls underneath.

~In the 2-3 I expect to see David Lighty on Corey Brewer's side. Brewer is too much for Ron Lewis on defense, but matches up pretty well with the tenacious Lighty. Brewer has a tendency to turn the ball over and commit stupid fouls and I think Lighty has the right skills to force Brewer into mistakes.

~This game will be decided by turnovers, Ohio State takes very good care of the ball, particularly the guards, while Florida does not. Florida averages OVER 14 turnovers per game. Taurean Green, Florida's leader in assists, has an assist to turnover ratio of 1.4 to 1. To put that number in perspective, Mike Conley averages exactly 2 times that ratio at 2.8 to 1. Green has turned the ball over 17 times in the first five games of the tournament; Conley and Butler have combined for 18. There will be those that will argue that Florida is playing better ball now, but through the tournament, Florida has averaged just under 15 turnovers per game. During this same time frame, Ohio State has turned the ball over just 9 times per game. Ball handling and passing is not one of Florida's strengths, and I think that the Buckeyes will turn these mistakes into points much like they did against Georgetown.

I will not make a final score prediction, but I will say that I like the Buckeyes in a fairly close game. I am unsure what will happen during free throw time, or how that will affect the spread, but I like Ohio State to be up by five before it starts. Florida is bigger, stronger, and more experienced, but Ohio State is quicker, more flexible, and more fundamentally sound. Guard play dominates the tournament, and no one has three better guards than Ron Lewis, Mike Conley, and Jamar Butler.

**GO BUCKS!**