

Preview: THE GAME

Written by {ga=furls}

Friday, November 16 2007 7:00 PM -

It's finally here. The Game. Ohio State versus Michigan, this year facing off in The Big House in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The winner is the Big Ten champion. And at 10-1, the Buckeyes still are very much alive in the race for a berth in the BCS Title game. At 8-3, Michigan is looking to finish a season that started horrifically on a strong note. Furls previews the big game for us.



[Last year the stakes were higher.](#) The winner of "The Game" was assured a berth in the National Championship Game and the runner up, well, for them there was always next year. That seems to be a common thread for the Henne, Hart, and Long led Wolverines, but their "next year" ends tomorrow as the four seniors will start in their last games for that school up North. They have accomplished much, but at the same time, they have accomplished so little.

Henne will finish his career at Michigan as the Wolverines all time passing leader and Hart will also be wrapping up his career as the Michigan's all time rushing leader, but what have they actually accomplished? Michigan's 2004 recruiting class is 0-3 against Ohio State and 0-3 in bowl games. For as accomplished as Hart and Henne are, they really have not accomplished very much. Should they fail to win one game against Ohio State those records would carry an asterisk as big as the one branded on Barry Bonds 756th home run ball.

It is very likely Lloyd Carr will formally announce his retirement to his football team in the locker room immediately before the 2007 installment of The Game. The timing for Carr is probably pretty good because if he should lose his sixth game in his last seven attempts to

Ohio State, well lets just say the Michigan alumni lynch mob was already mobilizing.

As visions of Les Miles standing on the sidelines in Ann Arbor wearing a urine and blue colored polo shirt swirl through the minds of Michigan fans (somewhere between their high sagittal crests and sloping brows), Ohio State's dreams of a second consecutive National Game berth were dealt a serious blow last week. So while the Wolverines are looking to send their coach out a winner, the Buckeyes are looking to salvage a season that once promised a chance at redemption from last year's humiliation.

The Buckeyes national title hopes received a new infusion of hope from Oregon's stunning loss to Arizona Thursday night, but they will need a lot of help along the way. Realistically, the Buckeyes are playing for a Big Ten championship, a Rose Bowl appearance, and a chance to send Lloyd Carr, Chad Henne, Jake Long, and Mike Hart out as losers; to relegate these four to the John Cooper depths of the Ohio State-Michigan abyss.

Introducing the Michigan Wolverines. □ May they rot in Hell, err, Ann Arbor.

There is much ado about whether Henne and Hart will start or play. Lloyd Carr is tight lipped as usual, but I would expect both to play. Henne has been battling a mild shoulder separation since the Orgeon game and Hart has not been 100% on his

ankle all season. Henne, if unable to go, would be replaced by freshman quarterback Ryan Mallett. Neither quarterback has performed particularly well.

Henne started his career at Michigan as the second coming of Jim Harbaugh, but he has never really improved as a quarterback. He continues to make the same bad reads, questionable decisions, and poor throws. Mallett is more or less the same quarterback; big, slow, strong arm, and roughly the same decision making ability. Mallett lacks Henne's experience and accuracy, but game planning for one is no different than game planning for the other.

Mike Hart will play, I will not even discuss the alternatives. As much as I despise Mike Hart, I must give credit where credit is due and no one runs harder than Mike Hart. His vision is exceptional and he is the perfect running back for the zone-blocking scheme that Michigan installed last year. Hart always seems to pick the right cut back lane and that is not a good thing for the Buckeyes.

Ohio State's defense looked very susceptible to zone blocking in the Penn State game. The linebackers were continuously caught abandoning gap assignments and over-pursuing the motion on the line, leaving cutback lanes open.

Defensively, Michigan is not nearly as good as they were last year. This year's Wolverines are giving up 144 yards per game on the ground. That is a substantial difference from last year's total of 29 ypg coming into The Game. The biggest difference is upfront. The secondary play has actually improved from last year's gaping hole of suck, but the teams are not as apt to throw the ball when they are running it effectively.

The Matchups:

-Ohio State's defense vs. Michigan's Offense:
Advantage Michigan.

Ohio State's defense has struggled with the run more than the numbers would lead you to believe, and Mike Hart is the perfect back to exploit recent sloppy play by the Buckeyes. As the season has progressed, the Buckeyes defense has become less aggressive schematically (not attacking the line of scrimmage) and has become less disciplined. Players are consistently ending up out of position and the tackling has suddenly become horrific.

