

Six Ways To A National Title

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Tuesday, July 14 2009 7:00 PM -

Over the decades, Ohio State has made a relative habit of gleaning greatness from low or middling expectations. None of the 1954, 1968 and 2002 teams were expected to compete for the title prior to their respective seasons, while the 1979 team, which enjoyed a perfect regular season and came within an eyelash of winning it all, was picked to finish as low as fifth in the Big Ten. The 2009 edition faces the same lack of buzz. In Jesse's latest column, he lays out the six things that have to break in Ohio State's favor if the Buckeyes are going to defy the expectations and win it all for the second time this decade. Happy birthday Jesse!



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The 2009 edition faces the same lack of buzz. Currently the Buckeyes are ranked ninth in the Associated Press poll; eleventh in the Coaches poll. Nobody seems to expect them to get through the regular season unscathed, what with USC's visit to Columbus and a trip to Happy Valley on the docket. Always-pesky Illinois comes to the Horseshoe for the first time since winning there two years ago, as do the rejuvenated Iowa Hawkeyes. It isn't the toughest schedule in the land, but for a team in reloading mode, it isn't the easiest either.

There are certain areas that shouldn't worry us. Terrelle Pryor should build upon his scintillating debut season, in which he led the Big Ten in passing efficiency

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despite his lack of experience and shot-put release. The kid has the talent to be great, and more importantly, he *wants* to be great. The receiving corps is deep and diverse. Boom Herron isn't the one-man wrecking crew that Chris Wells was, but he's quick, has a nose for the holes, and might actually be a better fit than Wells for the spread formations the Buckeyes are bound to employ this season. Chimde Chekwa should be a star performer at cornerback, there is plenty of talent in the linebacker corps to fill the void left by Jim Laurinaitis and Marcus Freeman, and with Thad Gibson and Cameron Heyward back, the Bucks should have one of the top defensive end duos in America.

So it isn't as if the cupboard is bare. Still, as we all know, it takes more than the expected to go right if you're going to win a National Championship. Here are six things that have to break in Ohio State's favor if the Buckeyes are going to defy the expectations and win it all for the second time this decade.

Remember the Tight End: You do remember the tight end, right? You know- big guy, wears a receiver's number; catches the ball every now and again. Of course you do, and so do I. Now let's hope Coach Tressel's memory is as good as ours. Fortunately, it seems that for the first time since Ben Hartsock was plying his trade in Columbus, the tight end might be a fully functioning part of the passing game. Sophomore Jake Stoneburner, a former receiver, is drawing raves for his speed and hands, and Terrelle Pryor showed a willingness to spread the football around as the starter last season. A tight end that can stretch the field and make the tough third-down catches can do wonders for an offense. Let's hope we see some of that action on the field this fall.

Someone will need to step up at left tackle: Say what you want about Alex Boone, but for the most part he did a decent job protecting the quarterback's blind side for three seasons in Columbus. Now Boone is off the scene, and someone will have to fill his shoes. The rest of the offensive line looks as good as it has in years: Mike Brewster is a year older and better at center, Bryant Browning and Jim Cordle should be solid at right guard and right tackle, respectively, and Michigan transfer Justin Boren is going to be just plain nasty at left guard. That leaves left tackle, only the most important position on the line, and in all likelihood, that leaves sophomore Mike Adams as the man who must fill the void left by the

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mercurial Mr. Boone. If Adams can step in and solidify the spot, this offensive line will be the best we've seen thus far in the Tressel era.

The Heart of the Defense: With the Buckeyes breaking in new starters at linebacker, it's imperative for the middle of the defensive line to make an immediate impact, in terms of both stopping the run and generating pass pressure. The ends are going to be fine- Thad Gibson and Cam Heyward should both be outstanding. The linebackers might not be experienced, but they are talented, and Ohio State rarely has a drop-off at that position anyway. But a defense is only as good as its tackles, and for this defense to be national-championship caliber, Doug Worthington and Todd Denlinger will have to be outstanding.

Nastiness at Safety: From Jack Tatum in 1968, to Todd Bell in 1979, to Mike Doss in 2002, physical safety play has been a staple of powerhouse Buckeye teams. Unfortunately, that head-hunting element has been missing of late. Kurt Coleman and Anderson Russell, the incumbents at safety, are solid, competent veteran players, but neither exactly strikes fear in the heart of opposing offenses. I'd like to see more of Jermale Hines back here: the Glenville product is listed at linebacker on the depth chart, but at 6'2" and 210 he has the ideal size as well as speed to play safety. Of course, if Jim Heacock wants to keep Hines at linebacker in the edge-rusher role, *a la* Cie Grant, you won't see me crying about it. Either way, someone will have to go above and beyond the call at safety for this team to win big.

Return of the Bad-Assed Kicking Game: Ohio State wouldn't have won the National Championship in 2002 without the contributions of the best kicking duo in the country, in place-kicker Mike Nugent and punter Andy Groom. The Buckeyes will need similar production from kicker Aaron Pettrey and punter Jon Thoma if they're going to win it all this season. Pettrey has always had great power, but has struggled with his accuracy. Thoma, his fellow red-shirt senior, has been stuck behind A.J. Trapasso on the depth chart and hasn't shown much in actual game action. With a defense that is young in spots, controlling field position is an absolute must. Pettrey and Thoma will have to come through in a major way.

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The Buckeyes will need to win out: Let's face it; when your conference has lost six straight BCS games and six straight Rose Bowls, you aren't going to get any favors from the pollsters- and nor should you. Penn State had its title chances ruined by a one-point loss at Iowa last November, and the same fate will befall the Buckeyes if they slip up just once in 2009- even if it isn't against USC. If it comes down to a one-loss Big Ten team versus a one-loss SEC or Big 12 team for the right to play for the crystal football, we know how that will turn out. And that's okay. Who wants to go hat in hand to the pollsters when you can get it done on the field? Besides, as I like to say, the only

real

National Championships are undefeated National Championships. That's the way you earn it.

If these six things break right, and if the expected strengths are as advertised, this team can contend for the National Championship. Is it likely? No. But history tells us that Buckeye national titles seem to come at the most unlikely of occasions.