



*Saturday, September 12, 2009*

*Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio*

*Ohio State vs University of Southern California*

*8:00 p.m. (ET)*

*TV: ESPN*

The Trojans of USC arrive in Columbus this week as a touchdown favorite to beat the Buckeyes for the second straight year, and for the seventh consecutive time in the storied series. USC has had its way with Big Ten Teams under the Pete Carroll regime, and they enter the game with the momentum and confidence born of that record. The Trojans lead the all-time series 12-9-1.

For Ohio State, the game presents an opportunity to reassert themselves as a team to be taken seriously on the national college football scene, and to silence, at least for the moment, the critics of the team, the conference, and the coach, all of which have seen their reputations tarnished in the last three years or so.

So we'll see.

In large part, both the confidence of the Trojans and the damaged rep of the Buckeyes stem from last season's 35-3 smackdown of Ohio State at the L.A. Coliseum by the top-ranked Trojans. That embarrassment triggered the benching of OSU quarterback Todd Boeckman and the beginning of the Terrelle Pryor experiment in Columbus.

One year later, it's the Trojans who will be playing the precocious freshman at QB, and the 105,000 in attendance will be pulling for the scarlet shirts this time around. As loaded as the Trojans are in terms of talent, there is some inexperience on the defense as well as at quarterback, and the early season matchup rounds out a set of circumstances that gives the Buckeyes their best chance in some time to end their 0-5 streak against Top Five teams....not to mention shrugging several other species of monkey off their collective back.

So we'll see on Saturday night.

### Check Your Package

Without losing track of the important detail that this 'crucial' contest is a game of football, contested by 18-22-year old college students, it is nonetheless a test of the will, pride, guts and yes...balls, the very manhood of the Ohio State Buckeyes. The beach boy bullies of Southern California kicked sand in the face of this program last year, and we will find out Saturday night what kind of intestinal fortitude they can muster when the Trojans come calling again on the Bucks' home turf.

The talk in Columbus this spring and fall had an emphasis on a new kind of aggressiveness, a nastier attitude, an imperative to dominate against lesser opponents and compete assertively with the elite ones. The upperclassmen that disappointed against Florida and LSU, and who were said to have not recovered emotionally from those high-profile shellings, were gone. This was to be a new, different breed of Buckeye.

The new killer instinct wasn't in evidence against Navy, a plucky bunch of public servants to be sure, but an outfit that should never have been let up off the mat when they were primed for the pin. The offensive line that had been touted by coaches as quicker, more athletic, and well-drilled in preparation, failed to clear the way on three tries to get two yards at a gut-check moment, against a defense that will never be confused with USC. The play-calling in that series aside, it was still a disappointment.

So we'll see.

### Nobody Knows it Better

The wait-and-see posture concerning this Saturday's game is common among program observers, because despite very solid and competitive efforts against #3 Penn State and #2 Texas last year, the Buckeyes weren't able to get over the hump to a "W" in either game, and last time I checked, they're still not giving out trophies for losing close games, even against the elite teams.

But none of the above reality check should be taken to mean that I'm not optimistic about the Buckeyes' chances Saturday night. In fact, I am. And part of the reason I feel good about OSU this week is that I know the players want it badly. Talking with Buckeye players over the past three weeks, I've heard it repeatedly. No one is more aware of the stakes for the program this week, or more anxious to end the negative talk and the big game losing streak than the players themselves.

If OSU fans are weary of hearing about how this team is a pretender to elite status, or that they can't win the big one...or that their conference is weak...or that their program is overrated....just multiply that by ten, and you'll be close to how sick the OSU players are of hearing about it. To a man though, their attitude about the game at hand is positive. They see it as the opportunity it

is. And my sense is that they think they're better than last year's Buckeyes. I do too.

They may still be fielding a team less talented than the USC Trojans this Saturday night, but I feel safe in saying that they will not be under-prepared or under-motivated.

So we'll see.

### Strength vs Strength

Games like this are analyzed to death in advance by football people more adept at such things than I am, so I don't purport to offer up any blinding insights on "X's and O's". There's plenty of that available elsewhere, and I'll link to some of it at the end of the article for those of you that haven't been getting smacked in the face with it all week.

But it does seem clear to me that the teams will match strengths when the Trojan offense goes against the OSU defense, and when the Buckeyes have the ball, the two units with notable question marks will be squaring off.

Even with a true freshman starting at QB, the Trojans have a formidable offensive team. They go four-deep with prep All-Americans at running back, headlined by Joe McKnight (12 carries, 105 yds, 8.8 ypc. vs OSU in '08), Stafon Johnson, the Trojan's leading rusher for the last two seasons, and C.J. Gable who piled up 617 yards and 8 TD's in 2008. Then throw in Allen Bradford, a 5'11", 235 lb. senior who looked great in the season opener last week. They say the USC waterboy can run the ball a little bit too.

The receivers are just as impressive, with seniors David Ausberry (6' 4", 235) and Damian Williams (6'1", 195) leading a cast of thousands. Tight end Anthony McCoy is another weapon for the Trojans, and they'll bring on fresh bodies at that position all night.

The offensive line, supposedly a question mark for them last year, is no longer questioned at all. They have one of the best units in the country, even with starting center Kris O'Dowd down with a dislocated kneecap. Jeff Byers, one of the best guards in the nation, moves over to center, and the Trojans return starting tackle Charles Brown (6'6", 285) on the left side, and touted sophomore Tyron Smith (6' 6", 285) steps in at right tackle. Butch Lewis and Alex Parsons start at the guards for the Trojans.

