



*Saturday, September 26, 2009*

*Ohio Stadium; Columbus, Ohio*

*Illinois at Ohio State*

*3:30 p.m. (ET)*

TV: ABC

In the week leading up to this year's Illinois game, no Ohio State player will be permitted to forget that the last time the Fighting Illini played in the Horseshoe, in November of 2007, they [knocked off](#) the undefeated and top-ranked Buckeyes, 28-21. In fact, all the Buckeyes need to guard against overconfidence this week is the knowledge that Illinois has won seven of the last ten times these two teams have met at Ohio Stadium.

What is less widely acknowledged is that since that momentous victory for coach Ron Zook's troops, the Illini have not often played at the level of the talented team that took down the nation's No. 1 that day in Columbus. Since that win over the Buckeyes, Illinois has an overall record of 7-9, including a 5-7 mark in 2008, and a 1-1 record so far this season.

Some cite [the beatdown the Illini took](#) at the hands of USC in the Rose Bowl after the '07 season as a negative turning point from which Ron Zook and his players are still trying to recover. (And if any team can relate to the effect a lopsided post-season loss like that can have on a team's psyche, it would be the Buckeyes, no?) Fans looking for a more tangible explanation might note an Illinois offense that, while talented and explosive, has been inconsistent, and a defense that has wavered between average and awful.

Favored by a touchdown over a supposedly rebuilding Missouri team in their opener, the Illini were [waxed 37-9](#) by the Tigers, and while Illinois' best player, receiver Arrelious Benn, was sidelined for the game, the other 21 starters reportedly showed up...and were shown up. In Week Two, the Illini beat up Illinois State [45-17](#), in a game that saw quarterback Juice Williams leave early with a hamstring injury. After a bye week, both Benn and Williams are expected to be healthy for Saturday's game, and they will lead the conference's most potent offense into the Horseshoe, where they have a better record than any other Big Ten opponent over the past 20 years.

### Illini Firepower

Coach Zook is replacing two offensive line starters from last year's team, but outside that, Illinois returns intact the offense that ranked first in the Big Ten in yards per game (427.1) in 2008. In last year's meeting with the Buckeyes, [a 30-20 OSU win](#), the Illini outgained Ohio State 455 yards to the Buckeyes 354 yards, but lost the game on crucial turnovers and special teams blunders. What is not in doubt is their ability to pick up yardage in large chunks. In his last two games against the Buckeyes, Juice Williams has 450 yards of total offense, and Illinois has 855 total yards as a team in the two games. What it adds up to is an offense that can be extremely dangerous if they don't self-destruct.

Williams is in his fourth year as the Illini starter at quarterback, and is coming off his best year, having passed for 3173 yards, with 22 TD's, 16 interceptions, and a 57.3 completion percentage in 2008. He rushed for an additional 719 yards and scored five touchdowns rushing, all of which made him far and away the Big Ten leader in total offense at 324.3 yds. per game. (His dominance of that category is best illustrated by noting the second place finisher in total offense, Northwestern's C.J. Bacher, at 242 yards per game.) His passing yardage total (3173 yds) also far outdistanced the second place finisher, PSU's Daryll Clark (2592 yds)

Williams has been dogged by inconsistency, however. Too often the big yardage numbers have not translated to Illinois victories, and while that's not the fault of any one player, Williams has struggled at times with interceptions, fumbles and overall erratic play, and that has kept him from being included in the conversations about the nation's best QB's. But for one game...especially for 60 minutes at Ohio Stadium...he's as dangerous a talent at QB as there is in the country.

The Illinois receiving corps is big, deep and talented. Arrelious Benn is the marquee name of course, but Williams has plenty of other targets. Benn caught 67 passes a year ago, for 1055 yards and a 15.7 yd average, but somewhat surprisingly, had just 3 touchdown catches. The junior has NFL size (6' 2", 220) and great speed, and this year he'll have another big-time playmaker playing opposite him in Jarred Fayson (6' 0", 215) who transferred from Florida after playing on the '06 championship team for the Gators. Jeff Cumberland, from Columbus Brookhaven (6' 5", 255) might be the biggest wide receiver in the country, and Glenville's Cordale Scott (6' 3", 215) only looks small by comparison. Did I mention these guys are big?

If there's one element the Illini haven't been able to replace from the 2007 Rose Bowl team, it's an every down running back the caliber of Rashard Mendenhall. Juice Williams led the Illini in rushing from the quarterback spot in 2008, with his 719 yards, and that's never a desirable outcome for a pro style offense. Daniel Dufrene (663 yds in '08) and Jason Ford (294 yds, 8 TD in '08) were the top two tailbacks in 2008, and both return this year. Dufrene missed the Missouri game with an ankle injury, and Ford didn't play in the second half for the same reason, but against Illinois State, they combined for 198 yards rushing, as Ford led the way with 137 yards.

