



Two seemingly contradictory statements about Ohio State and USC both somehow ring true after Saturday's 18-15 Trojan victory in Columbus. USC probably has the superior team...and Ohio State should have won the game. It was a contest that for me evoked memories of a duel with USC 30 years ago, one that ended almost identically, which is to say...heartbreakingly.

First of all, kudos to the Buckeye players, who were emotionally ready, and played an inspired game throughout. They competed with great spirit, made some big plays offensively, dominated the game with their defense for long stretches, and exceeded the expectations of many of their own fans.

They led in the game in the closing moments of both halves before lapsing somewhat on defense and allowing late Trojan scores, the first one inexcusable, and the last one decisive. But missed opportunities, questionable coaching and a couple of big mistakes cost the Buckeyes the victory just as much as their distressing recent inability to...as they say..."finish".

Here We Go Again

Some of the same issues that have plagued the Buckeyes during the losing streak (now at six) against Top 5 opponents were in evidence again Saturday night. Things like...failing to convert deep red-zone opportunities into touchdowns...silly procedure penalties hurting offensive continuity...an offensive system that habitually adds up to less than the sum of its individual parts....and those late defensive struggles. In the end, it was hard to escape the conclusion that the Ohio State players couldn't overcome their own head coach.

Time and again, Tressel's conservatism on offense has made games closer than they should be, requiring perfect execution by his team to avoid the one mistake that could beat him. And against the very best teams, sometimes those mistakes get made...a fumble against Penn State, a broken tackle against Texas....and of course the many, many games that get forgotten because they end up (often narrowly) in the win column...the ones against the Purdues, Northwesterns and Bowling Greens on the schedule.

On this night, the familiar lack of imagination on offense was perhaps more frustrating than the occasional lack of execution, which can be expected against good teams, and which was just as much a problem for the USC offensive unit. As just one example, OSU had three offensive possessions in the all important third quarter, and on all three the first play call was a rush by

Dan Herron between the tackles for, respectively, zero, one and two yard gains. The first two of those drives started in USC territory, and one of them did result in an OSU field goal, but the message delivered by those calls, to USC and to his own team, was that he had no better idea than to repeat the plays USC had stuffed down on the goal line in the second quarter, the last time he had sniffed the USC end zone without actually landing in it.

Late in the 1st quarter, when he had a 1st and goal on the 2-yard line after a 34-yard completion to DeVier Posey, the coach did try a pass play on first down, as Pryor missed tight end Jake Ballard in the end zone. A little touch on that throw by Pryor, and it's a TD, and you can't fault the coach for that. But if I can be permitted a little second-guessing here...running Herron off the left side twice in a row...on plays that develop slowly and require a handoff four yards deep before the forward motion gets started, seemed less likely to succeed than say, sneaking from inside the two with my 6' 6", 240 lb. superstar QB. But that's just me.

Ironically, at the one moment in the game that called for conservatism, Tressel wouldn't allow it. With OSU leading 10-7, with 1:49 left in the first half, and USC out of timeouts, he called pass plays on two of three downs. The resulting incompletions forced OSU to punt the ball back to USC with 48 seconds and 80 yards to go, and (somehow) they tied the game before the half, narrowly missing a go-ahead touchdown.

I know, I'm criticizing the man's lack of offensive aggressiveness, and in the same breath, faulting him for putting the ball in the air when he had a chance to score before the half. (I never said covering the game is harder than coaching it, did I?) The first down deep throw is understandable, an attempt to hit a big play down the field against all expectations. But to throw again on 3rd and long with the half winding down to a minute...just not smart. Those three points are all on JT. What was the margin of victory again?

Bottled Up

Terrelle Pryor had an inconsistent night against a solid Trojan defense determined not to allow the best Buckeye athlete to beat them, especially to the outside. He threw the ball erratically, going 11 of 25, including the early interception that cost OSU seven points. He showed that he still has a long way to go to become a complete quarterback, but he did set up the first two OSU scores with big completions in the vertical passing game. Several throws were off target though, even when there wasn't a lot of pressure, and the kid appeared to be pressing just a bit. He showed how dominant he can be at one point in the 4th quarter when he picked up a first down with a 17-yard run on a 3rd and 14 play, when everyone in the place knew that was probably the only way the Buckeyes could convert.

