

The Week That Was: Illinois

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Monday, September 28 2009 7:00 PM -

Eight consecutive quarters. And counting. That's how long it's been since an opponent scored anything- touchdown or field goal- against Ohio State's defense. Since allowing the late touchdown to USC on the night of September 12, the Buckeyes have pitched two consecutive shutouts, the latest being last Saturday's 30-0 drenching of reeling Illinois at the rain-drenched Horseshoe. It's the first time since 1996 Ohio State has applied the whitewash to back-to-back opponents. Jesse takes a look back at the win, and the rest of the week's college football action in The Week That Was.



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We even saw some progress with the offense, the zero first-half passing yards notwithstanding. Displaying a commitment to the zone-read that wasn't evident the first three weeks, Ohio State spread the field and rolled through a poor-tackling Illinois defense for 236 yards on the ground. The Buckeyes were sharp in the red zone, scoring touchdowns three of the four times they got inside the Illinois 20, and outside of a Terrelle Pryor fumble when the game was no longer in doubt, did a nice job taking care of a slick football all game (Ray Small also had a fumble, but that was on special teams.)

Really, this game served as yet another vindication for Tressel Ball, especially in

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Big Ten play. With the kind of weather conditions that prevailed Saturday field position, the kicking game, defense and a mistake-free offense are at a premium, and in those categories, the Vest's teams are almost always going to be the best on the field- particularly in the conference. The conservative formula hasn't been very effective against non-conference elite opponents lately, but it works just as well as ever against the likes of Ron Zook.

Play of the Game: The Buckeyes made several tremendous plays on the defensive end Saturday, but none bigger than Brian Rolle's first-quarter interception and long return that set up Ohio State's first score of the game. Not only did the pick provide at least a six-point swing on the scoreboard, it also changed field position, a priceless commodity in the rainy, difficult conditions that prevailed Saturday. The play set the tone in permanent ink- from then on it was Ohio State's game.

Total Domination: That was what Thaddeus Gibson put on display on the first possession of the second half for Illinois. With Ohio State leading 13-0 and the Illini starting the half on their own 12-yard line, Gibson made the following three plays:

- First Down: Trapped Juice Williams for a five-yard loss.
- Second Down: Drilled Juice on a five-yard pass play that moved the ball back to the original line of scrimmage.
- Third Down: Ran down Juice from behind and stripped him of the football. Illinois recovered, but had to punt from deep in its own territory. Ohio State drove to the touchdown that effectively ended the game on its next possession.

I'd love to see Thad come back for his senior season, but I'm not counting on it. A guy with that kind of size and speed is going to look very attractive to NFL defenses. Let's enjoy him while he's here, because I have a feeling it won't be for long. Really, I'm just hoping one of either Gibson or Cam Heyward is back as a senior in 2010.

Kudos for Big Mr. Wilson: Lawrence Wilson's career at Ohio State has consisted of an injury-plagued series of starts and stops, but he's healthy now and, like his fellow Buckeye defensive linemen Robert Rose and Doug Worthington, he's enjoying a senior renaissance. Wilson had one of his team's three interceptions on Saturday, and his in particular was a thing of beauty, as he tipped a Juice Williams pass high in the air then scrambled to come down with it. Not only was Wilson's play an aesthetic tour-de-force, it killed an Illinois drive that had reached into Ohio State territory midway through the third quarter.

Cast of Thousands: Thad Gibson. Cameron Heyward. Dexter Larimore. Todd Denlinger. Doug Worthington. Nathan Williams. Lawrence Wilson. John Simon. Robert Rose. If there is a college defensive line out there with more depth than Ohio State's- please, let me know.

Dirty Kurt: Ohio State will have to find a way to beat Indiana without Kurt Coleman, who was [suspended a game](#) by the Big Ten for his attempted decapitation of Illinois backup quarterback Eddie McGee late in the fourth quarter Saturday. I have no problem with the suspension- it was a clearly a helmet-to-helmet hit, looked dirty from here, and frankly, Ohio State should be able to beat Indiana without Kurt Coleman anyway, good as he is. But I'm not going to deny that I sort of liked the spirit in which Coleman delivered the blow, and the message it sends to teams slated to face the Buckeyes down the road. I'm glad Eddie McGee wasn't injured by the questionable hit, and I'm also glad this Ohio State defense plays fast, aggressive, and with an edge.

