



Jim Tressel has deservedly carried a reputation for fielding sound if not spectacular special teams units during his career at Ohio State, but the last couple of seasons have seen some aspects of OSU's special teams play fall short of the established Tressel standards. How far short? We'll see how the last few seasons stack up against the longer term Tressel track record.

Looking ahead, there's cause for concern in the kicking game for 2010 with some new faces in the lineup at punter and on the kickoff team. Then there are the fresh memories of the Oregon Ducks shredding the Buckeyes' kickoff coverage unit in the Rose Bowl, and Iowa taking OSU to overtime on the strength of a fourth quarter kickoff return for a touchdown. Were those aberrations?...or something closer to a trend? Some of the numbers might surprise you, as they did me.

Several of the personnel decisions for 2010 special teams have been made, and I'll gladly speculate on the some of the others, but the whole special teams area is worth evaluating, because when you look at the 2010 Buckeyes top to bottom, special teams is one of very few potential chinks in the OSU armor going into the season.

Ohio State special teams and kicking specialists have been somewhat overlooked in my summertime position group previews in years past. This season those units might be too big a factor to overlook, so we're dealing with them right up front. I'm sure I won't be the only one to examine the 2010 Buckeyes and get all the way to special teams before starting to see potential problems.

If the 2010 OSU special teams questions end up with mostly positive answers...well, there just aren't many more questions.

And I'll warn you up front...the following may be of interest to none but the most seriously afflicted Buckeye fans...*(I mean, it is about punting and touchbacks and long-snappers and such)* ...but you'll know soon enough, one way or the other.

How Special are the OSU Special Teams?

Kickoff returns:

Recent history; We start with an example of a special teams unit that has underachieved in recent years for the Buckeyes. Ever since Ted Ginn departed the scene, OSU has struggled to return kickoffs with anything close to his explosiveness. For a couple of years there, even basic competence at the task seemed beyond their reach. In 2009, Ohio State improved on the two previous seasons, ranking 45th in the FBS (6th in the Big Ten) in kickoff return average (22.34 yd avg).

That was a major step up from the 19.2 yd average that ranked OSU 10th in the Big Ten, and 108th of 119 teams in the FBS in 2008. And 2007 was worse. Ranked third from the bottom of the FBS (117th) and last in Big Ten at 17.65 yds, the OSU kickoff return team was starting into a two-year bout of ineffectiveness, becoming the weakest of the OSU special teams in that period. With Ginn Jr. and Santonio Holmes making things interesting on every touch of the football in mid-decade, the Buckeyes resided in the upper echelons of the FBS.....in 2006 (34th at 21.70 yds), 2005 (18th at 23.36 yds), and 2004 (11th at 23.71 yds).

2010 outlook; Top two kickoff returners of 2009 are history. Ray Small (18 ret, 376 yds) has moved on, and Lamaar Thomas (12 ret, 324 yds) has transferred, leaving the top two running backs, Dan Herron (2 for 44 yds) and Brandon Saine (4, 83), and the best receiver DeVier Posey (1, 24) as the only returning players with any experience returning kickoffs. And in a perfect world for Ohio State, none of the three of them would return a single kick in 2010.

Starting wideouts and running backs don't normally return kickoffs in Tressel's system, (Ginn excepted) but Saine, Herron, Posey and starting cornerback Devon Torrence all took reps this spring on the kickoff return unit. My guess though, would be that redshirt freshman [Jaamal Berry](#) will make his Buckeye debut on a kickoff return in the Marshall game, and that [Jordan Hall](#) will probably be back there with him on the return unit. Young receivers [Chris Fields](#) or [James Jackson](#) could get auditions in that role at some point early in the season as well.

You'd think that Posey, Torrence and Saine would be seen as too valuable as skill-position starters to put at risk of injury on kickoffs...(punt returns might be a different matter)...and as for Dan Herron...well, let's just say he's had his chance at this job.

Trending? - This group bounced back slightly in 2009 after two really sub-par seasons...trending up with talented backs returning kicks, plus lots of coaching emphasis on a unit they are well aware needs work.

Kickoff return defense:

Recent history; Naturally, the *most* recent history is what sticks in the mind...and in the 2010 Rose Bowl, and in the Iowa game in November, the OSU kickoff coverage team looked shaky...no way to sugarcoat it. The Ducks racked up 171 yards on six returns, (with much credit going to Oregon's Kenjon Barner, who put on an inspired performance) and the Buckeyes seemed unable to adjust. A lapse by the same unit late in the Iowa game allowed the Hawkeyes to climb back into that one with a long return for a score.

