

The Week That Was: A Right Good Caning

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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It was good news and not-so-good news at the Horseshoe on Saturday afternoon.

The good news is that Ohio State knocked off the then-12th ranked Miami Hurricanes and did it in a fashion more convincing than the 36-24 final score might indicate.

The bad news is, well, the 36-24 final score. As much as the Buckeyes dominated, particularly in the first half, they should have won by a lot more. It could very easily have been over at halftime. But two massive breakdowns in kick coverage and serial red-zone ineffectiveness combined to leave Miami in the game far longer than they should have been.

A win is a win, and the Buckeyes will certainly take it- especially over the Hurricanes, their dance partner in the 2003 Fiesta Bowl. The non-conference schedule gets more forgiving at this point, and that's good- because there are some kinks that need to be worked out for this oh-so-promising season to reach full fruition.

First, the Bad: And for the bad we need look no further than the coverage units, which were atrocious for the second week in a row. Miami took a kickoff and a punt back for touchdowns in the first half. [The former](#) put the Hurricanes up 7-3 after Ohio State had taken

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an early lead; [the latter](#) sliced Ohio State's lead to 20-17 and put Miami back in the game after the Buckeyes had seemingly taken complete control. Missed tackles, containment breakdowns, lack of speed in pursuit- you name it and it went wrong for the Buckeye coverage teams.

And this isn't just a two-week problem. Ohio State had similar issues last season. A kickoff return for a touchdown revived Iowa in the fourth quarter of last November's Big Ten title showdown, and Oregon ran high, wide and handsome on kick returns throughout the Rose Bowl. Tressel Ball is predicated on winning the field-position battle. But that's tough to do when the Buckeyes are continually giving up long returns or pooch-kicking the opposition to near midfield.

The technical problems are one thing. But Coach Tressel can solve the speed problems by inserting more defensive starters onto the coverage units. He may have to do that because this trend cannot continue, particularly when the Buckeyes go on the road against the likes of Wisconsin and Iowa.

Fun with Stats: Thus far, Ohio State's defense has given up a total of ten points. The special teams have given up 21.

Almost Got 'Em Back: The Buckeyes nearly- and should have- followed both of Miami's return scores with return scores of their own. On the kickoff following Lamar Miller's 88-yard kick-return score that made it 7-3 Hurricanes, Jamaal Berry was on his way to a 92-yard scoring return before being tripped up by his own teammate at midfield. Ohio State failed to score on the ensuing possession despite the good field position.

The Buckeyes almost countered Miami's punt-return score as well. This time Jordan Hall took a pooch kick at his own 27, was nearly tackled at the 35, stayed on his feet and took off past a bevy of Hurricanes who, believing him to be down, simply stopped playing. The little sophomore scooted all the way to the Miami 28-yard line before being dragged down by kicker Matt Bosher. This time the Buckeyes were able to convert the big play into points, courtesy of Devin Barclay's third field goal.

More Bad: Once again, Ohio State was unable to maximize its scoring opportunities. The

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Buckeyes settled for five field goals on Saturday, four of them from 24 yards out or closer. The red-zone struggles, combined with the lousy kick coverage, allowed Miami to hang around in a game in which they were being manhandled statistically. At halftime on Saturday Ohio State had a 288-104 edge in total yardage, were +3 in turnovers- and led by just nine points, 26-17. It should have been 35-3.

This is another multi-season trend. In their last four “big” non-conference games- the 2009 Fiesta Bowl against Texas, last season’s USC game, the 2010 Rose Bowl against Oregon and Saturday’s Miami game- the Buckeyes have kicked 14 field goals and scored eight touchdowns. Half of those field goals came on possessions that ended inside the opposition’s ten-yard line. They’re 2-2 in those games.

Part of the problem is the fact that Terrelle Pryor is not a polished, precise short passer. He can throw the long ball as well as anyone- he dropped one in there beautifully to DeVier Posey in the second quarter on Saturday- but he’s not so proficient when it comes to sticking that quick slant in between a couple of defenders.

Another part of the problem is that Ohio State doesn’t have that Maurice Clarett/Beanie Wells bell-cow of a runner who can be counted on to pound out the final tough yards of a drive. The best runner the Buckeyes have is Pryor. But Pryor, for all his size, speed and stiff-arm ability, is not a straight-ahead runner in the style of Tim Tebow. He likes to run laterally, break back against the grain and go east-west rather than north-south. That style worked on Saturday, as when Pryor rolled right and cut back left on the 13-yard touchdown run which put the Buckeyes in front 33-17 and broke the game open. But generally when you’re in close, the best thing to do is to simply go straight forward.

