

Month-In Musings With Jesse and Dan

Written by {ga=danjesse}

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With the college football season four games old, and the Big Ten conference schedule about to get underway for the 2nd-ranked Buckeyes, we thought it was a good time to take stock of the state of play as the leaves turn and autumn invades northeast Ohio. TCF college football writers Jesse Lamovsky and Dan Wismar got together this week for an exchange of thoughts and opinions, and our readers are invited to listen in on the conversation.

Dan: So Jesse, we might as well start close to home. After his six touchdown performance on Saturday, is Terrelle Pryor the Heisman front-runner...and if he's not, who do you think is?

Jesse: Pete Fiutak in his column this week made a good point about the silliness of Heisman talk this early in the season: ["Is the NFL discussing the MVP possibilities? Does basketball devote any energy to the issue in November? Is the baseball top guy crowned in April?"](#) □ And he certainly has a point.

Now, if I *had* to anoint a Heisman front-runner; yeah, it'd be Pryor. He's the quarterback for the nation's second-ranked team, after all. And this isn't a Gino Torretta-type case where he's riding the wave of a magnificently talented supporting cast. You could make the argument that Ohio State would not have a functioning running game if not for Pryor.

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Of course, there are two months left in the regular season- plenty of time for other contenders to step to the fore. Andrew Luck will state his case. Mark Ingram will be back in the running despite missing the first two games. Denard Robinson should get some love. But as of right now my guy is Terrelle Pryor.

Dan: You're right, it's crazy early...and if Pryor weren't in the conversation I'd be pretty much uninterested in having it. I think Luck will be talked about as long as Stanford is winning, as will Robinson at Michigan until someone breaks his leg. Not sure yet how much Ingram's missing two games will hurt his repeat bid, and Kellen Moore is a bonafide contender whose supporters won't be able to complain about a lack of exposure, with about six Boise St. games on ESPN.

Pryor's bid is less about stats than it is about leading a BCS title contender, but so far his numbers are better than Troy Smith's were in 2006 at the same point in the season. Right now, no one else jumps out at me as more of an early favorite.

Jesse: Let's stay close to home and talk about what seems to be Ohio State's major defect: the coverage teams, which did NOT have a good September. To you is it a question of talent, scheme, execution, or a little of each?

Dan: Some of each, I guess, but more and more I'm thinking it's a problem with the scheme more than anything else. Yes, some of the individual players selected for the kickoff coverage unit are baffling to me. Why a defensive tackle is out there...or walk-on DB's...these are things I don't get. Speed and tackling ability are the skills required...and a fearless aggression and lack of concern for bodily harm are the attitudes I want to see. I'd like to see nothing but first and second-string DB's and linebackers out there on kickoff coverage. But from the armchair view, there's more to it than personnel.

Coaches always stress "lane discipline", important enough as far as it goes. Maintain it too long and one burst by the returner to split two coverage men can allow him to break it long. You have to always be aware of the possibility of a reverse, but at some point you have to converge on the ball carrier in seek-and-destroy mode. No, I am not claiming to possess the answer to the problem.

A "talent" problem at Ohio State is not something to even consider. There does seem to be a lack of great team speed on this OSU kickoff coverage unit though. And of course, execution is part of it. The tackling has been downright lousy at times.

Punt coverage is different, and it has been a strength rather than a weakness for most of the Tressel era. I think the Miami game punt return was more of a one-off event rather than a

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troubling trend. Don't want to say I told you so, but before the season, it was clear that [special teams might be this team's biggest headache](#)

. And here's where the obligatory disclaimer goes about how OSU coaches have forgotten more about the subject than I'll ever know.

Jesse: Certainly the problems Ohio State's coverage teams had in the Rose Bowl gave some clue to how things would go on that end this season. My take differs a little bit. From my viewpoint there hasn't been enough "lane integrity." I'm thinking specifically of Darrell Johnson-Koulianos's [return touchdown in last season's Iowa game](#)

, when the containment broke down completely, allowing the returner to get outside with very little resistance. Aside from that it's been a matter of poor tackling and a lack of athletes who can pursue and make plays.

