

## How Bad Is Michigan?

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Wednesday, September 03 2008 7:00 PM -

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It probably isn't wise to draw conclusions after one game, but if what we saw out of the Wolverines on Saturday is indicative of what we'll see the rest of the year, it's going to be a long and painful season in Ann Arbor. In its first game running Rich Rodriguez's zone-read offense, Michigan looked tentative, slow, and un-athletic. Neither of the two Wolverine quarterbacks who played on looked particularly suited to execute the new style of offense. The speedy playmakers that defined Rich Rod's teams at West Virginia are nowhere to be found in Ann Arbor. Jesse thinks it's going to be a long year for Wolverine fans, and writes about it in his latest.



Say what you want about the University of Michigan, but you can't accuse them of inconsistency when it comes to winning football. The Wolverines have played in a bowl game every year since 1974 - the last year the Big Ten allowed only its champion to go bowling- and haven't finished with a losing record since 1967, when Bump Elliott's penultimate team went 4-6. Both streaks are the longest of their kind in major-college football, and from the looks of things after the Maize and Blue's 25-23 opening-day loss to Utah, one or both of them will be coming to an end in 2008.

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(By the way, doesn't it seem like the long shot of stunned, stricken Michigan fans, heads grasped in their hands, is on the verge of being stock footage at this point? Not that I'm, you know, deriving any enjoyment out of it or anything.)

Now granted, Utah is very good, my pick to run the table and crash the BCS party from a non-BCS conference. The Utes are well-coached, experienced, used to winning, and expected to win on Saturday. But they're still a Mountain West team, one that should not be able to go into the home stadium of an upper-echelon Big Ten team and dominate. That's what happened in the Big House, as the Utes out-gained Michigan 341-203, held a nearly twelve-minute edge in time of possession, and would have won fairly easily if not for fifteen penalties, three turnovers, a blocked punt, and a variety of other mistakes that allowed the Wolverines to come back and nearly steal the game in the fourth quarter.

The good news for Michigan is that, after being scorched in the first half, its defense turned up the heat and basically stonewalled Utah in the second. But the athletic deficiencies and issues with mismatched personnel aren't going away. Nick Sheridan and Steven "Sedale" Threet aren't going to magically channel Pat White, and Brandon Minor isn't going to impersonate Steve Slaton. The defense might be able to keep the Wolverines competitive, but the offense is a train-wreck, and it probably won't get much better, at least not this year. Where are the playmakers?

At this point, Michigan looks to be facing what Ohio State faced in 1988, John Cooper's first year after coming over from Arizona State. Like that Ohio State team, Michigan is young, inexperienced, and under a new coach after a disappointing previous season by a senior-dominated team. Like those Buckeyes, who lost Vince Workman early in the '88 season due to contact with an agent, these Wolverines have been shaken by unforeseen personnel subtractions, most notably Ryan Mallet's transfer to Arkansas. Unlike this Michigan team, Cooper's '88 Buckeyes got off to a nice start, thumping a good Syracuse team in the opener. But they struggled from there to a 4-6-1 record studded with one-sided losses to the likes of Indiana and Pitt. It was Ohio State's last losing season to date.

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The same fate might await this year's Wolverines. After what should be a cakewalk at home against the O.G. Miami, they hit a five-game stretch in which they play at Notre Dame, host Wisconsin and Illinois, and head to Happy Valley to take on a Penn State team which looks rejuvenated offensively and will be licking its chops at the prospect of ending a nine-game losing streak against the boys from Ann Arbor. The September 13 trip to South Bend stands as the most crucial game of the entire season: if the Maize and Blue lose that one, they'll be 1-2 with games against physically superior conference opponents in three of the next four weeks. There is a very real possibility that Michigan will be 2-5 and 0-3 in the Big Ten after seven games, with its only victories coming against MAC opponents. Not exactly the stuff of Rich Rodriguez's fellow West Virginian, Fielding H. Yost.

Watching Michigan struggle, one wonders if UM didn't goof a little by not going full-bore after Brian Kelly, who owns a nearly two-decade coaching legacy in the state of Michigan and has won at multiple levels of college football. Kelly, whose spread offense emphasizes the passing game more than Rodriguez's, could presumably have kept Ryan Mallet in the fold and the Wolverines on a decent course in 2008. Things have gotten a little stale in Ann Arbor the last few years, but it's still *Michigan*. Rich Rod, with his alien pedigree and his radical offensive makeover, represents a facelift for a program that perhaps needed nothing more than a little bit of cosmetic surgery.

That's not to say the facelift won't eventually be successful. But it won't be this year. The Wolverines will be fortunate to be better than 5-6 when they walk into Columbus on November 22, and if they aren't, count on Rich Rodriguez to become the first UM coach in forty-one years to preside over a losing season.

All we can do as Buckeye fans is sit back and enjoy the show.