Mixed Feelings: I know I should be happier about the outcome of Saturday’s game. After all, the Buckeyes beat a ranked team and beat them soundly. But my expectations for Ohio State in 2010 are through the roof: I’m talking 13-0, crystal-football expectations. They have the talent and the schedule to make this a very, very special season. But settling for field goals instead of touchdowns and giving up scores in the return game isn’t going to get it done on a neutral field against the likes of, say, Alabama- or in Madison or Iowa City, for that matter.

Terrelle’s Line: 12-of-27 for 233 yards and a touchdown with no interceptions; 20 carries for 113 yards and a touchdown. Pryor wasn’t terribly accurate on his throws but he made good decisions, took care of the football and nearly out-gained the Hurricanes singlehandedly with

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346 total yards to Miami's 352. In the much-hyped individual duel between Pryor and Miami signal-caller Jacory Harris, Ohio State's man, like his team, was the clear-cut winner.

Hard-Luck Harris: Miami quarterback Jacory Harris, who threw 17 interceptions in 2009, turned in a near-perfect performance in the season-opener against Florida A&M. But he reverted to his old freehanded ways on Saturday, tossing four picks that the Buckeyes converted into twenty points.

It would be easy to blame Miami's loss on its quarterback. But Harris didn't get much help from his teammates. Two of the interceptions- Nate Williams' first-quarter pick and Cam Heyward's game-changing third-quarter theft- were on him. On the former, Harris tried to squeeze a pass into a too-tight window and had it deflected to Williams by a diving C.J. Barnett (who was brilliant on Saturday before suffering a knee injury.) On the latter, Harris somehow didn't see the 6'4", 290-pound Heyward directly in the path of the football.

But neither of the other two interceptions, both by Chimdi Chekwa, were Harris's fault. On the first, intended receiver Travis Benjamin fired out in a run-blocking stance, only to watch the pass whistle by his ear right into Chekwa's breadbasket. On the second, Benjamin let a good throw go right through his hands and into the waiting arms of Chekwa, who took the gift fifteen yards down the near sideline. Chekwa's two interceptions set up ten Ohio State points. Neither would have happened had Travis Benjamin a.) been on the same page as his quarterback and b.) hung on to an eminently catchable pass.

Play of the Game Part I: Two minutes were gone in the second quarter- and Ohio State was in a spot of trouble. Ten unanswered points had given Miami a 10-3 lead and a lot of momentum. The Hurricanes were pressing up on the Buckeye receivers, daring Pryor- 3-of-8 for 27 yards to that point- to beat them through the air.

Which he promptly did. On first down from his own 20-yard line, Pryor play-faked, faded back and fired a perfect strike down the near sideline to DeVier Posey. Cornerback DeMarcus Van Dyke bit hard on the fake and could do nothing more than shove Posey out of bounds after a 62-yard gain. On the very next play Pryor hit Brandon Saine for the touchdown that tied the game and started a run of 17 unanswered points from the Buckeyes.

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As it turned out, Pryor's long ball to Posey and subsequent touchdown pass to Saine loosened Miami's grip on the game for good. The Hurricanes never again led after that two-play, 80-yard drive.

Play of the Game Part II: Despite being drastically outplayed in the opening thirty minutes, Miami trailed by only nine at 26-17 and got the ball to start the second half. The Hurricanes wasted no time after the break, needing just four plays- the biggest a 42-yard run by Damien Berry- to set up a first-and-goal at the Ohio State six. There the drive stalled on a false start, a two-yard run and an incomplection, but with the ball at the nine it appeared that the worst outcome for Miami would be a field goal and a one-score game with plenty of time remaining.

Enter Cameron Heyward. Dropping into coverage, the Son of Ironhead [snatched Harris's aerial](#) intended for Damien Berry at the five and rumbled up-field with a convoy of blockers in front. The big man steamed all the way to the Miami 15-yard line before being dragged down from behind. Two plays later Pryor scrambled for a touchdown to make it 33-17, Ohio State.

Pryor-to-Posey got the Buckeyes back into the game. Heyward's theft-and-run gave them control that they would not relinquish. Before the interception the Hurricanes had a chance. After it, they were done.