Good news is, with the notable exception of the nullified 99-yard return in the Ohio game, the kick-coverage units have been markedly better the last couple of weeks- actually, going back to the second half of the Miami game.

Dan: Staying with OSU for the moment...After seeing the Badgers and Hawkeyes get out of the gate, are you still as concerned about the Buckeyes' road games at Iowa and Wisconsin as you were at the start of the season? Is there a sleeper Big Ten team, (this year's Purdue?) the Bucks should be worried about?

Jesse: After watching Iowa's offensive line get whipped in the final moments of its loss to Arizona I'm not quite as concerned about the Hawkeyes as I was before. To me the biggest factor in Iowa's near-upset last season was that its offensive line kept James Vandenburg clean and allowed him to find his targets down the field. Most of that line is gone, however. If Ohio State's front four can win the battle up front- and I think it will- the Buckeyes will walk out of Iowa City with a victory. Besides, Ohio State *always* beats Iowa when the chips are down. I believed prior to the season that Wisconsin would be the toughest game on the schedule and, despite some unimpressive performances from the Badgers thus far, I haven't altered that sentiment. The game is in Camp Randall at night, Wisconsin always seems to be able to run the ball against Ohio State and they always seem to bring their A-game against Ohio State despite the fact that Bret Bielema hasn't actually beaten the Buckeyes yet. You KNOW the Badgers are going to show up. Ohio State will have to play very well to win that game.

As for sleepers, I don't see any. Purdue had actually played pretty well prior to that game last season- they'd just beaten themselves. I don't see the parallels this year. Minnesota is awful. Illinois hasn't looked good at all thus far, their 2-1 record notwithstanding. It should also be pointed out that the Buckeyes are operating at a completely different level from where they were prior to the Purdue game in 2009. Wisconsin and Iowa still stick out as- potentially by far- the two toughest tests for this Buckeye team within the Big Ten.

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Dan: The Wisconsin game still worries me the most, mostly because of the tough Camp Randall venue, and the night game aspect, giving the cheeseheads all day to drink beer and collect batteries to throw. Bielema has to be desperate to beat Tressel too, so he'll be treating this one like it's his Super Bowl. Their defense is still suspect though, and they have not looked like a Top Ten team in September. The Iowa game is another big challenge, but I don't think they'll be going into that contest unbeaten in conference play like they were in 2009.

To me the sleepers in the Big Ten are the two teams that aren't on the OSU schedule...Michigan State and Northwestern. Penn State can never be overlooked, but they'll be starting a true freshman QB in the Horseshoe, which is a tough obstacle to overcome (Matt Barkley notwithstanding).

Jesse: This one is pretty simple. Boise State has already beaten what were supposed to be their two biggest tests in Virginia Tech and Oregon State. Any chance in your mind of the Broncos slipping up and losing a game the rest of the way?

Dan: Boise St. lost some style points when VT lost to James Madison, but they are still formidable, and they're a sentimental favorite for poll voters who favor a playoff system (even though BSU would arguably be hurt by such a system). I look down their schedule and see a well-coached Fresno State team that has a productive offense and three BCS conference opponents as one team that could give the Broncos a game. Other than that, I guess Nevada (at the moment No. 25) presents the biggest challenge to them. If I had to bet the farm though, I'd say they finish unbeaten...and still out of the title game.

Jesse: I think that Nevada game on November 26th will be a serious test for Boise. It's in Reno, where two years ago the Broncos had to escape with a 41-34 victory. The Wolf Pack already have impressive wins over Cal and BYU (in Provo.) They have a senior quarterback in Colin Kaepernick, a dual-threat guy who has been outstanding so far. If Boise is going to lose a game it's going to be that one. Still, I'm with you- I think they run the table and are on the outside looking in when it comes to dealing out the crystal football.