Left tackle Jeff Allen, center Eric Block and right guard Jon Asamoah are returning starters on the Illinois offensive line, and North Canton's Ryan Palmer is a first-year starter at the other tackle spot this year. Tight end Michael Hoomanawanui is a sixth O-lineman at 6' 5", 270, and he also caught 25 passes with 2 TD receptions last year.

### Strength vs Strength

The Illini will try to control the ball and the clock, just as they did when they beat OSU two years ago, but this time the running game isn't the threat it was then. The offense, the obvious strength of the Illinois team, will be matched up against a Buckeye defense that is clearly the Buckeyes' better unit. The game should be a good test for the OSU defensive backs, as they try to contend with the size and athleticism of the Illinois receivers. The task for the defensive line and linebackers will be to contain Williams, and limit the damage he is able to inflict on them on the ground.

The Buckeye strategy against the spread has been to try to pressure the QB with the front four, plus occasional blitzes from LB's Jermale Hines, Ross Homan and Brian Rolle, and then to make the receivers pay for making the short and intermediate catches with big hits from the likes of Homan and Rolle and DB's Kurt Coleman, Devon Torrence, Andre Amos and Chimdi Chekwa. The Bucks rely on speed and sure tackling on defense, and as the game goes along, the big hits tend to cause fumbles, tipped balls and tentative receivers looking over their shoulders for Silver Bullets.

With both Williams and Benn a little banged up in recent weeks, it will be interesting to see how they hold up over four quarters in Columbus. The depth this year on the OSU defensive front is something Williams hasn't seen in his career against Ohio State, and the Buckeyes' ability to harass him with a ten-man rotation this time around could be one of the keys to the game.

### Continuous Improvement?

When the Buckeyes have the football, they'll be looking to continue defining their offensive personality under sophomore quarterback Terrelle Pryor. Pryor had a solid game last week, reaching career highs in pass attempts (27), completions (17) and passing yardage (262), in addition to rushing for 110 yards in the win over Toledo. The Buckeyes called his number on

rushing attempts a few more times than in the first two games, and he responded with several healthy gains on the ground, including a 43-yard run.

The passing game clicked early, and the 76-yard TD pass on the third offensive play took some of the pressure of the first two weeks off Pryor's shoulders, and he did a good job of running the offense the rest of the day. Pryor's only other 100-yard rushing day was last year...in the Illinois game, and with the problems the Illini defense has been having to this point in 2009, he could be in for another stellar day.

The season is young for Illinois, but the pass defense in the first two games has to be a major concern for Zook and his staff. The defense had just five starters returning this year...and that was before they lost LB Martez Wilson, perhaps their best defensive player, for the season with a neck injury. They gave up 325 yards passing to Missouri, and then 354 yards in the air against Illinois State. The rush defense has been better, but perhaps only because Illinois State was way behind (24-0 at half) and passing by necessity. Missouri got 117 rushing yards out of their spread.

Illinois does have some strength in the defensive front, with end Doug Pilcher and defensive tackle Josh Brent the best of that group. Sirod Williams returns at defensive tackle after missing time with an injury in '08, and Corey Liuget is a promising youngster in the DT rotation. Massillon's Antonio James starts at the defensive end opposite Pilcher.

Ian Thomas is a standout at linebacker, but overall the linebacker group is very young and inexperienced, and now more so with Wilson out. In the secondary, three starters are back for the Illini, but they have been victimized by big plays and poor tackling, both last year and early in 2009. Illinois held Pryor in check last year, giving up just 49 yards passing, but Pryor and Wells combined for 253 yards rushing that day, as the Bucks led early and controlled the game on the ground throughout. This year, look for the Buckeyes to try to exploit the pass defense of the Illini, including some shots at big plays in the downfield passing game.

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With both teams lacking a dominant running back, the team that can somehow establish the rushing game early will give their dual-threat quarterback the advantage in this game. And if both quarterbacks are on top of their games, this could be one of the more entertaining contests we have a chance to watch all year. Two of the most dynamic, athletic quarterbacks in the game today strutting their stuff on a fast track in Columbus. What's not to like about that?

I think the combination of the home field and the better defense will carry the day for the Buckeyes. They have controlled Benn in the first two meetings of his career, and even if Williams gets his 250-300 yards of total offense, I think the OSU defense will force a couple of turnovers, and get points as a result. Pryor and the OSU offense should be able to puncture a questionable Illini defense, and the Buckeyes will prevail...I'm saying 31-17.

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Illinois' Ron Zook is the third straight coach of an OSU opponent to have served as an OSU assistant coach. (Tim Beckman of Toledo, Pete Carroll of USC). Zook is another in the long line of successful coaches from the famed ["Cradle of Coaches"](#) , Miami University in Oxford, OH.

### Links:

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[2009 Illinois Roster](#)

[2009 OSU Roster](#)