

Noon. Saturday. The Game. The game of all games. The greatest rivalry in all of sports. The Wolverines come into Columbus already with more losses than ever before in the history of the program and with a snake oil salesman as their head coach. The Buckeyes come into the game 20 point favorites, #10 in the country, and with a Big Ten title and a Rose Bowl bid still very possible. Nothing to worry about, right? Buckeye Dan gives us his thoughts in his game preview.



*Saturday, November 22, 2008*

*The Game - Ohio State vs. Michigan*

*Ohio Stadium, Columbus, OH*

*Kickoff: Noon (ET)*

*TV: ABC*

### What, Me Worry?

There are lots of reasons why this year's Ohio State-Michigan game shouldn't be close. Consider:

Ohio State (9-2, 6-1) is playing for their fourth straight Big Ten title, plus a probable BCS Bowl invitation. It's the final game at the Horseshoe for senior stars Malcolm Jenkins and James Laurinaitis, and probably for Chris Wells too. On top of that, the precocious freshman quarterback has vowed that he will not let these seniors lose, and he has played well enough to get away with saying stuff like

that.

OSU has everything to play for, and every reason to be confident.

The Bucks have won four straight Michigan games under Jim Tressel, and he's 6-1 against Michigan overall. Tressel is 49-6 as OSU Head Coach in Ohio Stadium, and 82-18 overall in his eighth year at OSU. You gotta like the odds.

The line is 20. The Michigan Wolverines' record is the worst in the school's history. Their embattled first-year coach says winning this game wouldn't salvage what has been a horrible season. That's how much Rich Rodriguez knows about Ohio State vs. Michigan.

Players are defecting from the Wolverine program even in the week before the OSU game. Rumors are about that the Rodriguez-Michigan relationship may end after this one sorry year. The vibe from Ann Arbor says they just want the nightmare season to be over. There is little evidence to suggest the Wolverines have in them what it would take to come into Ohio Stadium and beat this Ohio State team.

In fact, the planets are aligned for a classic ass-kicking by the Buckeyes. I don't believe I have ever seen such carefree confidence in an overwhelming victory by the OSU fan base in the 40-some years I've been watching [this rivalry](#) . It's astonishing really, given the history.

### Lessons of History

I won't presume to weigh in on all that history, but instead will just offer up a series of numbers, and let you browse for memories as you wish. [1969](#) , [1991](#) , [1993](#) , [1995](#)

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[1996](#)

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[2003](#)

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The Game of 2008 has relatively little on the line compared to some of those years. But again in 2008, the Buckeyes find themselves one win away from their goal of a conference championship, and again a Michigan team with nothing to lose stands in their way.

Furthermore, this year's Buckeye team hasn't come close to showing the same kind of pre-Michigan dominance of some of those other OSU teams that ultimately lost to the Ugly Hats. It's a little hard to believe that any seasoned Buckeye fan would be predicting a blowout Buckeye win this year, knowing as they do that this game is nearly always tighter, tougher, lower-scoring, and less predictable based on the teams' records, than it appears to be on paper.

And it's all quite a comedown from the epic No.1 vs. No. 2 struggle of just two years ago, isn't it? The buildup to The Game, which drips with drama and emotion even in a normal year, was cranked up to feverishness that year, first by the national title implications of 2006, and then further by the [passing of Bo Schembechler](#) the day before the game. And then [the game](#) actually surpassed the hype. By comparison, this year is pretty tame.

### Off a Cliff

So why are Buckeye fans, even those who know the history, and can recite by rote all the clichés about throwing-the-record-books-out-the-window for OSU-Michigan, still predicting that the Buckeyes will cruise to an easy victory?

It must reflect just how far and how fast the Michigan program has fallen in 2008 under Rich Rodriguez. Yes, this team lost a ton of talent from the senior-laden group that beat a good Florida team in a New Years Day bowl game less than a year ago. (*Wait a minute...Did I just say that Michigan beat the Florida Gators in a major bowl game earlier this year?*)

But going 3-8, with losses to Utah, Toledo, Northwestern, Notre Dame and Purdue, is not simply taking a step backward in implementing a new system and a new coaching philosophy, with young players. It's stumbling down a mine shaft, into free fall, with no indication just yet where the bottom might be. It's a disaster, and one redeemable only by beating the hated Buckeyes. The negative spin on the first year of the Rodriguez era in Ann Arbor is no doubt exaggerated from the perspective of the Buckeye fan. We *want* them to fail, after all. But even in Ann Arbor, I hear the Rich Rodriguez Fan Club is still holding their meetings in a phone booth. The guy got on the bad side of the UM fan base when he lost his opener at home to Utah, and he never got them back.

The highlight of the Michigan season was a comeback win over Wisconsin, after

the Wolverines had trailed 19-0 at the half on their home field. That victory so inspired them that they went out and lost their next five games in a row. The defense has been shaky, and the offense has been worse.

