



*Saturday, October 24, 2009*

*Ohio Stadium; Columbus, Ohio*

*Minnesota at Ohio State*

*12:00 p.m. (ET)*

*TV: ESPN*

### A Crisis of Confidence?

The Minnesota Golden Gophers come to Columbus Saturday cast in the role of another of those soft touches on the OSU schedule, while the wounds from the stunning loss to Purdue last week continue to fester on the body of Buckeye Nation. A week ago, the talk was of the 7th-ranked Buckeyes' path to another conference championship and a potential BCS berth. After Purdue, the OSU football program is in self-examination mode, while the fans and media weigh in with blistering criticism of the coach, the quarterback and the entire system.

Inside the program this week, a humbled and candid group faced up to their problems, and a noticeable resolve and commitment to improve seemed to prevail. In the surrounding fan base and media zone, doubt and cynicism appeared to be as prevalent as confidence and hope. And at the heart of all the questions about the current stewardship of the OSU program sit Jim Tressel and Terrelle Pryor, the co-dependent coach and quarterback, who find themselves at once the targets of the criticism, and the only hopes for near-term future success.

The 2009 OSU football season will be largely defined by how these two men react and move forward from last week's embarrassment. It begins at home Saturday against Minnesota.

We have met the enemy...

In any program accustomed to success as a matter of tradition, any defeat is likely to be defined as a game "we lost" as opposed to a game "they won", and so Purdue is granted less credit than they probably deserve for last Saturday's upset. There's always that tendency, for example, to define the turnovers your defense generates as forced takeaways, and the turnovers the other guys' defense generates as stupid giveaways. Such was the case with Pryor's four turnovers against Purdue, as viewed from Buckeyeland.

In any event, it was a 'perfect storm' win for the Boilermakers and a damaging loss for the Bucks. Maybe Purdue was "the best 1-5 team in the country", a notion roundly mocked here and elsewhere a week ago. But a week after the upset, hardly anybody is still talking about how well Purdue played. It's all about what's wrong with the Buckeyes. That's to be expected when a 1-5 team beats a 5-1 team.

Again this week, the OSU-centric approach to the game against Minnesota will probably rule the day. In a very real way, the identity of the Buckeyes' opponent this week is incidental, (although they *are* probably glad it's Minnesota, not Penn State). Because in some sense Ohio State will be playing against themselves....against the way they have performed, especially on offense, for the past two weeks. Their play this week will be a referendum on Tressel's ability to adapt to what opposing defenses have been showing him. It will be a test of Pryor's ongoing development...of his attitude...of his relationships with his teammates...and of his toughness.

(As an aside...while we're at it, let it also be a referendum on the often fickle 105,000 OSU fans in the Horseshoe, who like to consider themselves stalwart, loyal boosters of the Scarlet and Gray, but have shown a distressing tendency to turn on the OSU kids with boos when things don't go so swimmingly. Buck up, people.)

### Tempest Over Terrelle

We'll eventually get around to the Gophers and this week's game...honest. But first, a look at the controversy around Pryor is in order.

It is undeniable that so far in 2009, Terrelle Pryor has failed to progress in his development as a quarterback as far or as quickly as OSU fans (and probably coaches) expected, especially in light of a promising freshman year that saw him lead the conference in passing efficiency, even as he showed at times the indecisiveness of the true freshman he was. Early this season he didn't show the explosiveness or improved passing mechanics that many expected to see, but it was an issue not deemed serious, since the Buckeyes were off to a solid start, scoring 30 points in all but the USC game, and were ranked in the Top 10.

But when Pryor seemed to regress against a tough Wisconsin defense, and then bottomed out with four turnovers against Purdue, the frustration with Tressel's offense and with the young man at its helm boiled over, and nearly everyone had something to say about it...from analyses of the flawed Tressel offensive scheme...to critiques of Pryor's attitude...to suggestions that Pryor has been playing the wrong position all his life....you name it.

Pryor's high school coach Ray Reitz spoke to ESPN for [an article](#) that they promoted as if he had been critical of Pryor's handling by OSU coaches. In reality it was more of a suggestion that he be allowed to run the ball more....(strange advice to a coach that gave Pryor 21 carries out of 28 total team rushes against Purdue). SI's Stewart Mandel

[set out to cover the story](#)

from afar, and his piece understandably failed to grasp some important details and got some others completely wrong, while also taking a quote from a Pryor teammate out of context, making it seem nastier than it really was. Presumably the boss said to do a piece on Pryor, so he cranked one out.

