

The Week That Was: Unhappy Valley

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Monday, November 09 2009 7:00 PM -

Ohio State picked a pretty good time to play its best game of the season. It was a must-win showdown, played on the road in front of 110,033 spectators, nearly all of them partial to the home boys from Penn State- and the Buckeyes, quite simply, kicked ass. They whipped the Nittany Lions on both sides of the football, got a smart, mistake-free performance from Terrelle Pryor, and took a massive step toward their first Rose Bowl appearance since 1997 with a 24-7 victory that was every bit as authoritative as the final score would suggest. Jesse looks back at the win, as well as the rest of Saturday's college football action in The Week That Was.



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All of a sudden, after an up-and-down season, the Big Ten title is right there waiting for this football team. One more step and it's theirs.

Homecoming Day: Terrelle Pryor made his first trip to his native Pennsylvania in an Ohio State uniform, and his somewhat pedestrian numbers- 8-of-17 for 125 yards and two touchdowns, five carries for 50 yards and a touchdown- don't do justice to the quality of his performance in Happy Valley on Saturday. Playing in a hostile environment in a game his team absolutely had to win Pryor was damned near flawless in his execution and his decision-making. The frenetic, flustered youngster of earlier this season was nowhere to be found; in his place was a cool, composed leader who didn't force things, didn't turn the ball over, took what the defense gave him and made the plays to win the game. Numbers-wise it wasn't

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the best performance of his Ohio State career; results-wise, it almost undoubtedly was.

Ironhead Would Be Proud: As good as Terrelle Pryor was, he wasn't the star of the game for the Buckeyes. That would be defensive end Cameron Heyward, who was, quite simply, a one-man wrecking crew on the defensive side of the football. Destroying every blocker Penn State employed to stop him Heyward lived in the Nittany Lion backfield, sacking Darryl Clark twice and, incredibly for a lineman, leading his team with eleven tackles. He's still a junior, and hopefully he'll be back in Columbus next season- but Cam took a big step toward securing a premium position in the 2010 NFL Draft, should he make that decision.

But it wasn't as if Mr. Heyward was the only man causing havoc in the trenches. The entire front four showed up to play on Saturday, and the rest of the defense came along for the ride. Penn State's offense compiled nine first downs- a bare two of those in the decisive second half- and went 4-of-16 on third downs. Evan Royster, the Big Ten's leading rusher, was a near non-factor with 36 yards on 13 carries. Derek Moye, Penn State's leading receiver, didn't record a single catch. All told, the Nittany Lions had just 201 total yards. So intense was Ohio State's defensive line pressure that Penn State had to basically abandon the drop-back passing game, even on third down. With the pocket caving in on almost every snap Darryl Clark was forced to run roll-outs and quarterback draws, with negligible success.

I've been critical of Darryl Clark's performance in big games, and his numbers on Saturday- 12-of-28, 125 yards, one interception- were deeply unimpressive. But to be fair, not many quarterbacks would have succeeded under the kind of pressure Ohio State employed on Saturday. The Buckeyes simply played great football on the defensive side, at all three levels. The line was sensational. The linebackers- Spitler, Rolle and Homan (one interception and could have had two more) were all over the field. The secondary was suffocating. Game balls for everyone!

How to Win Via the Punt: Jim Tressel has called the punt "the most

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important play in football" and sure enough a pair of punts, one good, one not so much, were the crucial elements in the sequence that gave Ohio State an early 7-0 lead. After going three-and-out on their first possession the Buckeyes trotted out Jon Thoma and the senior punter- who struggled against New Mexico State last week- boomed a 55-yarder that rolled out of bounds at the Penn State 16-yard line. The Nittany Lions lost three yards in three plays and had to punt from their own 13. Jeremy Boone hit a short line-drive punt that [Ray Small fielded on the run and returned 41 yards](#) to the Penn State nine-yard line. Two plays later Pryor scrambled seven yards for a score and the Buckeyes were in the lead.

By the way, Ray Small played a very nice game on Saturday, setting up Ohio State's first and last touchdowns with long punt returns, catching a pass, and taking an end-around for a 13-yard gain. Best of all... no muffs. Whenever Ray-Ray goes an entire game without putting a punt on the ground, it's noteworthy.

Dan Fouts Memorial "Bad Call" of the Week: Penn State only scored once on Saturday- and it probably wasn't a score at all. Putting together their only good drive of the afternoon, the Nittany Lions moved 71 yards in 12 plays and tied the game early in the second period on Darryl Clark's one-yard, fourth-down plunge. Whether Clark actually broke the plane is highly debatable. It didn't look as if he made it, but after a cursory replay review, the officials went ahead and gave Penn State the six points.