With those games fresh in mind, I was a little surprised to see that Ohio State still managed to finish first in the Big Ten in net kickoff yardage in 2010. Their kick return defense numbers (21.22 yd. avg) ranked in the top half (51st) of all FBS schools. On the down side, they only generated six touchbacks, a sharp dropoff from previous seasons.

As recently as 2008, OSU was ranked 4th in the nation (17.5 yds) in kick coverage, and the three years preceding that, OSU ranked 57th, 25th and 42nd...consistently in the top half to top third of FBS teams. Conclusion: the performance of this unit in 2009 wasn't as bad as two of the last three games made it look.

2010 outlook; The touchback numbers should be up, as we anticipate seeing the stronger leg of Drew Basil easily surpass last year's total of six. Other than that, a prediction here is pure guesswork, with so many variables and personnel changes involved...that is, beyond assuming Tressel will have them performing above the national average, like he usually does.

Trending? - As with the kickoff return team, this group will get a lot of coaching focus this summer and fall. That, and the ever-increasing level of athleticism in the young OSU linebackers and defensive backs that typically play on coverage teams, should help this unit trend slightly up in 2010.

Punt returns;

Recent history; Ohio State under Jim Tressel has consistently been in the top half of the FBS rankings in punt returns, though they dipped to 71st in 2009, with an 8.0 yard average return. In 2008, they led the Big Ten and were 12th nationally with a 13.0 yard avg. It's another special unit with a consistently above average track record under Tressel.

Ray Small (2009 - 33 ret. for 273 yds) was the fourth-ranked punt returner in the Big Ten last year, but during his checkered career at Ohio State, his big-play capability was always measured against his inconsistency at catching the football cleanly...which is the head man's Priority One on punt returns.

2010 outlook; Duron Carter (2 returns) Dane Sanzenbacher (2) and DeVier Posey (3) are the only players other than Small to return a punt for the Buckeyes in 2009...and Carter isn't around this year either. If Tressel's past practice is a reliable indicator, we should see an upperclassman wide receiver... but probably not one of the top two...returning punts for OSU.

Ted Ginn is the exception to this rule, but we've seen Tony Gonzalez, Brian Hartline, Brian Robiskie, Small and DeVier Posey in this role under Tressel, and if memory serves, all five were working as the #3 or #4 wide receiver at the time.

This spring though, it was Posey and Sanzenbacher working in the kick scrimmage as punt returners, and Devon Torrence was getting a look there too. Those are apparently the hands the coach trusts the most...and he has proven many times over that he values catching the punt over returning it. So unless a Chris Fields or a James Jackson or a Taurian Washington or a Jordan Hall steps up this August, and gains the trust of Jim Tressel catching the football, don't be surprised to see a starting wide receiver (Posey or Sanzenbacher) or a starting corner (Torrence) returning punts in September. It won't be a true freshman...I can promise you that.

Trending? - steady and occasionally spectacular over the years. 2010 too unpredictable as of June, since we're not sure how much experience will be there to catch the ball.

Punting:

Recent history; OSU has gotten consistently strong punting in the Tressel era. From All-Big Ten Andy Groom (2002-03)...to Kyle Turano (42.8 avg in 2004) to four years of A.J. Trapasso, (who averaged 41.21 yds in 2008 and 41.50 yds in 2007), OSU fans have been a bit spoiled. That track record necessarily led to some dissatisfaction with Jon Thoma's numbers in 2009. But a closer look at Thoma's season, and at the performance of the other 10 guys on that punt team, show why it's important to look past average punting yardage.

Thoma punted 58 times for a 38.2 yd average, which ranked him 90th out of 98 punters in FBS by that measure. But if your bottom line is effectiveness (*it is, isn't it?*) consider a couple of other numbers.

Thoma often sacrificed distance for height on his kicks, and the pooch-punting requirements of Tresselball valued placement and field position over distance. As a result, Thoma had an average net of 36.8 yards on a 38.2 yard punting average...a credit to the stingy coverage team as well...(OSU coaches say their goal is a 38-yard net punt.) And then come the truly remarkable numbers...

OSU allowed just nine punt returns in the 2009 season, for *a total of 49 (net) return yards*...28 of which came on one return in the Rose Bowl! That's 21 punt return yards (and obviously no touchdowns) in 12 regular season games. So...was it an "off year" for OSU punting? Hardly.

