



Saturday, September 19, 2009

Cleveland Browns Stadium; Cleveland, Ohio

Ohio State vs U. of Toledo

12:00 p.m. (ET)

TV: ESPN-Plus - WEWS Ch.5 Cleveland (ABC)

On the Rebound

Ohio State will try to bounce back from their tough loss against USC when they play the first Buckeye game ever at Cleveland Browns Stadium Saturday against the Toledo Rockets. It's just the second meeting for the two schools, as OSU holds a 1-0 record with a 49-0 win over the Rockets in 1998.

Last season the Bucks played their annual contest against a Mid-American Conference opponent in the week preceding the USC game, and squeaked by against Ohio University in one of their more uninspired performances of recent years. This season, instead of looking forward to a meeting with the Trojans, the Buckeyes must avoid looking back. After dropping a heartbreaker to USC, and barely hanging on against a resilient Navy team, the Buckeyes (1-1) are still looking for their first fully satisfying game of the season.

In Toledo (1-1), the Buckeyes will face a team that has a wide open spread attack, and ranks among the nation's top offenses after two games, but which also has struggled to stop the opponent on defense, giving up almost as many yards as they have gained. The Rockets will be led by first-year head coach Tim Beckman, who will look across the field Saturday and see in Jim Tressel not just a familiar face and a former boss, but a longtime family friend.

Family Ties

Beckman spent two seasons (2005-6) on Tressel's OSU staff as cornerbacks coach, but the ties go back much further than that. Beckman's father Dave played for Tressel's father Lee, when the elder Tressel coached at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, and the two families grew close after that. Dave Beckman baby-sat for a young Jim Tressel, and Lee Tressel became something of a father figure for young Tim Beckman when his father died shortly after Tim went away to college. But after the niceties are all over with Saturday, Beckman will be doing his best to knock off his fellow Berea High School grad.

Beckman's career as a head coach is getting off to a high-profile start. In just his second game at Toledo, he played a home game on national TV against a Big 12 Conference opponent, and his Rockets made it look easy as they crushed the Colorado Buffaloes, running out to a 30-3 lead early, and coasting home [54-38](#) . Next up is a rare opportunity to play Ohio State away from Columbus, a chance afforded no other MAC team in the Tressel era at OSU, and the closest thing to a home game any MAC team is likely to get anytime soon. It is officially a home game for the Rockets, who will play the second game in the series in Columbus in 2011.

The opener for Toledo was a game similar to the Colorado contest, with the opposite outcome for the Rockets. Purdue struck early, taking a 21-0 lead, and the Boilermakers led 31-14 at halftime. The game was 45-14 in the third before the Rockets closed with 17 points in garbage time, losing [52-31](#) . The two constants in the Rockets two 2009 starts: a potent offense....and no defense whatsoever.

Lots of Weapons

The Rockets' offense is triggered by quarterback Aaron Opelt, a 6' 2", 219 lb. senior who comes into the game leading Division 1-A in total offense with a 437.0 yards per game average. He is 56 of 90 passing (62.2%) for 742 yards and seven touchdowns, with two interceptions. Opelt threw the ball a mind-boggling 69 times in the loss to Purdue, passing for 423 yards and three TD's, while the Rockets rushing attack totaled only 70 yards for the game.

Against Colorado, they showed more balance on offense, as Opelt passed for 319 yards and four TD's, and he chipped in with a 61-yard TD run on the way to a 305-yard rushing day for Toledo as a team. That rushing game should improve this week with the return from suspension of tailback Morgan Williams, a Canton McKinley product who was the Rockets best rusher a season ago (1010 yds, 6 TD, 6.0 ypc). He joins DeJuane Collins (700 yds, 5 TD, 5.5 ypc) to form a respectable pair of backs to go along with Opelt, who rushed for five TD's himself in 2008.

At receiver the Rockets have size and speed, with senior Stephen Williams (6' 5", 200) providing a lot of both, and freshman Eric Page (5' 10", 165) as another deep threat. Williams had 71 receptions and 8 touchdowns a year ago, and Page has caused problems downfield for the Rockets' first two opponents in 2009, with 12 catches and a TD against Purdue, and 3 catches, including a 70-yard TD, against Colorado. Two other big receivers, sophomore Kenny Stafford (6' 4", 195) and Robin Bailey (6' 5", 230) are Opelt's other targets in the multiple receiver sets in the spread.

