

Right on Schedule

Ohio State: With perhaps the deepest and best defensive front in college football and an offense that's rounding into form, the Buckeyes once again look like the team to beat in the Big Ten. They blew a golden opportunity to get the big-game monkey off their backs against USC and Terrelle Pryor hasn't had the breakout season many expected, but if the defense keeps on keeping on, Ohio State will once again find itself playing BCS football in January- along with the distinct possibility of another crack at the Trojans, this time in Pasadena.

Penn State: Most of the analysts seemed to think that the Nittany Lions would breeze through their schedule leading up to the November 7th

showdown with Ohio State in Happy Valley. I didn't: I thought there was a good chance they would drop a Big Ten game prior to playing the Buckeyes. But I figured that loss, if it came, would be to Illinois- not Iowa. Be that as it may, Penn State is 4-1, which is more or less what it should be at this point.

Northwestern: Okay, the loss at the Carrier Dome to Syracuse was a little bit of a surprise, but you really can't take victories over BCS schools for granted if you're Northwestern. For the most part the Wildcats have handled business against opponents they ought to beat, and this Saturday's tilt against the O.G. Miami should be a lay-up on the way to a 4-2 record at the midpoint. All things being equal, they'll take that record in Evanston.

Minnesota: The Gophers were expected to beat Air Force and Syracuse, and they did. They were expected to lose to California and Wisconsin and, well... they did. The road win over Northwestern two weeks ago was a bit of a wild card, but not a shocker by any means. Most observers figured Minnesota for a middle-of-the-pack Big Ten team, and so far that's pretty much what they've looked like.

Purdue: The Boilermakers have played better football than expected in Danny Hope's first season in West Lafayette, but they don't have much to show for it. Four straight close losses to Oregon, Northern Illinois, Notre Dame and Northwestern have left Purdue with a 1-4 record, despite having a positive point differential to this point. They've been competitive, but they haven't been able to close games against solid competition. Unfortunately, there aren't any sure wins left on the schedule, although Illinois looks pretty vulnerable these days.

Overachieving

Michigan: I'll admit, I didn't expect the Wolverines to be 4-1 at this point. But they are, with by a rejuvenated offense led by freshman sensation Tate Forcier. Michigan looks much more comfortable and confident executing Rich Rodriguez's offense, but that rickety defense could be a real liability as the Big Ten

season progresses. Still, with more wins than all of last season and a fish-in-a-barrel shot at a bowl bid, things are looking up in Ann Arbor at the present.

Iowa: With super-back Shonn Green off to the NFL a drop-off from last season was to be expected; instead, led by a tough and opportunistic defense, the Hawkeyes just keep right on rolling. At 5-0 they've won nine straight and eleven of twelve since the middle of 2008, and although they looked shaky in close wins over Northern Iowa and Arkansas State, they also boast impressive victories over Iowa State, Arizona and Penn State. Tough road games at Wisconsin, at Michigan State and Ohio State loom in the second half of the season.

Wisconsin: The Badgers have received contributions both expected (John Clay) and unexpected (quarterback Scott Tolzien) on the way to a surprising 5-0 start. Other than a 44-14 pasting of Wofford, Bret Bielema's team hasn't looked overwhelming- but they're winning and that's all that matters. We'll see how good Wisconsin really is in the next two weeks, when they visit Ohio State and host Iowa. The Badgers have struggled in the stretch the last two seasons and may again this season, but they've built a nice cushion for themselves at least.

Indiana: The Hoosiers were the popular pick to inhabit the Big Ten cellar and with losses in their first two conference games

they might still do just that. But they've looked better than advertised, winning their first three and taking Michigan down to the wire in Ann Arbor. A .500-or-better record and a bowl bid may be a possibility, provided Bill Lynch's team beats Virginia on Saturday and scrapes out another couple of victories before the end of the season. Indiana isn't very good, but they aren't hapless, and that counts as progress in Bloomington.

Underachieving

Michigan State: A dark-horse favorite to go to Pasadena- or at least, *my* dark-horse favorite- the 2-3 Spartans have already lost as many games as they did in all of the 2008 regular season. Road defeats at Notre Dame and Wisconsin are forgivable, but losing at home to Central Michigan is not. Michigan State has a chance to build on the big overtime win over Michigan and salvage this season, but any chance at the Rose Bowl has probably gone by the boards. Earning a winning record and the program's first bowl win since 2001 is the ceiling for Sparty.

Illinois: Hands-down the biggest disappointment in the Big Ten, and one of the biggest in the country. The biggest surprise has been the lackluster performance of an offense that, with eight starters returning, was expected to do big things. The Illini are 99th in the nation in total offense, 110th in scoring

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in passing. In fairness, Illinois has played a tough opening slate- Missouri, Ohio State and Penn State are each ranked and have a combined record of 12-2- but Ron Zook's team hasn't even been competitive, losing to those three teams by a combined score of 102-26. Newly benched Juice Williams is the first sacrifice, but he won't be the last if this keeps up.