Still, we shouldn't complain too much. At least the Nittany Lions were whistled for a penalty- four, in fact. They somehow went the entirety of last season's victory in Columbus without being flagged once.

Tough Juice: Maybe we should steal Caron Butler's nickname and give it to Dane Sanzenbacher, because this young man is a two-dollar steak. He showed his courage on a critical third-down play early in the second period, going high over the middle to snag Terrelle Pryor's third-down pass at the Penn State

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23-yard line despite knowing he was going to take a lick. Dane's clutch grab turned out to be one of the most important plays of the game, for it set up the 37-yard Devin Barkley field goal that gave the Buckeyes the lead for good, 10-7.

Looked like a Big Miss (at the time): Terrelle Pryor's one and only flub of the game came near the end of the first half. With 12 seconds remaining before intermission and the Buckeyes clinging to a 10-7 lead, Pryor found Sanzenbacher streaking down the near sideline to the end zone... and overthrew him. I'm not sure Terrelle was at fault- it looked as if Dane slowed down on his route- but either way, it was a golden opportunity lost.

But He Made Up For It: The measure of a player is how he bounces back from mistakes and adversity, and Terrelle atoned for his first-half miss in a huge way. After Penn State's third drive of the second half petered out the Buckeyes took control of the football at their own 39-yard line. On the first play of the series Pryor faded back and hit his favorite target DeVier Posey down the far sideline with a 61-yard touchdown bomb.

The secret to the big score was two-fold. First off, Ohio State had run the ball on the first play of its previous nine series, which set up Penn State's defense for the deep ball. Secondly, the play call sent Posey and Sanzenbacher streaking down the same side of the field, forcing Penn State safety Nick Sukay to make a Sophie's Choice- cheat toward Posey and leave Sanzo open, or cheat toward Sanzo and leave Posey open. Sukay cheated toward Sanzenbacher and Pryor took advantage. That made it 17-7 Ohio State with 1:47 left in the third and the way the Buckeye defense was performing, you could have taken all that white clothing in the Beaver Stadium stands and sown it into a funeral shroud for the home team right then and there.

Runs in the Family: Guard Justin Boren is often described as "nasty" in his aggressive blocking style, and the way his brother Zach dished out punishment on Saturday, he's worthy of the same adjective. The freshman fullback was putting a hurting on people all afternoon, never more so than on a 3
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-and-3 play early in the fourth quarter, with Ohio State on the Nittany Lion 17-yard line. Boren first cleaned out blitzing linebacker Sean Lee, putting him on his back, then turned and received Pryor's short pass for a first down to keep the Buckeyes' final scoring drive alive. Ohio State won the physical battle as decisively as it won the game on the scoreboard, and guys like Zach Boren were a big reason why.

(I know my estimable colleague Dan Wismar [already touched](#) on the Zach Attack's flattening of Mr. Lee, but I had to add my voice to the amen chorus. That was just a bad-assed play by the young man.)

Stats Don't Lie: The numbers tell the tale of Ohio State's domination on Saturday. The Buckeyes out-gained Penn State 353-201- including a 228-76 edge on the ground- ran 66 plays to Penn State's 58, picked up 15 first downs to Penn State's nine and held the ball for over 34 minutes. This was a woodshed beating in every facet.

One-Game Season: The victory in Happy Valley, combined with Iowa's upset loss to Northwestern, has turned next week's Buckeye-Hawkeye battle into a virtual Big Ten Championship Game. For Ohio State it's simple: beat Iowa next week and a trip to the Rose Bowl is secured. Even a loss in Ann Arbor (heaven forbid) wouldn't keep the Buckeyes out of Pasadena provided they win next week, since they would own head-to-head tiebreakers over every other two-loss team in the conference (Iowa, Penn State and Wisconsin.)

I'm ecstatic over the prospect of Ohio State playing in the Rose Bowl. [I've made no secret of my affection for the Granddaddy](#), and thirteen years between appearances is way too long. Going

undefeated and winning the National Championship is the ultimate, of course- but winning the Big Ten Championship and playing under a southern California sun on the afternoon of January 1st

has a glow all its own. And it's going to happen. Ohio State is going to beat Iowa next week... and we're going to smell roses.

Around the Nation

Game of the Week- Houston/Tulsa: Add another chapter to the ever-growing legend of Case Keenum. Playing on the road against a Tulsa team fighting for its postseason life the Cougars trailed 45-37 with 3:28 to play. Enter Keenum. First he led the Cougars on a 61-play march, ending it with a one-yard touchdown pass to James Cleveland to cut the deficit to 45-43 with 21 seconds remaining. The two-point conversion failed, leaving Houston behind by two, but when the Cougars recovered an onside kick at their own 39-yard line, Keenum and Co. were back in business. Two completions by Keenum moved the ball to the Tulsa 34.