The Rockets' offensive line returns all five starters from the 2008 team, and the tackles, John Morookian and Mike VanDerMeulen are mentioned in the preseason All-MAC conversations. As a unit, they average over 300 pounds, and their performance opening holes for the running game looked a lot better in the second game than in the opener at Purdue.

Almost Defenseless

On defense, the Rockets just do not appear to have enough size or talent to match up well against the Buckeyes. The defensive line is quite small, with senior tackle Derrick Summers perhaps the best of the group at 6' 2", 258. The starting ends weigh just 233 and 244, and as a group, they have struggled to stop the run.

At linebacker, Archie Donald on the outside and Beau Brudzinski (son of former Buckeye Bob Brudzinski) in the middle, are the leading tacklers for the Rockets. Far and away the best defensive player for Toledo is safety Barry Church (6' 2", 219), a three-time All-MAC performer, and a legitimate NFL prospect. He plays the Star position, a hybrid LB/Safety spot (similar to Jermale Hines' role for OSU), and is all over the field making plays on the ball-carrier and the ball.

The secondary replaces a couple of starters from last year, but they have nine guys back there who have started at least one game for Toledo, so the depth might help overcome the lack of experience.

Toledo runs a 4-2-5 defense that takes a lot of chances, especially with the blitz, and therefore gives up a lot of big plays. They have six interceptions in two games, but they have been hurt badly by the passing games of both early 2009 opponents. On paper, it looks like an ideal opponent to function as a confidence-builder for Terrelle Pryor and the OSU rushing attack. The Buckeyes offense should be able to wear down the smaller Rockets as the game goes along, and as long as they strike a balance between run and pass, should be able to have their way with the Toledo defense. The Rockets will be starting freshmen at both cornerback spots, giving Pryor and the receivers the opportunity to exploit a whole lot of inexperience.

Among 120 FBS (Division 1-A) schools, the Rockets are 107th in the nation in rushing defense (205.0 yards per game), 110th in total defense (493.0 yards) and 115th in points allowed (45.0)

On the other side of the ball, it would be an understatement to say that Toledo has not faced a defense as good as the Ohio State Buckeyes, a unit that has held both Navy and USC under their rushing averages. But neither have the Buckeyes yet faced a team with the passing prowess of Toledo, given USC's freshman starter at QB and Navy's preference for the rushing game. One assumes the Toledo offense will see their 558 yards per game average go down significantly this Saturday against an OSU defense that controlled the USC Trojans a week ago. But it would be a mistake to think the Rockets will be intimidated by anyone, given the recent schedule they have played.

Not only does Coach Beckman give them an insiders perspective in terms of his familiarity with what the Buckeye coaching staff will be trying to do, but these Rockets went into Ann Arbor last year and beat Michigan, and also traveled to U. of Arizona in 2008 before meeting Big Ten and Big 12 opponents already in 2009. They have the Buckeyes on a neutral field in their home state, and while the crowd at CBS is likely to be a partisan Buckeye gathering, Toledo has a puncher's chance to play enough offense to put double-digit points on the board against OSU, and take it from there. My guess is that the Rockets' defense gives up at least twice as many points as they score. I'll guess 38-17.

Buckeye Notes:

- Three-year starter Jim Cordle, starting this season at right offensive tackle, is out with an ankle injury for the next 3-4 weeks. The ankle was injured before the USC game, but Cordle played on it the whole game, and then this week submitted to an MRI, and was shut down. The exact nature of the injury hasn't been disclosed.
- Working against the spread, we might see more Buckeyes seeing action to keep players fresh, especially DB's. Coach Fickell mentioned CB Travis Howard and safety Orhian Johnson as two guys who might see some action from scrimmage this week.
- OSU running back Dan Herron has scored at least one touchdown in six consecutive games.
- This is the first time the Buckeyes have played in Cleveland since 1991, when they beat Northwestern 34-3 at Cleveland Stadium.

Links:

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

[2009 OSU Roster](#)

[2009 Toledo Roster](#)