



Saturday, October 17, 2009

Ross-Ade Stadium, West Lafayette, IN

Ohio State at Purdue

12:00 p.m. (ET)

TV: Big Ten Network

This Saturday the Buckeyes go on the road to the state of Indiana for the second time in three weeks, looking for their fifth straight win, this time against a struggling Purdue team under first-year head coach Danny Hope. On paper it looks like a mismatch, with Ohio State (5-1, 3-0) the heavy favorite to dispose of Purdue (1-5, 0-2) without too much trouble. But as Wisconsin learned last week in Columbus, sometimes you can do almost everything right and still end up on the short end of the score when it's all over.

A game like this is always potentially troublesome for the favorite, since it's easy to look past the somewhat weaker opponents to the obvious challenges later in the schedule. But beyond the clichés about every conference game being important, and "playing them one at a time", etc., this Ohio State team should take the field at Ross-Ade Stadium Saturday a highly motivated group, with a whole lot to prove, if only to themselves.

Home, Home on the Road

Speaking of well-worn football adages, an old favorite is that truism about how tough it is to win conference games on the road. OSU's Jim Tressel might want to go over that one with his players before game time, because with the exception of a couple of 5th year seniors, no player on his roster has *ever* experienced a loss on the road to a Big Ten team.

It has been four full years (10/8/05) since Ohio State lost a conference road game...that [17-10 night game loss](#)

to Penn State, when Troy Smith had an off night and Paul Posluszny played like never before or since. Well, the Buckeyes can tie the all-time Big Ten record for consecutive road victories at 17 with a win over Purdue Saturday. And that would put them right back at Happy Valley on November 7th, with a chance to set the conference record against the team that inflicted their last road loss.

Did I mention that the current record is held by the 1988-1992 Michigan teams? So, that might be enough to get the juices flowing this week if the team's recent trouble with the Boilermakers doesn't do the trick by itself.

And then there's the competitive fire burning in the gut of Terrelle Pryor and those of his offensive teammates. They were embarrassed by the lame showing against the Badgers last week, and there will be no shortage of motivation on that side of the ball to execute well and put up some points, regardless of the color of the opposition uniforms.

Why Can't He Hurry Up and Be Great?

John Cooper used to quip about the pressure of coaching at Ohio State by describing the attitude of the fan base as "remember, we're behind you win or tie." Terrelle Pryor may be wishing he had it so good. Rarely has an OSU quarterback taken so much flak following an 18-point win over a previously undefeated opponent.

The simple fact is though, that the offensive production for the Buckeyes against Wisconsin was not enough to win the game had the defense and special teams not chipped in with three touchdowns. And Pryor had a forgettable day...to be charitable.

There are lots of reasons (*call them excuses if you will*) for Pryor's shaky performance, some of them all on him, some not so much, and since this is the Purdue preview, not the Wisky recap, I'll not go crazy on them...but briefly...and in no particular order...

- Wisconsin surprised the OSU coaches with a 4-4 defensive front that Tressel admitted they didn't adjust to soon (or well) enough.

- Wisky DE O'Brien Schofield is the real deal, and he gave OSU tackles Adams and Shugarts fits all day rushing Pryor.

- Pryor stares down primary receivers, and forces the ball to covered ones too much, and Tressel's offense runs the same couple of patterns week in and week out, so the Wisky DB's and LB's found it way too easy to jump routes, resulting in one pick and at least two others that might have been.
- Pryor still thinks he can stiff-arm or otherwise evade any pass rusher that confronts him...and he can't.
- The defensive TD's and KO return TD (and of course the struggle to convert on 3rd down) kept the ball away from the offense for 42 of 60 minutes.
- Several OSU OL's were probably weakened by the flu.

Whatever the reasons, Pryor was 5 for 13, for 87 yards passing with one TD and one interception. A couple of completions and at least one rush by Pryor came up just short of first downs and forced punts. It just wasn't his day....but the upshot of it was that Pryor and the offense were all anybody wanted to talk about during the week following a game dominated by the Buckeye (and to be fair, also the Wisconsin) defense. [ESPN talked](#) to his position coach, Nick Siciliano. Beat writers

[Marcus Hartman](#)

of BuckeyeSports.com and

[Doug Lesmerises](#)

of the PD weighed in on Pryor, Tressel and the struggles on the offensive side of the ball.

At bottom, you can say that the kid is clearly still learning...and despite the pace of his improvement, the team is still winning. And then at least once or twice a game, Pryor just leaves you slack-jawed with a move or a run or a throw...and although he has now started 16 football games, you remember he's just a sophomore, and you think back to how raw he was a year ago, and you can see glimpses of how good he could be when (if?) he figures it all out.

And that, dear reader, was my long-winded way of suggesting that Pryor is sick of talking and ready to take it out on some Boilermaker butt on Saturday. I mean, we were talking about the Purdue game on Saturday...weren't we?

The Best 1-5 Team in the Country...or something

Once again this week, we're previewing an OSU opponent that has some pretty good offensive numbers, at least before they play the Silver Bullets of Ohio State. Joey Elliott, the 5th year senior quarterback for [Purdue](#), leads the Big Ten in passing yards (262 yds per game) and total offense (283.7 yds per game), and is tied for the league lead in TD passes with 12. He also leads the league in interceptions with nine. And running back Ralph Bolden is second in the league in rushing at 99.0 yards per game (599 total yds, 4 TD's, 5.2 ypc), although 387 of those yards were piled up in the first two games against Toledo and Oregon.

