

The Edge Of Emotion

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, January 03 2008 7:00 PM -

It's been painful as a Buckeye fan, listening to the national media trash this team for the last six weeks. In Gary's latest, he says that Buckeye fans have heard so much of it, they're starting to believe it, creating a palpable sense of dread in the air for Buckeyes fans secretly terrified of a repeat of last year. Can Jim Tressel funnel this negativity, embrace the role of underdog, and translate it into a win Monday and a national title? Gary opines ...



There is a palpable sense of dread in the air as the Buckeyes begin their final preparations for Monday night's BCS national championship game. It's the kind of dread that most Cleveland fans certainly recognize having lived with the "please don't let my team lose another big game" feeling most of their lives.

Call it a hangover from brutal 41-14 loss to the Florida Gators if you want, but it's also fueled by a sense, largely unspoken among Buckeyes fans anyway, that this year's Buckeyes team is not worthy of its current status and thus it's bound to disappoint.

When half a season often passes between the last game of the regular season and the beginning of the bowl season, particularly the BCS bowls, whatever momentum that existed has long since been stilled. But if the Buckeyes do lose on Monday, it won't likely be a question of talent. More likely it will be their inability, once again, to find the emotional edge that is often the difference in these college bowl games.

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Consider this year's bowl season. Start with the Rose Bowl. USC ran roughshod over Illinois egged on mainly by a lingering feeling that it had the best team in the nation this year but was thrown off track by injuries. The Illini, on the other hand, seemed to lack any emotion whatsoever. Surprised as anyone at how their season turned out, the Illini never expected to be in the Rose Bowl in the first place and played like it. They brought a wide-eyed sense of optimism but not much else and the 49-17 final score aptly reflected the emotional gulf between the two teams on Tuesday.

The Georgia/Hawaii game went much the same way. Georgia had been reeling since it was rightly snubbed for the BCS championship game. Their argument, with some appeal if not merit, was that they were more highly rated than LSU and thus should have been the SEC team that benefited when Missouri lost to Oklahoma and Pittsburgh beat West Virginia at season's end. At the time, Georgia was number four in the rankings and LSU was seventh. But with LSU playing in and winning the SEC Championship against Tennessee while Georgia was sitting at home, the victim of having lost to both South Carolina and Tennessee earlier in the season, the pollsters ultimately determined that the rankings were just wrong and pushed LSU to number two and into the BCS title game.

This slight, perceived at best, was more than enough against a Hawaii team that looked like it would struggle against the MAC champion. Hawaii, another Western Athletic Conference champ like Boise State last year, may have had a little Boise State sort of edge about them entering the game, but that was hardly enough to overcome a bigger, stronger Georgia team with a bigger, stronger emotional edge. It showed in the 41-10 score.

The same story line continued on Wednesday night in the Fiesta Bowl. Despite having essentially been humiliated by a supposedly lesser opponent in Boise State the year before, the Oklahoma Sooners learned nothing from that experience. Instead, for the second straight year they walk away from a BCS game suffering another really bad loss.

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It would have appeared entering the game that Oklahoma, like Georgia, had developed a chip on its shoulder about being left out of the national championship game. But whatever edge that perceived slight created was more than dulled by the self-inflicted perception that the Mountaineers would be little competition, reeling as they were from first suffering a crippling loss to a really bad Pittsburgh team, and second having lost the oily and overrated Rich Rodriguez as their head coach, a loss that has been controversial to say the least.

Meanwhile the Mountaineers, under a well liked interim coach practically begging for the job permanently (which he got) found a way to channel their rage and frustration against an Oklahoma team that should have known better but didn't. From the first snap to the last play and the four hours in between, the Mountaineers literally ran the Sooners ragged, drilling them 48-28.

Even the Capitol One Bowl match up between Florida and Michigan followed much the same script. Florida was the fat and happy squad with the Heisman Trophy winner and the arrogant swagger of a team that figured once it showed up, its Big Ten opponent would crumble, kind of like Ohio State last year in the BCS national championship game, despite Florida already having lost three times this season.

The overmatched Michigan Wolverines, reeling from a season of coaching missteps and blown opportunities, were lucky to make it to a New Year's Day bowl game at all. Added to the mix was a retiring coach who seems more beloved now than he ever did and an opportunistic third choice coach-in-waiting hovering over the proceedings like a kid waiting for his parents to leave on vacation already so he can drive the 'vette.

But on the way to cementing his status as the latest genius, Florida head coach Urban Meyer couldn't find a way to solve a Michigan offense that could only get 91 yards against Ohio State. As a result, he and his vaunted Gators, the beasts of the SEC and clearly faster and better than any team ever in the history of the Big Ten, found themselves on the losing end of a game in which they were the

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recipients of four Michigan turnovers.

The difference maker, obviously, was emotion. The Wolverines, with aspirations for a national championship before the season started, found themselves without anything much to play for after the season's first game. But given a chance to send Lloyd Carr solidly into retirement with a warm and fuzzy feeling, not to mention the chance to lance the boils of big game failures by the likes of Chad Henne and Mike Hart, the Wolverines overcame a litany of poor tackling, dropped passes and turnovers early in the game to suddenly dominate when the game mattered most-in the fourth quarter.

The Buckeyes can choose to learn the lessons of these games by osmosis or can simply take a look at the film of their game against Florida last year. The beating they and the program took should be lesson enough as to exactly how much of a part emotion plays in the outcome. Many of the Buckeyes who played in last year's game now admit they had lost their edge somewhere between the thrilling victory against Michigan and the improbable run and minor controversy that resulted in Florida getting into the game. The Buckeyes were heavily favored, had every accolade to enjoy and felt that they couldn't be beat.

Florida, guided by Meyer, used the Buckeye's arrogance against them to develop an underdog mentality that had, as its goal, proving that they not only belonged on the same field with the Buckeyes, but that they could beat the Buckeyes. When Ted Ginn, Jr. returned the opening kickoff for a touchdown, it turned out to be the worst thing that could happen to the Buckeyes, and not simply because Ginn got hurt. The Buckeyes falsely assumed the rest of the game would be a similar cakewalk all the while the Gators were planning their revenge, which they ultimately extracted in spades.

The real question facing the Buckeyes on Monday is how they will use last year's loss and their underdog status, despite their ranking. Can head coach Jim Tressel funnel it into intensity, concentration and execution or will the team succumb to the weight of expectations? Certainly Tressel has been trying to pull

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the right levers on this score, even to the point of having a DVD made of all the negative things being said about the Buckeyes nationally. But will it be enough?

Last year's loss was as much a psychological blow to the Buckeyes program as it was to the Big Ten overall and also hurt Tressel's reputation, whether or not it should have. A win cures all. That won't happen, however, if the Buckeyes and Tressel cannot find enough in this entire emotional quagmire to create a razor-sharp edge. And if they cannot, that dread fans are feeling now will continue unabated because the bashing they've been currently taking, as painful as it's been for Buckeye fans, will turn out to be well deserved. And nothing hurts worse than the truth.