Pryor took just one sack, but it was at a crucial juncture on OSU's last possession before USC scored the go-ahead TD. The Buckeyes were up 15-10, and had a 3rd and 7 at the USC 32, well within the field goal range of kicker Aaron Pettrey. The most important thing the coaches should have made Pryor aware of was that he could not afford to lose yardage, and to throw the ball away if a sack was imminent. But even after the sack, and with a kicker who has the leg to

drill it through from 60 yards or more, Tressel decided to punt from the USC 36-yard line with a 5-point lead, rather than try a 53-yarder....and it cost him.

The 30-Year Itch

It wasn't until the Buckeyes added the 3rd quarter field goal to make the score 15-10 that I started thinking about the Rose Bowl following the 1979 season, when USC, down 16-10, started a drive late (5:31) in the 4th quarter, and used almost all the time on the clock on their way to a game-winning touchdown, preventing the previously unbeaten Buckeyes from winning the national championship by a 17-16 score.

The Trojans were littered with future NFL players, including Hall of Famers Marcus Allen and Anthony Munoz. The drive featured tailback Charles White (see Joe McKnight) taking handoffs from QB Paul McDonald and running behind Munoz and Brad Budde, as White accounted for 70 of the 83 yards in the drive, and scored the go-ahead TD on a dive from the 2-yard line. An OSU defense that had been tough on the Trojans all day couldn't make the stops when the game was on the line.

A little [memory refresher](#) turned up even more similarities to Saturday's game. The Trojans got off to an early lead before the Buckeyes battled back to tie the game, which went to halftime at 10-10. In the first half, Art Schlichter connected on a long completion to Gary Williams down to the USC 2-yard line, but a goal-line stand by the Trojans turned the Bucks away without a touchdown. See what I mean?

Incidentally...the OSU defensive backs coach that day? [Here he is](#) talking about the game.

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

The Good -□

* Jermale Hines replacing Anderson Russell at safety worked well. Hines is physical against the run, and can cover as well as AR. Kurt Coleman moved fairly seamlessly to free safety as Hines took over at strong safety.

* The defensive line played well overall, standing up very well against the vaunted USC offensive line, (*which had somehow, in the week before the OSU game, morphed from a pretty good unit with a couple of injuries, into the reincarnation of the 1978 Steelers.*)

* On the DL, Todd Denlinger, Cam Heyward and Dexter Larimore had solid performances for the Bucks. By the way, freshman Jonny Simon was in there at defensive tackle in the fourth quarter with the game on the line. That young man has a bright future.

*The OSU cornerbacks also had strong showings, as both Chimdi Chekwa and Devon Torrence

looked good in run support against the outside rushing attack of USC. Torrence had an outstanding game in coverage too, breaking up a pass and getting a sack of Matt Barkley. Andre Amos also played well, alternating with Torrence.

* Despite the late TD drive, criticism of the Buckeye defense seems a bit misplaced. Discount the first USC score which resulted from the Pryor interception when the Trojans started on the OSU 3-yard line, and the defense gave up 11 points. Eleven. That's a winning performance anyway you slice it. Linebackers Brian Rolle (8) and Ross Homan (9) led the Buckeyes in tackles, (Torrence also had 8) and controlled the USC rushing game..at least for the first 55 minutes.

* WR DeVier Posey looked fully recovered from his ankle sprain, and showed the stuff OSU fans have been expecting from the sophomore this year, with six catches for 81 yards.

* Brandon Saine proved he can catch the ball well out of the backfield. More, please.

* Punter Jon Thoma was a star of the game, with 6 punts for a 38.7 yd average, and zero total return yards for USC. Four punts downed inside the USC 20...and zip on returns for the entire game.

The Bad -

* Pryor seemed impatient at times, even when not pressured. He would often lock in on a primary receiver right from the snap, so much so that a few times he tried to force it in even when the receiver was well-covered.

* Though the offensive line blocked and protected Pryor well in general, when OSU was held to a field goal after a 1st and goal at the 2, the left side of the line was blown up by the USC defense, as the execution at crunch time is still a problem on the OL.

* OSU averaged just 2.9 yards per rushing attempt, with just 88 net yards rushing in the game, including 44 for Herron and 36 for Pryor. With Pryor getting 17 yards on one carry, his other nine carries netted just 19 yards. Credit the USC defense for delivering that unexpected result. And it's no slam on Dan Herron to note that he's not Chris Wells. OSU is good, not great, at running back.

* There's too much talent on the offensive side of the ball for Ohio State for them to generate just 13 points...at home...against a team replacing 8 starters on defense...with outstanding field position most of the night.

The Ugly -

* In a game like that, on a night like that, the only thing ugly was the final score.

Links:

[OSU Athletic Communications - Game Stats](#)