At the helm is freshman Matt Barkley, the "Terrelle Pryor of 2009", that is, the top recruit in the country at any position his senior year. He proved ready for the challenge of starting at USC in the opener against San Jose St. last week, completing 15 of 19 passes for 233 yards and a touchdown. He got off to a slow start, failing to drive the Trojans to scores in their first five possessions, but made up for it by leading six TD drives after the start of the second quarter in a 56-3 USC rout.

Carroll took the pressure off of the kid by calling short and intermediate routes, making liberal

use of the running backs and tight ends in the passing game, a trend sure to continue Saturday in Columbus. But Barkley has a strong and accurate arm, and no shortage of guts to go with it. Don't be surprised to see him throw the ball aggressively downfield at times against the Buckeyes, especially if Carroll senses that the Buckeyes doubt he'll do it.

The challenge for the Buckeye defense of course, is to confuse Barkley...and hit Barkley...and harass Barkley into making some mental and physical mistakes. But if they don't slow down the Trojan rushing attack, none of that will matter. Seven different players (not counting Mark Sanchez) had rushing attempts against OSU last year, and USC rushed for 164 yards in the game, balanced by 184 yards passing by Sanchez and Corp. That was plenty, considering the Trojans scored a TD on defense, and completely bottled up the OSU offense after halftime.

The Ohio State defensive line, the ostensible strength of the team, will be put to the test against the strong offensive front of the Trojans. If USC can control that matchup and dominate the line of scrimmage, it will be a long night for the Bucks. The Buckeye linebackers will have to cover McKnight and his running back mates out of the backfield, so look for Jermale Hines to be on the field more than Austin Spitler, whose lack of top end speed at the outside linebacker spot could be exploited by the short passing game of USC.

And the interior of the OSU defensive line, with Dexter Larimore, Doug Worthington and Cam Heyward, will have to keep the USC rushing game under control on the inside. It will be tough to rattle the freshman quarterback if all he has to do is hand the ball off.

So we'll see.

### Pryor's Time to Shine

The USC defensive unit that snuffed out the Buckeye offense after halftime last year put eight players into the NFL this offseason, so there were some holes to fill from the stable of blue-chip talent sitting on Pete Carroll's 2008 bench. And it won't be enough for the OSU defense to hold down the explosive Trojan offense in this game if the Buckeyes are to have a chance to win it. Pryor and the OSU offense are probably going to have to score at least 20 points to have a shot. And this year, with a somewhat green Trojan defense and a more confident and experienced Pryor, it looks like that could happen.

Like last year, the Buckeye offense will be playing USC without Beanie Wells, and they'll have to run the ball more effectively than last year in order to win the game. Dan Herron had 51 yards rushing on 11 carries in the game, a respectable performance against a star-studded defensive unit, and he'll be counted on to give OSU another good effort Saturday. Pryor had 50 yards running the ball himself (40 net yds) but he and Boeckman were under a relentless rush all night as the Bucks were forced to play catch-up. It should be a different story this year, if only because Pryor has the full playbook at his disposal, a year of seasoning behind him, and a younger, if no less talented Trojan defense coming at him.

USC will likely come out with Everson Griffin and Wes Horton at the defensive ends, and Christian Tupou and sophomore Jurrell Casey at the tackles. Injuries to starting end Armond Armstead and tackle Averell Spicer have thinned the Trojans on the line, but depth abounds on this team.

All the 2008 starting linebackers (and one who didn't start) got drafted, but the Trojans think their 2009 unit may be even faster than the guys who graduated. In the middle is Chris Galippo, starting for the first time, but a stud prospect and a big hitter who had nine tackles in the opener. Flanking him will be juniors Michael Morgan and Malcolm Smith, both of whom had extensive playing experience last year, and have stepped right into the system as starters.

The secondary is anchored by Taylor Mays, twice a first team All-American safety, who brings a scary combination of size (6' 3", 235) and speed (reported 4.25 in the 40), and who hits like a truck. Cornerback Shareece Wright was an academic casualty this year, but able cornerbacks are on the scene. Josh Pinkard and Kevin Thomas will start, and senior strong safety Will Harris rounds out an excellent unit.

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For the Buckeyes to put up enough points to win, they will have to harness the immense talents of Terrelle Pryor and ride him to victory.

All of the offseason coaching on Pryor's passing mechanics and footwork...all of the film study and mental preparation...all of the hours on the practice field working with new receivers...all of the cultivation of his natural leadership skills....all of it...has pointed toward this Saturday night.

Every offensive wrinkle Jim Tressel decided not to show to Navy last week...every trick play...every lesson the coach absorbed from visiting other college programs in the offseason...every bit of big-game coaching acumen the critics say he lacks....all of it....is to be targeted at USC this Saturday night.

So we'll see....

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And along with the many things we'll see that we never expected to see (one of the great joys of watching college football)...we'll also see...

...if the OSU defensive ends are capable of pressuring and rattling the freshman QB of the Trojans.

...if the OSU offensive line can man up and open holes for Buckeye running backs, including

Pryor.

...if OSU linebackers can cover USC running backs out of the backfield.

...if Jim Tressel can make halftime adjustments equal to or better than Pete Carroll's adjustments, and offset Carroll's amazing USC track record of dominant 3rd quarter performances.

...if the OSU staff's coaching of Terrelle Pryor will maximize his off-the-charts physical abilities.

...if the Buckeyes have the pride, the guts and the spirit to take it to the USC Trojans for four quarters, and beat them, if not with pure talent, then with whatever else it takes to do it.

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No predictions. Don't make me say it again....

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**Links:**

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

[ESPN.com Game Preview](#)

[Bucknuts - Steve Helwagen](#) - Transcript of OSU-USC Chat

[BuckeyeSports.com - Jeff Svoboda Game Preview](#)

[Bucknuts - Craig Haubert](#) - on the recruiting significance of the game

[2008 OSU-USC Game recap](#)