Some of the more measured and thoughtful of the Buckeye beat writers will get you closer to the heart of the matter. Tim May and Ken Gordon of the *Columbus Dispatch* share thoughts on [a blog](#)

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The *Plain Dealer's* Doug Lesmerises says he [senses a more relaxed Pryor](#) after the Purdue loss, and takes some of Pryor's comments this week as indications that he may have reached a turning point in terms of his awareness of his responsibilities at OSU. (Pryor:"Last week, that opened me up to the world and opened me up to myself and who I am as a person.") Doug also followed up with Coach Reitz, and reports

[here](#)

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Marcus Hartman at BuckeyeSports.com (Scout.com) is another of the beat writers who stays close enough to the program that he doesn't overreact to one week's events. Much of his work at Scout is premium content, but he has written at some length and depth about Pryor and the OSU offensive woes at his blog...(examples [here](#) and [here](#) ) and he's always worth reading and taking seriously.

To a man, the guys that cover this team every day, and who have been around Pryor this week, say he seems like a different person...relaxed with the media, humbled, and more self-aware. Of course, we'll see if any of that translates to a different look on the field on Saturday, but at least it's an encouraging start. If nothing else, the Purdue upset and Pryor's trials have [brought out the sports celebrities](#)

to counsel the young man on dealing with life in the spotlight. Shaq has talked to him. Miami's Jacory Harris has been on the phone with Pryor...and of course LeBron has taken the quarterback under his wing, and it seems the two are

[developing a relationship](#)

. I don't suppose any of this could hurt.

I shared some of my own thoughts on Pryor and the offense in last week's game story, so there's no need to regurgitate any of that. Take it for what it's worth, but in general, my advice is to stick to reading the guys that spend every day with the OSU players and coaches, and leave the national writers alone to throw darts at the dartboard to try to get one thing right.

### Gophers Offense Struggling

Minnesota (4-2, 2-2) has posted wins over Syracuse, Air Force, Northwestern and Purdue this year, while dropping Big Ten games to Wisconsin and last week 20-0 to Penn State. The Gophers had figured to be potent on offense in 2009, with quarterback Adam Weber and all-conference wide receiver Eric Decker coming off of big seasons in 2008, and running back Duane Bennett returning from an injury last year to join DeLeon Eskridge in the backfield, but as a unit, they have yet to hit their stride.

Working to adapt the spread offense to the more pro-style, run-oriented set of new coordinator Jedd Fisch has turned out to be a slower transition than anticipated, and the Gophers are frustrated by a lack of results from a group that had hoped to be much more productive.

The Gophers have really struggled to run the football, and are currently last in the conference in rushing (103.4 ypg) and in total yards (293.7 ypg). The inability to run has affected Weber's effectiveness as a passer as well. The third-year starter's numbers are the worst of his career. Weber has completed 55.8% of his passes for 1325 yards, with 6 TD's against 9 interceptions. As a team the Gophers rank 9th in the league in passing offense, and Weber is the league's 7th-ranked passer at 189.3 ypg, but is ranked 11th in passing efficiency.

Bennett leads the Gophers in rushing, but is averaging just 41.7 yards per game. He has totaled 292 yards and has 5 TD's to go with nine pass receptions for another 35 yards. Last year's starter Eskridge has contributed 212 yards on 52 carries plus 3 TD's. Redshirt freshman Kevin Whaley (124 yds, 1 TD) is a smaller, faster back coming off Coach Tim Brewster's bench.

Decker is simply the best player on the team, and one of the best wide receivers in the nation. He has size (6' 3", 220) and speed to go with great hands and leaping ability. On jump balls, he wins more often than not. Decker's biggest problem this year is trying to get some plays out of his teammates so defenses can't concentrate solely on him. He has 47 catches this year, for 731 yards and five TD's, and his 104.4 yards per game ranks 10th in the country and 1st in the Big Ten. Last week Penn State held him to just one reception, and the week before that he managed just three catches against Purdue, but the Gophers will continue to work hard at

getting Eric Decker the ball.

His running mates at wide receiver are sophomores Troy Stoudermire (14 rec., 126 yds, 1 TD) and Brandon Green (12 rec., 140 yds) but so far they haven't been able to take the pressure off Decker. Stoudermire is an outstanding kickoff returner, though, so OSU will have to focus on him. Nick Tow-Arnett is the tight end, and he's off to a pretty good start in 2009 with 16 catches for 216 yards.

The offensive line is fairly young with three juniors and two sophomores starting, and they have had their problems protecting the quarterback, giving up 16 sacks so far to rank 9th in the conference in that department. And if run blocking is their specialty, the rushing totals for this team don't reflect it. Injuries and the subsequent shuffling around of bodies have contributed to the problems, so they might look to improve as people get healthy.

The kicking game is solid, with punter Blake Haudan averaging 42.8 yards per punt, and placekicker Eric Ellestad hitting on 7 of 8 field goal attempts, though his long is 39 yards.