And We Had a Nice Warm Welcome Prepared, Too: I guess LeBron James [wasn't able to make it](#) up to the game on Saturday. Gee, what a shame.

Around the Nation

Game of the Week- West Virginia/Marshall: It was going to be perhaps the greatest night in the history of the Marshall University football program. After nine straight losses without a victory to cross-state big brother West Virginia, the Herd finally had the Mountaineers right where they wanted them. With a record crowd at Joan C. Edwards Stadium ready to go

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bonkers, Marshall led, 21-6 with a first-and-goal at the WVU eight and the clock ticking down toward the eight-minute mark of the fourth quarter. Three dives into the line, another minute-and-a-half or so burned off the clock, a chip-shot field goal- that's all Marshall needed to practically ice a monumental victory.

And that's when everything began to go sideways.

On first-and-goal freshman running back Tron Martinez was stripped of the football and the Mountaineers recovered at their own four-yard line. Up to this point Marshall had dominated West Virginia's offensive line with four-and-five-man fronts, but here Doc Holliday switched to a soft prevent defense. Nine plays, 96 yards and 3:16 later the Mountaineers were in the end zone for the first time courtesy of Noel Devine's four-yard touchdown sweep. Now it was a one-score game at 21-13, with more than five minutes still remaining.

Two minutes later Marshall faced fourth-and-one at the West Virginia 43-yard line, and Coach Holliday had a decision to make. The Mountaineers had one timeout remaining. Holliday could go the safe route, punt and put the game in the hands of his defense- or he could roll the dice, go for it, and take a chance on burning nearly all the time remaining with a first down.

Let's flash back briefly to a similar situation fourteen years earlier, in the 1996 Big 12 Championship Game between Texas and Nebraska. The unranked Longhorns led the three touchdown-favored Cornhuskers (winners of 47 of their previous 49 games) 30-27 with two-and-a-half minutes left and faced fourth-and-inches at their own 28-yard line. The obvious choice was to punt. Not wanting to give Nebraska another crack at his tiring defense, Texas head coach John Mackovic elected to go for it. Quarterback James Brown [rolled left](#) and hit a wide-open Derek Lewis, who rambled all the way to the Nebraska ten-yard line before being dragged down. The Longhorns went on to score and won the game, 37-27.

Doc Holliday was in a far more favorable field-and-score situation than John Mackovic had been. The Herd was in West Virginia territory, ahead by a touchdown and two-point conversion. But like Texas, they were the underdog. They couldn't just sit back and let victory come to them. They had to go and get it.

It was the right time to take a chance. But Doc Holliday elected to punt. The kick was superb,

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carrying to the two-yard line before being downed. But Marshall's defense, having already given up one field-length scoring drive in the quarter, was gassed. West Virginia took it 98 yards in 15 plays, tying the game on a touchdown and two-point conversion with twelve seconds remaining. The Mountaineers took their first lead of the game on an overtime field goal and won it, 24-21.

A lot had to go wrong for Marshall not to realize its dream on Friday night. A lot did go wrong. And it started when Doc Holliday turned into Sheriff Behan and started playing not to lose.

Player of the Week- Denard Robinson, Michigan: Last week's TWTW Player of the Week is now this week's TWTW Player of the Week after a spectacular performance in Michigan's 28-24 win over Notre Dame. Robinson tore apart the Irish with an amazing 502 total yards: 244 passing on 24-of-40 attempts with a touchdown; 258 rushing on 28 carries with two touchdowns, including a [Notre Dame Stadium-record 87-yarder](#)

. The speedy sophomore passed and ran for all 72 yards of Michigan's game-winning drive, scoring the winning touchdown on a two-yard jaunt with 27 seconds to play. There's no need to crown the kid yet, not after facing two mediocre defenses. But thus far, there hasn't been a better player in America than Denard "Shoelace" Robinson.

Explosive Attack of the Week: The impressiveness of Oregon's 72-0 opening-day destruction of New Mexico may have been mitigated by the fact that, well, it was New Mexico. But just in case there were any doubters as to the firepower of the Ducks, they were silenced Saturday in Neyland Stadium. Oregon generously spotted Tennessee a 13-3 second-quarter lead before blistering the Volunteers with 45 unanswered points in a 48-13 rout. Once again the Ducks did it in all facets, scoring touchdowns on both defense and special teams- indeed, Oregon now has three punt-return touchdowns this season. After back-to-back spankings of Mountain West and SEC opponents the Ducks are averaging an even 60 points per game, second only to Houston in the FBS rankings.