Got to give the Vest credit: He may not be Bill Walsh in terms of play-calling and innovation, but at least he isn't standing pat on the offensive side of the football. Last Saturday, for the first time this season, the Buckeyes ran perhaps the majority of their plays out of the read-option look, and lo and behold, it proved very successful (albeit against an Illinois defense that is shorthanded and not very tough even at full strength.) Clearly Terrelle Pryor is more experienced and more comfortable in the read-option than in other formations, and just as clearly the stable of micro-backs are more suited for the read-option than the Power-I. Of course, we shouldn't get too excited- at some point a big 4

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-and-one will come up, and you'd better believe that when the rubber meets the road, we'll see old "Dave" everyone's favorite iso running play, hauled out of mothballs just for the occasion.

I'll go out on a limb here: I have a feeling we as Ohio State fans have seen our last of Ron Zook craning his neck on the Illinois sideline. It's his fifth year in Champaign, those are his recruits on the field, running his schemes, and man, that team is *awful*. You aren't supposed to regress as a program, and without a doubt the Illini have regressed the last couple of years. Ron Zook has one winning season since he arrived at Illinois in 2005. That won't be enough to retain him, especially if this season goes into the toilet- which it certainly looks like it will.

No Big Ten program over the last two decades has had a tougher time achieving consistent success than Illinois. The Illini haven't had back-to-back winning seasons since 1989-90. Which is a little curious; with Chicago at one end of the state, St. Louis at the other, and Ohio relatively nearby, there would seem to be enough raw materials at hand to build a winner, or at least a team that can finish over .500 more than one year in a row.

Around the Nation

Game of the Week- Michigan-Indiana: You could say Texas Tech-Houston was a better game, and a more meaningful game, but I'm a Big Ten homer and I thought the Wolverines and Hoosiers played a fantastic one early Saturday afternoon. Michigan is now 4-0, with one

more victory than they had all last season, and although their defense isn't very good and they're damned lucky not to have lost to both Notre Dame and Indiana- 4-0 is still 4-0.

Indecent Exposure: Several would-be National Championship contenders got shown up as pretenders this past weekend. Mississippi, which had somehow gotten all the way to fourth in the polls, took a tumble Thursday night in Columbia. Penn State faced a quality opponent and lost. California, which spent one glorious week being feted as the team to beat in the Pac-10, took a pounding at the hands of Oregon. Miami got dropped like a bad habit by old nemesis Virginia Tech. And LSU didn't exactly look like title material in a narrow escape over Mississippi State. Even before this weekend, a general consensus seemed to be forming- that Florida, Texas and Alabama were the true contenders, with everyone else fighting for the nice parting gifts. Those perceptions certainly weren't hurt by what transpired last weekend.

Really though, the carnage in the bottom half of the top ten just served as another reminder of the uselessness and arbitrary nature of early-season college football polls. Honestly, did anyone ever *really* think Ole Miss was one of the five best teams in the land?

John David Crow Memorial Kick-Ass White Running Back of the Week: Stanford's Toby Gerhart rumbled through Washington's defense for 200 yards on 27 carries, including a 60-yard touchdown, as the Cardinal defeated the Huskies 34-14. Stanford, by the way, is 2-0 in the Pac-10 and hosts another somewhat surprising team next Saturday- 3-0 UCLA.

Season-Killing Injury of the Week: Baylor is off to a 3-1 start, but one doubts the finish to 2009 will be as idyllic. The Bears are going to have to play the rest of the way without sophomore sensation Robert Griffin, who never throws interceptions and runs with the approximate speed of sound. Griffin blew out his right knee late in the first half of Baylor's 68-13 trouncing of Northwestern State. The Bears still have one non-conference cakewalk remaining against Kent State, but then it's on to the rugged Big 12 South schedule, and it's going to be tough to eek out two conference wins- probably what Baylor needs to secure a bowl bid- without the phenomenon.