### Defense - Gophers' Perennial Problem

Back in the day...when Minnesota sported great running backs like Marion Barber, Lawrence Maroney...and all the way back to Darrell Thompson, it seemed like they could never stop anyone on defense. Not a lot has changed. Defense killed their season last year, and the Gophers have struggled again this year to stop the opponent...especially on third down.

Minnesota's opponents are converting on third downs at a 50.9% clip, which is last in the conference (OSU is 5th at 36.4%). And they are giving up yardage in big bunches too, with opposing offenses averaging 393 yards per game, to rank 10th in the Big Ten.

The other defensive numbers aren't much better. The Gophers are 7th in the conference in scoring defense (23.3 ppg), 7th in passing defense (228.3 yards per game) and 10th in rushing defense, giving up 164.7 yards per game on the ground.

The defensive line is strongest in the middle with defensive tackles Eric Small and Garrett Brown starting for the straight third year, and sophomore Brandon Kirksey backing them up. At the ends, expect to see Barrett Moen and Anthony Jacobs starting, with Derrick Onwuachi and Ray Henderson getting playing time in the rotation.

At linebacker the Gophers have two of the top three tacklers in the Big Ten in Lee Campbell and Nate Triplett. The 6' 3", 246 lb. middle backer Campbell has 77 tackles (11.0/game) and half a sack, while the equally large Triplett (6' 3", 247) is close behind with 70 total stops (10.0/game). Senior Simoni Lawrence, at 6' 1", 221 is the speed linebacker, and has contributed 54 tackles on the season.

Both starting cornerbacks for the Gophers are seniors, including Traye Simmons, one of the

best corners in the conference a year ago, who has 23 tackles plus a TD on a return of a blocked kick. The other starter is Marcus Sherels, who has 32 tackles plus an 88-yard fumble return for a score. Juniors Kyle Theret and Kim Royston are the starters at safety.

### Gut Check Time

It's Homecoming. The Gophers are suspect if not awful on both sides of the ball. It really couldn't set up much more favorably for a Buckeye team that desperately needs to reassert itself and regain some swagger after two weeks of sub-par play. But really, who the heck knows what state of mind this OSU team will be in come game time. I believe I'm done forever trying to divine in advance what that mindset might be.

Though Pryor needs to gain confidence, I think I'd start out by asking less instead of more from him. I'm still scratching my head over the running backs getting just seven carries in the game last week. This is the worst rush defense in the Big Ten, and Tressel should beat on them with Brandon Saine and Jordan Hall until they beg for mercy.

The read-option that the Bucks have experimented with a bit in the early going was a bigger part of this week's preparation, so I'd expect to see more of that on Saturday, with Pryor having the decision-making authority to keep or hand-off that he hasn't always been trusted with before. I would hope that the coaches have been encouraging him to take the inside hole when it's there, instead of his tendency to try to bounce it out to the sideline on every option rush attempt. On the very first play on offense last week, he passed on a huge hole just outside the tackle in favor of trying to get to the sideline. (And we know what happened on the second play.) Go north-south...don't dither.

If the Gophers follow the lead of the Badgers and Boilers in defensive strategy against OSU (and why in the world wouldn't they?) by crashing LB's and safeties off the edge on nearly every play to disrupt the play in the backfield and shut down Pryor's ability to run the ball, I hereby beg the OSU coaches and Pryor to discover the area of the field between the hash marks, and throw the ball to the tight ends and the running backs in the space previously occupied by the blitzers.

Brandon Saine caught one pass for a 40-yard gain in the first quarter last week, and he didn't see another ball thrown his way. Words fail me here...(clean ones at least)

I trust the imposters that showed up in the uniforms of the OSU offensive tackles last week will be replaced by the actual 5-star recruits we have seen perform admirably in the past.

Eric Decker should get his half-dozen catches, but I expect Chekwa and Torrence to contain him, and the defense as a unit to stifle most of what Minnesota's offense tries to do. The offense wasn't the only unit embarrassed against Purdue. The Bullets will be back.

One statistic worth noting is that Minnesota has come from behind in all four of their wins this

year, and in all but one they have trailed in the 4th quarter. Moral of the story: There's no quit in these guys, no matter what the score is. Don't let up.

Another one is the fact that Tressel's Buckeyes have not lost consecutive games since the 3-game losing streak in 2004.

This is a Buckeye win, but I have absolutely no faith in my (or anyone else's) ability to forecast the score. I'll go conservative at 27-13, though I expect a little more offensive punch than that from OSU.

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Links:

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

[2009 OSU Roster](#)

[2009 Minnesota Roster](#)