The aptly named coach Danny Hope puts the best possible face on the Boilermakers' rough start by stressing that they have been in every game, and are just a handful of plays away from a much better record, were it not for their problems with turnovers...or as he calls them, Purdue's "ball security issues". (*We haven't heard a better euphemism since terrorist attacks were renamed "man-caused disasters"*)

Indeed, Purdue has started well several times only to fade in the stretch. They competed all game long against [Oregon](#), before falling 38-36, and had a late lead against Notre Dame, only to [lose it](#) on a last-minute touchdown. They jumped out to a 10-0 lead against Minnesota last week, but turned the ball over too many times in a 35-20 defeat, and they led Northwestern at halftime, but went scoreless in the second half to drop a [27-21 decision](#) to the Wildcats.

Purdue has kept much of the spread offensive look that Joe Tiller brought to the team, but they have adapted it, and are showing other formations off of it in the attempt to become a more physical (read: running) football team. Bolden has been held in check in their last four games however, and Elliott's decent passing stats haven't translated to victories once defenses have focused on stopping the passing game.

Still the Boilermakers have the 4th-ranked offense in the conference (2nd in passing and 6th in rushing) and they'll throw the ball coming off the bus. Junior wide receiver Keith Smith is the top target for Elliott, ranking second in the conference in both yards (97.5) and receptions (7) per game, with 42 total catches and 4 TD's. Senior Aaron Valentin is Smith's running mate, with 29 grabs and 5 TD's through half the season, but he has also had problems holding on to the ball after the catch. Tight ends Kyle Adams and Jeff Lindsay have combined for 21 catches and 173 yards.

The offensive line for the Boilers is big and experienced. Tackle Zach Jones is joined by two other 5th-year seniors and two sophomores, both returning starters. They have been solid so far, as offense has not been the primary problem for Purdue.

Trouble on D

If "ball security" is Purdue's biggest problem, then bad defense is a very close second. The Boilermakers rank last (11th) in the Big Ten in the all-important scoring defense category, giving up 30.5 points per game, and they are 10th in rushing defense, allowing 167.3 yards per contest. Only Indiana has given up more first downs, and the Boilermakers are 9th in the league in allowing 3rd down conversions.

If those decrepit numbers seem to bode well for an offensive explosion by the Buckeyes on Saturday...well, just remember that your intrepid correspondent suggested that much the same thing might happen last week.....(and remember too how OSU played Tressel-ball against Purdue, failing to score an offensive TD and sitting on a 10-point lead in an agonizingly frustrating [16-3 win](#) last year in Columbus.)

While we're recalling recent history in the OSU-Purdue series (led overall by OSU 37-12-2) it's worth noting that while the Bucks have a two-game winning streak over the Boilers, Purdue beat OSU in 2000 (Drew Brees) and [2004](#) (Kyle Orton) and of course took the national champion Buckeyes [to the brink in 2002](#) . But back to that defense...

The stats are as bad as the record, but the Boilermakers are not without good defensive players. Defensive end Ryan Kerrigan is among the best at his position in the league, and trails only the Badgers' Schofield in tackles among Big Ten defensive linemen. He has 7.5 tackles for loss and 4 sacks. He is joined on the defensive line by redshirt freshman tackle Kawann Short, who has 30 tackles and an interception through six games, and has looked huge (6' 4", 310) doing it.

Jason Werner is probably the best linebacker so far for the Boilermakers. He returns to the starting lineup after missing the entire 2008 season with a back injury, and has totaled 50 tackles and three sacks while serving as the Purdue captain on defense. Chris Carlino and Joe Holland line up as the middle and weakside backers respectively for the Boilermakers.

Purdue has been much better defending the pass than they have the run, and two big reasons for that are their experienced and talented senior cornerbacks David Pender and Brandon King. The safeties Torri Williams and Dwight McLean are also both seniors, with Williams in his 6th year in the program, so there's not a lot these four haven't seen.

Placekicker Carson Wiggs has experienced the bitter and the sweet for Purdue already this year. He hit a 59-yard field goal, the Big Ten's longest of the year so far, but he also had a 38-yard attempt blocked and returned for a touchdown against Minnesota.

Purdue is last in the league in turnover margin at -9, as compared to the Buckeyes at +5.

A couple of injury notes for the Buckeyes..

Senior offensive tackle/guard Jim Cordle is ready to go this week, and should play quite a bit, but is not expected to start. And starting defensive tackle Dexter Larimore will not play Saturday, and will likely miss 3-4 weeks with a knee sprain suffered two weeks ago. Freshman running back Jamaal Berry, who has yet to appear in a game, will not see action this week either after being injured again in practice.

The Buckeyes have scored 30 points or more in every game this year except USC, despite their well-documented offensive struggles. With a motivated Buckeye offense meeting the worst defense in the Big Ten on Saturday, I see no reason for that to change. Add to the equation an OSU defense that has been just short of awesome all season matched against a turnover prone Purdue offense, and it looks like this game could follow the recent pattern of relatively

comfortable Buckeye victories. I'll guess 38-10.

Links:

[OSU Athletic Communications - Game Notes](#)