And then there's the prevailing sense that Rodriguez just doesn't *get* this OSU-Michigan thing. At least not in the sense that Jim Tressel gets it, and has gotten it since Day One. But I give Rodriguez credit for being a good football coach, and a guy who is able to get a team up for a game emotionally. I expect the Wolverines to be pumped up Saturday, and I think they'll play the Buckeyes tough. In fact, I expect them to empty the playbook and take all kinds of unconventional risks. I mean why the hell not?

But let's face it. They are less talented and less experienced than Ohio State, and it's hard to envision them maintaining any emotional edge on the Buckeyes, especially with 105,000 shrieking partisans assembled to watch in Columbus, and all the shiny hardware that's on the line for Ohio State.

### So What Do They Have?

I think Michigan's only shot at winning this game is if their defensive line can dominate their counterparts on the Buckeye offensive line, and shut down the OSU running game as a result. That will be necessary to hold the Bucks under 20 points or so, because it will be tough for the UM offense to put up close to that many points themselves.

The Wolverines are big and talented up front on defense, with two of the top linemen in the Big Ten in ends Tim Jamison and Brandon Graham. With tackles Terrance Taylor

and

Will Johnson

, they put a strong group of linemen on the field that could give the OSU offense some trouble.

Linebacker Obi Ezeh is by far the Wolverines' leading tackler, but he needs a lot more help in the back seven than he has been getting so far this season. The defense is better against the run (128.3 ypg) than against the pass (234.8 ypg), so there should be opportunities for Terrelle Pryor to hurt them with his arm, especially if the running attack can loosen them up a little.

More was expected of this defense in 2008, but part of the problem has been

simple fatigue. The Wolverine offense has been so anemic that the defense has been spending way too much time on the field, and has worn down as the games and the season have gone along. For Saturday, they're probably expecting a steady diet of running plays by Wells and Pryor...and then Wells some more. And Tressel will surely follow that script, at least as long as it works like it has the last two weeks.

And remember, Chris Wells goes nuts when he sees those funny helmets. He changed the momentum for good as a freshman in the 2006 game, with a 52-yard touchdown run in the second quarter to put the Buckeyes into the lead for good in the 42-39 OSU victory. Then last year, he overpowered the Wolverines with a 222-yard rushing day to set an OSU-Michigan record in another Buckeye win. Wells wants to be remembered as one of the all-time great OSU running backs. 'Motivated' may not be a strong enough word to describe Beanie on Saturday.

### They'll Have to Score

Offensively, it has been a struggle all year for Michigan. They have two good healthy running backs coming into this game in Brandon Minor (466 yds. on 89 carries, 8 TD's) and

### Carlos Brown

, so they're in better shape physically at that position than they've been for much of the year.

But at quarterback, starter Steven Threet is again out with an injury, and the Buckeyes expect to see backup Nick Sheridan (526 yds. passing on 55 of 113, with 2 TD's and 5 INT's). Sheridan was 8 of 29 last week against Northwestern, and he'll be facing an OSU defense that leads the conference in pass defense. Michigan has freshman dual-threat QB Justin Feagin who could see action as well, though he is almost exclusively a running threat.

The receiver corps consists of junior Greg Matthews (409 yds on 35 catches, 2 TD's) and then two talented but unproven freshmen, Darryl Stonum and Martavious Odoms. They have yet to demonstrate that they can make big plays in the passing game, and the Ohio State defense is set up to prevent that very thing.

The Wolves are returning only one starter from 2007 on the offensive line, and the inexperience shows in the ongoing difficulties they have had moving the ball and scoring points. They will have to figure out a way to pick up first downs by running

the ball, because all indications are they're not going to make a living throwing it.

### Bucking the Trends

As much as I have my guard up, acknowledging the possibility of an upset by Michigan, I can't really see them hanging with the Buckeyes. I don't envision them scoring more than 20 points, even with a special teams or defensive touchdown, and I can't see them holding the Buckeyes under 28 or 30 points, given the way Pryor and Wells have been playing.

But just so you don't get cocky (*cockier?*), it's worth noting that if the Buckeyes win Saturday, they will be bucking a couple of other historical trends:

The Buckeyes have never won five games in a row in the history of the series. In fact, before the 2006 win, it had been 43 years since OSU won even *three* straight in the series.

Bo Schembechler, Lloyd Carr, and all but one coach in Michigan history won their first games against Ohio State.

Not worried? Me neither. I see the Wolverines putting up a good fight, and maybe even covering the 20-point spread, but the Bucks will prevail, say 30-16.

*Incidentally, I have shamelessly picked the Bucks to win each and every week this season (yes, USC too) so I am of course 9-2 along with them...if you're scoring at home.*

### Links:

[OSU Athletic Communications - Game Notes \(pdf\)](#)

[Bucknuts.com Preview](#)

[ESPN.com Preview](#)

[2008 Ohio State Roster](#)

[2008 Michigan Roster](#)