

Winning Ugly In Columbus

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Saturday, September 06 2008 7:00 PM -

OU led the Buckeyes 14-6 late in the third quarter on Saturday and were threatening to become the first in-state team to beat the Buckeyes since Oberlin in 1921. Not only were Ohio State's National Championship dreams swirling the bowl, so was the reputation of the beleaguered Big Ten. It would have been arguably the most catastrophic loss in the history of the program. Then the Buckeyes - with a little help from their guests - woke up. In a closing rush, the Scarlet & Grey ran off the last twenty points to turn their deficit into a 26-14 victory over the game but mistake-prone Bobcats.



There is never a good time for Ohio State to lose to an in-state opponent, or to anyone, for that matter. But with Ohio University leading 14-6 late in the third quarter on Saturday and threatening to become the first in-state team to beat the Buckeyes since Oberlin in 1921, the timing seemed particularly unfortunate. Not only were Ohio State's National Championship dreams swirling the bowl, so was the reputation of the beleaguered Big Ten, a reputation that is intimately tied to everything that happens in Columbus. It would have been arguably the most catastrophic loss in the history of the program.

Then the Buckeyes- with a little help from their guests- woke up. In a closing rush, the Scarlet & Grey ran off the last twenty points to turn their deficit into a 26-14 victory over the game but mistake-prone Bobcats. A win is a win. But this one was so ugly, even Jack Park might want to forget about it.

This review is going to be a little on the negative side, just so you know.

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Yeah, you think we missed Beanie?

Saturday's game should put to rest the braggadocio about Ohio State's "depth" behind #28. Mo Wells was uninspiring, Brandon Saine was strictly "meh", and although Dan Herron flashed some nice skill, especially on the drive that cut OU's lead to 14-12, none of the three exactly *carpe'd the diem* in Beanie's absence. Ohio State's three-headed tailback monster combined for 113 yards and 26 carries- pretty good on paper, but decidedly less so in the flesh. The Buckeyes showed little power in short yardage situations and little explosiveness at any time. The longest gain of the day on the ground was 23 yards by Terrell Pryor as the clock ran down late in the fourth quarter.

The play-calling didn't exactly conjure up memories of Sid Gillman either. Twice Ohio State found itself needing a single yard for a first down, and twice the Buckeyes ran ISO plays with the guard pulling. Maurice Wells was stuffed on 4th and one in the second quarter running this play, and Boom Herron picked up a yard on 3rd

and one in the third quarter, on a highly generous spot. Ohio State has a 6'4", 240-pound quarterback and a 250-pound fullback. With those options, why give the ball to a 190-pound tailback five yards in the backfield in a short-yardage situation? Why pull a guard? I just don't understand the thinking there.

Paging game-breakers...

I realize that, without #28 in the backfield, Ohio State's big-play chances via play-action are going to be somewhat limited. But 3.9 yards per attempt and 4.2 yards per completion? Seriously? Taking

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away the longest pass play of the game for OSU, a 25-yarder to Jake Ballard- and I *can* take it away because a pass to a tight end in this offense can be classified as a fluke- Buckeye quarterbacks were 15-of-27 for 85 yards. Not only were the receivers not getting downfield, they weren't doing a very good job of catching the ball. Both Brian Robiskie and Brian Hartline had key drops, Hartline's of what would have been a touchdown, in a second-quarter drive that ended with a field goal and kept Ohio in front, 7-6.

Normally, drops aren't a problem with Robiskie and Hartline. But the lack of separation is, and will continue to be even when Beanie gets back. I like the Mike Lanese types as much as the next guy, but it'd be nice to mix in a little game-breaking with all of these possession guys.

By the way, where was DeVier Posey?

Again with the spread

Ohio State's defense has had some trouble dealing with running plays out of spread formations over the last couple of years, and did again on Saturday, especially in the first half. An Ohio team that gained a grand total of 39 yards on the ground against Wyoming picked up 145 against the Buckeyes, much of that out of the spread, and much of it on third downs, when Bobcat backup quarterback Boo Jackson continually

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found room to run after being flushed from the pocket. Ohio was 9-of-17 on third downs, and five of those conversions came via the run.

Everyone has his (or her) pet theory for why the Buckeyes have problems defending running plays out of the spread. I've seen and heard quite a bit of blame attached to Jim Heacock's "soft" schemes, but my own explanation is a somewhat more prosaic: Ohio State's defensive tackles don't create enough push up the middle to reach the quarterback before he has time to make his second read. The ends were doing their jobs getting up-field (Lawrence Wilson in particular had another excellent game), but with little pressure in their faces, OU quarterbacks were able to get out of the pocket and make plays on the run. I hear some wistful reminiscing about the aggressiveness of Mark Dantonio, and he did a terrific job in Columbus, but this team misses the likes of Kenny Peterson and Tim Anderson more than any coach.

Oh, and the less said about Ohio State's tackling, the better.

Thank God for special teams

With the notable exception of Ryan Pretorius's shanked extra point, Ohio State's special teams were solid; were, in fact, the main difference between an ugly win and an unspeakably hideous loss. Perhaps the play of the game was Shaun Lane's recovery of a fumbled

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punt return, in which he just saved the ball before it rolled out of bounds, to set up the go-ahead touchdown early in the fourth quarter. Ray Small put things on ice later in the period with a 69-yard punt return for a score. Good special teams have always been a trademark of Jim Tressel's teams, and today the special teams stepped up in a big way, when no other unit did.

A ruthless assessment

As much as it's talked up, there is no single component of this Ohio State team, aside of course from Beanie Wells, which jumps out as particularly impressive. The defense? There are some nice players on that side of the ball, but too many weaknesses up the middle of the football field for it to be an outstanding unit. The offensive line is okay, but nothing special. There are no Glenn/Galloway/Boston-type home-run hitters on the outside. Todd Boeckman is a decent college quarterback, nothing more. This is a good football team. It is not a great one. Maybe I'm jumping off the deep end after a flat, uninspired performance. But I'm not so sure.

I guess we'll find out for sure, one way or another, next Saturday in the L.A. Coliseum.