Tressel's teams have consistently been near the top of the FBS stats in punt defense..usually in the top 10-15%...(trust me on this one...I'm as sick of the stats as you are). And they consistently allow an uncommonly low number of total returns...2005 (12), 2006 (15), 2007 (16), 2008 (16), and minimal yardage. Here the numbers surely back up the reputation.

2010 Outlook; Third-year sophomore [Ben Buchanan](#) won the punting job this spring, showing off the big leg that made him a top national recruit two years ago. But he was inconsistent in the

Spring Game...getting off a couple of decent punts..and a couple of real clunkers....and that was in front of just 60,000 friendly, home fans. He looked better in the kick scrimmage...but his next pressure kick will be his first.

I'd say there is no larger question mark for the 2010 Buckeyes than what kind of contribution they can expect from Ben Buchanan. And for a coach who has been known to say that [the punt is the most important play](#) in football, that is no small matter. What we do know is that we can expect a well-coached punter...and the rest is up to the multi-talented Buchanan to make the most of the ability that got him this far. It's his third year in the program, so he should be ready mentally.

True freshman [Drew Basil](#) enrolled early and went through spring ball, and he is the only other scholarship player with much of a punting background, making him the favorite to be Buchanan's backup.

Trending? - consistently effective under Tressel...Buchanan is talented enough to keep it that way in 2010.

Field goals:

Recent history; In 2009, Aaron Pettrey was 14 of 20 (70%) before he got chopped down against New Mexico St. The 27-year old former soccer pro [Devin Barclay](#) went 7 of 10 on field goals and 12 of 12 on extra points the rest of the way as Pettrey's replacement.

Pettrey (7 for 8) and Ryan Pretorius (15 for 19) split the duty in 2008, hitting at a combined 74% clip, and Pretorius was 18 for 23 (78%) in 2007. Mike Nugent (88% FG, 2002-04) is remembered as perhaps the best of the Tressel era placekickers, and Josh Huston (79% FG in '05) hit some big ones for his coach too. All in all, it's an enviable track record of excellent placekicking over the long haul, and one that makes the 70% success rate on field goals in 2009 a target for improvement this year.

2010 outlook; Having finished the 2009 season as the starter, and with Buchanan concentrating on punting, Barclay is likely to open 2010 as the starting placekicker. The concern with both Barclay and Buchanan is their range...or lack of same. Both have been fairly good inside of the 40-yard range, and inconsistent at best at longer distances.

Buchanan has been right in the mix for placekicking duty all along. In the annual kick scrimmage this spring, he hit 8 of 14 field goal attempts, including a 50-yarder, and he won it for his Gray team with a 39-yarder in overtime. That matched fairly closely the performance of Iowa game hero Barclay, who hit just 8 of 15, (and just 1 of 7 from beyond 40 yards).

In fact, it might have been Buchanan instead of Barclay getting the call last year when Pettrey went down, but for a minor ankle sprain Buchanan suffered three days before Pettrey's injury. I'm assuming the coaches would prefer not to have one player as both starting placekicker and punter, but Buchanan is potentially the best they have at both jobs.

The wild card in the kicking mix is the true freshman [Basil](#) . He showed the coaches the strength of his leg this spring, and as of the Spring Game, he looked like the leading contender to kick off for this team. And if Barclay struggles from beyond 40 yards, maybe Basil will get an opportunity to show his stuff on some longer field goal attempts.

The Buckeyes' long-snapper will once again be [Jake McQuaide](#) , the senior from Cincinnati Elder. If you went all year in 2009 without knowing this guy's name, that's arguably a good thing. Offhand, I can't recall a bad snap in 2009, though there probably were one or two.

Trending? - a traditional strength at OSU under Tressel...this year's kickers are a major question mark...at least until they perform with 105,000 people watching. Barclay has range limitations, and Basil is totally unproven. Not sure where, or if, Buchanan fits into the placekicking picture. Trending slightly down until we get some clarity on what the individual roles will be.

To sum it up...the kickoff return and kickoff coverage teams will be challenged to improve in 2010, and will get a lot of coaching attention to help assure that success. Deeper groups at running back and wide receiver should help the overall kick return numbers.

The kicking specialists and their teammates on those units have a high bar to reach to match the standards set by their Buckeye predecessors. The performances they get from their one old kicker and their two young kickers could make or break them in a couple of tight games...any one of which could make or break the Ohio State season.

Any perception that Jim Tressel's OSU special teams are somehow slipping is largely unfounded in fact. When one of his many special teams units stumbles for a season or two, it gets noticed...which serves to confirm the high standard he has set, and that, for the most part, he maintains over the long haul.

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