The secondary has been very good in coverage this year, but they have not been asked to do very much. That should change against Mario Manningham and Adrian Arrington today. Manningham is putting up ridiculous numbers this year and has the size and speed to match up with Jenkins.

Jenkins will have his chance to cement himself early to mid first round position in next year's draft if he is able to shut Manningham down. This is clearly one of the key match ups of the game.

The other key match up will be Donald Washington/Chekwa against Adrian Arrington. This is the first game of the season in which Ohio State's secondary will be test by two NFL caliber wide receivers. It will be interesting to see how the defensive backs handle it.

Vernon Gholston against Jake Long will be a key match up not only for the outcome of the game, but also in positioning these two players in the draft. If Long is able

to shut Gholston down, then he will prove that he has the athleticism to become an elite NFL tackle. Gholston, rising meteorically on draft boards, will have a chance to prove that he can beat an NFL caliber tackle. Personally, I think the outcome will hinge on the Buckeyes defensive scheme. If they play passively at the line, than Gholston will have no chance.

-Ohio State's Offense vs. Michigan's Defense:
Advantage Ohio State.

Michigan's run defense is porous and Beanie Wells is pretty good. Michigan's secondary is much better this year than it was last year, but it will not be asked to cover two first round draft picks in this game. Remember, Ohio State's top two receivers this year were last year's #3 and #4 options.

Ultimately I think this matchup will hinge on Ohio State's ability to run the ball. I would not be surprised to see the Buckeyes come out slinging the ball to start the game, but make no mistake about it, the game will be won or

lost on the ground. The Buckeyes will need to remain patient and take the 4-5 yards on the ground while waiting to break the big one.

-Ohio State's running backs on Crable. Michigan will be sending him, the question is, will anyone pick him up?

-Rory Nichol against Michigan's linebackers. Michigan is going to be aggressive in getting after Todd Boeckman, you have to assume that based on his recent performances under pressure. Rory Nichol and Jake Ballard will be very important in limiting Michigan's blitzing not only with catches but by the threat of catching the ball. If Michigan blitzes from the strong side, the middle linebacker or strong safety must rotate over, but they would definitely be too late to get a tight end in the flat. Coincidentally, where are the Buckeye's tight ends making most of their catches?

-Brian Robiskie against the Michigan secondary. Michigan is going to try to take Robo away down the field, unfortunately, teams have been able to do that with

alarming regularity lately. Roboskie has been held to less than 90 yards in five of the Buckeyes last seven games; he has not gone over 100 yards since the Washington game on September 15th. The Buckeyes are going to need the receivers to step up and make some plays.

Don't be surprised if...

-We are left wondering, once again, if the Buckeyes defense is any good. Michigan's running attack matches up very well with Ohio State's defense.

-Chad Henne/Ryan Mallett toss a couple to the boys dressed in scarlet and grey. Chad Henne presses and makes bad throws. That is part of who he is. I expect to see two interceptions by the Buckeyes secondary downfield.

-Chris Wells makes his name as the next great Wolverine slayer. I expect to see the Buckeyes use the passing game to try to keep Michigan honest, but this game is going to be all about Beanie Wells. 200+ yards and 30 carries.

-Ray Small is the secret weapon. Every year Jim Tressel uses a guy early on that no one was expecting. Last year, it was Roy Hall on the first drive, this year it will be Ray Small (or perhaps Sanzenbacher). Look for the Buckeyes to get a couple of early passes to Small downfield.

-The thunder and lightning backfield, Wells and Saine. All year long there have been rumors of two back sets featuring Wells and Saine, I look for that to become a reality today. With the end result... Saine drifting off to the flat as a

receiver, or Saine streaking down the field in play action. We will see some stuff from Jim Tressel that were not expecting in this game.

If I were a betting man....

I would take the Buckeyes (-4.5) and the over, 49 points just does not seem to go as far as it used to. I like the Buckeyes to win by 10-14, and I think that Michigan will actually be able to move the ball pretty well putting up some points.

Ohio State: 34

Michigan: 24

This is your last shot to earn Props as the Prognosticator of the Week. If you are the best you will get your props in my wrap. Enter [here](#). There is no prize except knowing that you are smarter than everyone else, isn't that enough?