[Matt Hogan drilled a 51-yard field goal](#) at the gun and the Cougars were miracle winners, 46-45.

Case Keenum completed 40-of-60 for 522 yards and three touchdowns with no interceptions in the win over Tulsa. For the season he's completing 71.5 percent of his passes for 3,815

yards and 28 touchdowns against just five picks. He's leading the nation in both yards and touchdowns and he's leading Houston to potentially its first finish in the national polls since 1990. He might not become the first Cougar to hoist the Heisman since Andre Ware in '89, but he'll be on the short list- and deservedly so.

Brass Balls Call of the Week: The honors go to Georgia Tech head coach Paul Johnson, who played to win in the Ramblin' Wreck's 30-27 overtime win over Wake Forest. Trailing 27-24 in the extra period, Georgia Tech faced a 4th

-and-1 at the Wake five-yard line. A chip-shot field goal beckoned, but quarterback Josh Nesbitt told Coach Johnson he could cover the distance- and Johnson decided to go for it. Sure enough, Nesbitt gained two yards on a keeper, then

[three more for the winning touchdown](#)

on the next play. Now Georgia Tech is 9-1, 6-1 in the ACC, and needs only to win at Duke next week to wrap up a trip to the conference championship game.

How to Blow a Game to a Service Academy, Notre Dame-Style: It's simple. First, miss field goals of 41 and 30 yards. Then, commit three turnovers. After that, come away without points on three separate trips inside the opponents' 15-yard line, including a failed 4^t

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-and-goal from the three, a fumble at the one and an interception at the five.

Voila

- you have

[Notre Dame's 23-21 loss to Navy](#)

, a defeat achieved despite 512 yards of total offense; 452 from the arm of Jimmy Clausen. The Irish went more than four decades without a loss to the Midshipmen. Charlie Weis has lost to them twice in the last three years, both times in South Bend- and the fire is now raging under the ample butt of the Notre Dame boss. And it doesn't get any easier for the beleaguered Irish- they have to go to Western Pennsylvania next week to take on a white-hot Pitt team.

SEC Officials Strike Again: Some dubious officiating played a big part in Alabama's victory over LSU on Saturday. With 5:54 to play and the Tide clinging to a 21-15 lead, Tiger cornerback [Patrick Peterson intercepted Greg McElroy](#) at the LSU 32, but was ruled out of bounds. After a

review showed that Peterson had not one but *both* feet inside the field of play, the original call was upheld. The Tide kept moving to the field goal that put the game away.

Of course, this isn't the first time an SEC kingpin has benefited from friendly officiating. Florida survived Arkansas's upset bid last month thanks largely to a couple of horrible pass-interference and personal-foul calls levied against the Razorbacks. Sometimes you have to wonder if the country-drawling boys in the striped shirts aren't conspiring to keep Florida and Alabama perfect en route to the conference championship game in Atlanta. Or maybe they're just incompetent.

Funny- Wally Pipp Played in Cincinnati Too:

You're not supposed to get better when your Heisman-candidate quarterback gets hurt. Cincinnati has, and the reason is Zach Collaros.

The sophomore from Steubenville had languished in obscurity behind Tony Pike, throwing just fifteen passes in his first eighteen games as a Bearcat. All that changed on October 15

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, when he was pressed into duty in the third quarter of Cincinnati's game at South Florida after Pike went down with a left wrist injury.

Now you have to wonder if Pike will get his job back. In the last three-and-a-half games Collaros has completed 78.6 percent of his passes for 1,100 yards and eight touchdowns with no interceptions. Displaying a mobility Pike doesn't possess, Collaros has also run for 281 yards and 6.5 yards per carry with four touchdowns. He put up video game numbers in Cincinnati's 47-45 conquest of Connecticut on Saturday, throwing for 480 yards, running for 75 and accounting for three touchdowns with his arm and legs.

Brian Kelly has a dilemma on his hands. Tony Pike is progressing nicely from his injury; in fact, he was practicing with the team last week. At the same time Cincinnati's offensive machine has only added a new gear with the multi-dimensional Collaros. There doesn't look to be much room on the schedule for experimentation, either- West Virginia comes to Nippert Stadium on Friday, followed by rejuvenated Illinois and the winner-take-all showdown at Pitt on December 5th. How Kelly sorts out his quarterback situation is one of the more interesting storylines in the final weeks of this season.

Winners of the Week

Stanford: It was truly a glorious day down

on the Farm. The Cardinal devastated Oregon's defense with 505 total yards- including 223 rushing yards from Toby Gerhart- and became bowl-eligible for the first time since 2001 with a [51-42 upset of the previously red-hot Ducks](#). They don't play much defense in Palo Alto, but with Gerhart running over would-be tacklers and the brilliant Andrew Luck firing ropes all over the field, Jim Harbaugh's team can score on anyone. Now they'll have a chance to keep scoring in the postseason.