Winners of the Week

Oregon: On the opening night of the season Oregon looked like a team in disarray, losing their cool, their star running back, and the game to Boise State. Now, after hammering Cal 42-3, they look like a team that will speak with a loud voice in the Pac-10 title discussion.

Iowa: After barely hanging on against Northern Iowa on the opening Saturday, the Hawkeyes have looked increasingly formidable in whippings of Iowa State and Arizona, and climaxed their month-long rise with an impressive victory in Happy Valley. Playing at night among raindrops and White-Out conditions, Iowa played tough and opportunistic football, dominating the line of scrimmage and ruthlessly capitalizing on nearly every Penn State mistake. Adrian Clayborn's [punt-block and subsequent return](#)

for the game-winning touchdown might be the defensive play of the year in college football so far.

Idaho: After hanging on to defeat Northern Illinois 34-31, the 3-1 Vandals are off to their finest start since 1994, when John L. Smith was the head coach and the program was a member of the Division I-AA Big Sky Conference.

Houston: It's still early, but the Cougars have their BCS resume in order. Their thrilling 29-28 defeat of Texas Tech was their second of the season against a Big 12 opponent and sets them up for a run through a soft-looking Conference USA West Division, with a chance at a second road win over a BCS opponent when they go to Starkville and play Mississippi State in two weeks. But what's with the Houston fans storming the field after their ranked team had just beaten an unranked opponent? I mean, I know it was big game, but it's just Texas Tech. You've been to Cotton Bowls folks, you've been there before. Act like it!

Alabama: The Tide defense completely stifled Arkansas's high-powered attack, harassing Ryan Mallett into a 12-of-35 day and cruising over the Hogs, 35-7. Mallett was the top-ranked quarterback in the nation leading the second-ranked offense in the nation going, but both of those lofty statuses will take a hit after their mutual dismantling in Tuscaloosa.

Losers of the Week

California: Once again, Cal- and Kevin Riley- showed that it isn't ready for prime time in a 42-3 humiliation at the hands of Oregon in Autzen Stadium. Riley was awful, completing just 12-of-31 passes for 123 yards, while Oregon's Jeremiah Masoli had a career day, completing 20-of-25 for 253 yards and three touchdowns without an interception. The Ducks hammered the California defense for 524 total yards, held Jahvid Best to 55 yards on sixteen carries, and scored the last 42 unanswered points.

Miami: Maybe people got a *tad* too excited about wins over mediocre Florida State and Georgia Tech. The Hurricanes looked downright callow in their 31-7 loss to Virginia Tech, which sent a loud message that no matter how good the flavor of the week tastes, they're still the top dish in the ACC.

Florida State: Prior to Saturday the Seminoles hadn't lost to an in-state opponent aside from Miami or Florida since 1952, when they were defeated by the University of Tampa. The Spartan program is now defunct, but another Tampa-based school did the honors this time, led by a Tallahassee native at quarterback. Starting for the injured Matt Grothe, South Florida freshman B.J. Daniels terrorized the Seminoles with 341 total yards and two touchdown passes as the Bulls pulled off the stunner in Doak Campbell Stadium, 17-7.

Bill Lynch: You have to feel for the Indiana head coach. After battling Michigan for nearly fifty-eight minutes, he saw an opportunity to grab the program's first win in Ann Arbor since 1987 taken away by a poor call. Lynch put Randy Johnson-like heat on a piece of gum when Michigan was rewarded the football for taking possession after the Indiana receiver was clearly on the ground. A win would have been

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massive for the Hoosiers, bringing them to 4-0 with Ohio State coming to Bloomington next week, and it would have been massive for Lynch as well. They didn't get it.

New Mexico: The Lobos dropped to 0-4 with a come-from-ahead 20-17 loss in Albuquerque to New Mexico State. It was New Mexico's first loss to the cross-state Aggies since 2002, and with a trip to Texas Tech and a rugged Mountain West slate coming up, the best chance for a win in Mike Locksley's inaugural season as head coach might have gone by the boards. Locksley, by the way, was [reprimanded](#) this week by the University of New Mexico for giving one of his own assistants a fat lip during a "heated" coaches meeting. Excellent hire by the Lobos.