By the way, check out LaMichael James's tie-breaking [72-yard touchdown run](#) in that game if you haven't already. Al Wilson and Shaun Ellis are rolling in their graves over Tennessee's tackling on the play, and they aren't even dead.

Anemic Attack of the Week(s): On the other side of the spectrum from the Ducks are their opponents in the [1990 Freedom Bowl](#) - Colorado State. The punch-less Rams have amassed 517 total yards in two games- fifteen fewer than Denard

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Robinson's total from Saturday- and are the only team in FBS football to have not scored a touchdown. Since starting 2009 with three straight wins, Colorado State has now lost eleven straight. Dan Hawkins isn't the only man in that neck of the woods who should be scanning the want ads. Ram coach Steve Fairchild is probably updating his resume as we speak.

Winners of the Week

The FCS: James Madison became only the second I-AA team to knock off a ranked FBS opponent (the first being Appalachian State when they beat Michigan in 2007) with its [21-16 conquest of 13](#)

[th](#)
[-ranked Virginia Tech](#)
in Blacksburg. The Dukes became the fifth FCS school to beat an FBS opponent this season, joining Jacksonville State (Ole Miss), North Dakota State (Kansas), South Dakota (Minnesota), Gardner-Webb (Akron) and Liberty (Ball State.)

Oklahoma: The Sooners had trouble with lowly Utah State in their opener but looked a whole lot more impressive on Saturday, crushing Florida State, 47-17. Landry Jones bombarded the Seminoles for 380 yards and four touchdown passes in the rout.

South Carolina: Behind 182 rushing yards from freshman Marcus Lattimore the Gamecocks shut down Georgia, 17-6, to move to 2-0 on the season. Steve Spurrier might not have the quarterback he desires to operate the Fun 'n Gun at its optimum level, but he certainly appears to have the running back and defense to win big. Now he just needs to start winning games in November.

San Diego State: Brady Hoke's reclamation project is running ahead of schedule in the Land of Jack Tripper. After a 41-21 thumping of New Mexico State the Aztecs are 2-0 for the first time since 1994. Up next is a trip to Columbia to take on Missouri.

The Big 12 South: The South's six members are now a combined 12-0 after a clean sweep of the first two weeks. That state of affairs is guaranteed not to last past this coming Saturday, though- not with Texas going to Lubbock to take on Texas Tech and Baylor looking at a likely loss to 4th-ranked TCU.

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Losers of the Week

The ACC: Miami lost to Ohio State. FSU got run off the field by Oklahoma. Virginia Tech lost to James Madison. Georgia Tech lost to a Kansas team that scored three points against an FCS opponent the week before. Actually, the conference's best "win" was probably Virginia's narrow loss at USC. Someone will win the ACC and go to the Orange Bowl this season. As Jim Bouton said in *Ball Four*, I don't see how it can be avoided.

Boise State: That opening-week victory over Virginia Tech looks a whole lot less impressive than it did before Saturday.

Eastern Michigan: The Artists Formerly Known as the Hurons couldn't hold a 21-14 second-half lead against the O.G. Miami, falling 28-21 to the Artists Formerly Known as the Redskins. Ron English is now 0-14 as a head coach. Perhaps next week's opponent, Central Michigan, can change Eastern's mojo- after all, the program's last win came over the Chippewas in the final week of the 2008 season.

The Land of (Dis)Enchantment: After New Mexico's 52-17 loss to Texas Tech and New Mexico State's 41-21 loss to San Diego State, the state's two FBS entries are a combined 0-3 and have been outscored 165-38.

UCLA: Does Rick Neuheisel have any eligibility left? His Bruins were horrendous offensively Saturday against Stanford, committing four turnovers, going 1-of-9 on third downs and getting shut out in a 35-0 loss to the Cardinal. With USC's fortunes on the wane, UCLA has an opportunity to seize the imagination of L.A. college football fans- and they're not doing it by a long shot.

Next Week: Ohio University takes the hour-and-a-half drive up U.S. 33 to take on the Buckeyes at noon in the Horseshoe. Will Ohio State start finishing drives with authority and stop getting gashed in the return game? We shall see.