Nebraska: It isn't exactly Johnny Rodgers vs. Greg Pruitt anymore, but there's still a certain magic when Nebraska, the Big Red of the North, and Oklahoma, the Big Red of the South, meet on the football field. On Saturday night [the magic](#)

belonged to the Cornhuskers

, as their swarming defense forced five Sooner turnovers and carried the anemic Nebraska offense (180 total yards) to a 10-3 victory. Not only did the Huskers earn a hard-fought win over their ancient rival, they kept pace with surprising Kansas State in the Big 12 North race. If Bo Pelini can ever find a decent quarterback, he'll have a powerhouse in Lincoln, because his defense can play with absolutely anyone. As for Oklahoma, which put up its lowest point total in a game since the 1998 season, well... there's always the Alamo Bowl.

Clemson: Thanks to a heroic performance by a banged-up C.J. Spiller (312 total yards, two touchdowns) the Tigers came from behind with 19 fourth-quarter points to

knock off Florida State, 40-24, and tighten their grip on the ACC's Atlantic Division. Any combination of Clemson wins and Boston College losses equaling two, and the Tigers will be in the championship game. Dabo Sweeney's first full season hasn't been perfect by any means, but he has his team right where it needs to be.

Arizona: The rise of Oregon and the fall of USC have captured the Pac-10 headlines, but very quietly Mike Stoops's Wildcats are enjoying their best season in years. Saturday's 48-7 ambush of Washington State lifted Arizona to 6-2 overall and 4-1 in the conference, putting them right in the thick of the Rose Bowl race. The real test still lies ahead: three tough road games at Cal, Arizona State and USC and a visit to

Tucson by Oregon in two weeks. Negotiating that slate to Pasadena is probably too tall of an order, but at least Arizona is still a factor in November- and it's been a long time since they could say that in Tucson.

Temple: The joyride continues for the Owls, though not without some harrowing moments. Al Golden's team blew a 31-13 second-half lead and fell behind hapless O.G. Miami 32-31 Thursday night before rallying to win on Brandon McManus's field goal with three seconds left. The victory gives Temple seven wins- the most since 1990- and all but locks up the program's first trip to the postseason since the [1979 Garden State Bowl](#)

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Losers of the Week

Iowa: After breezing along on the wings of destiny for nine weeks, the roof caved in on the Hawkeyes on Saturday afternoon. Not only were they [beaten at home by Northwestern](#), 17-10, they also lost quarterback Ricky Stanzi with a severe ankle sprain. Backup James Vandenburg was completely ineffective, going 9-of-27 for 82 yards and failing to produce a point for an Iowa team that was shut out over the last 54 minutes of play. Iowa will be in major trouble next week in Columbus if Stanzi can't go. Of course, I think they'll be in major trouble regardless.

Oregon: The loss at Stanford wasn't the end of the world for the Ducks- they still control their own destiny in the Pac-10 race- but coughing up half a hundred to the Cardinal wasn't exactly the best way to follow up the huge win over USC last week. After several superb weeks Chip Kelly's defense fell apart on the Farm, and they'll have to get their act back together with the proverbial quickness, because tough tilts against Arizona and Oregon State remain on the schedule.

South Carolina: It's November, which means it's time for the annual el-foldo from the Gamecocks. Saturday's 33-16 loss at Arkansas dropped Steve Spurrier's team (6-4, 3-4) to 1-7 in November since 2007, and there's a good chance that record will

be 1-9 before this season is over, what with Florida and Clemson remaining on the schedule.

Boise State: If you're a non-BCS school aiming for a BCS bowl, sometimes you can win and still lose. That's the case for Boise State, which struggled to put away a 3-6 Louisiana Tech team in an unimpressive 45-35 victory Friday night. With TCU [massacring everyone in sight](#) it's imperative for the Broncos to put up style points in abundance, and they're not doing it. Losses by Notre Dame, Penn State and Iowa lift hopes of a BCS at-large, but it's going to be tough for two mid-majors to crash the party, and if that doesn't happen, Chris Peterson's bunch will be the odd team out.

Kent State: The Golden Flashes could have nailed down their sixth win, gone to 5-1 in the MAC and set themselves up for a first-place showdown at Temple next week with a win over a reeling Akron team. Instead they were roasted for 429 total yards by the nation's 119th-ranked offense and lost to the rival Zips, 28-20. Now any chance for a MAC East title is probably kaput, along with hopes for the program's first bowl bid since 1972.

Next Week: Ohio State and Iowa battle for the Rose Bowl next Saturday at 3:30 in the Horseshoe. Dan and I will recap the big win over Penn State and preview the Hawkeyes on the Buckeye Friday podcast.