Dan: Jesse, do you think the SEC is still the dominant conference in the BCS as you look at them four games in? How would you rate the strengths of the conferences so far in 2010?

Jesse: If you're wishy-washy (like me) you could answer this question two ways. The first way is to say "yes," because a conference is as good as its best team, and the SEC's best team- Alabama- is the nation's best team until proven otherwise. And of course, there's that little

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matter of the SEC winning four consecutive BCS title games, along with its 6-0 record in title games since 1998-99.

The second way is to say "no" because there has been some serious atrophy in terms of the SEC's depth over the last couple of years. Georgia and Tennessee are shadows of their former selves. LSU doesn't have a quarterback. South Carolina and Auburn are ciphers. Florida clearly isn't the team it was during the God's Quarterback heyday of 2008-09. One of the biggest boasts of SEC homers was that the conference schedule, week-in and week-out, was tougher than anywhere else in America. I don't think they can make that claim anymore.

Still, until someone (hopefully Ohio State) knocks them off, you've got to keep the SEC at number-one. But the Big Ten and Pac-10 are looking stronger than they have been in a while. My BCS conference rank goes SEC-Big 10-Pac 10-Big 12-ACC-Big East, with the Big East behind the Mountain West. And the WAC is tougher than the Big East at the top, although the bottom of the WAC, with New Mexico State, San Jose State and Utah State, is barely above the Big Sky.

Dan: Well Jesse, I asked the question not only because it's right in your wheelhouse, but because I too feel that the SEC is a bit down this year, though it's too soon to tell if it's a trend. There's some strength at the top as usual, with Alabama, Arkansas and Auburn looking fairly strong, but I'm not sure the conference is as deep as it has been in recent times. A couple of the traditional powers, Florida and LSU look to have growing pains, even though they're both 4-0, and some of the middle-tier teams are clearly down...you mention Georgia and Tennessee...throw in Ole Miss. The conference bottom-feeders (Kentucky, Vandy, Miss. St.) look like the lesser teams in the Big Ten or PAC-10.

From the early going, I think the PAC-10 may be stronger than I gave them credit for in the preseason, and better than expected showings in the Big Ten by Michigan, Penn State and Northwestern (not to mention Nebraska) are giving the conference a depth I didn't think it had going in. The top nine teams in the Big Ten are 31-3 going into conference play.

The ACC has been disappointing and the Big East has been awful. The Mountain West and the WAC both have a case to make that their winners deserve an automatic BCS berth as much as the Big East does. No real argument with your conference ranking.

Jesse: Two-part coaching question. Which coach helped his stock the most in September... and which coach hurt his stock the most?

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Dan: Al Golden at Temple is the first guy that comes to mind. He's being talked about more and more as Paterno's eventual successor, and the scare he threw into the Nittany Lions the other day sure didn't hurt...(we both called that one). Jim Harbaugh at Stanford is clearly enhancing his resume, and Bo Pelini is convincing any remaining doubters that Nebraska is all the way back.

Despite an ugly loss to Oklahoma, I think Florida State is convinced they have the right guy in Jimbo Fisher, and it took a heart attack to slow down Mark Dantonio's fast start at Michigan State. (Has there been a gutsier call in college football than [Dantonio's fake field goal](#), since Chris Peterson's [two-point conversion](#) vs Oklahoma?)

Other than those guys, the Stoops brothers, Bob (Oklahoma) and Mike (Arizona) are off to good starts, and Gene Chizik may be able to buy a house now in Auburn, AL.

It looked like a no-brainer in the preseason to predict Brian Kelly would get out of the gate fast at Notre Dame, based on his track record of early success and the level of talent in South Bend. So the 1-3 start is somewhat surprising for him, and it looks like it won't get better until they get some speed and some play-makers on defense there. Dave Wannstedt took Pittsburgh's preseason Top 20 ranking down the tubes in a hurry with a disappointing start, and the less said about the unraveling of Butch Davis' UNC program the better.

In the Big Ten, you'd have to say that Rich Rodriguez' stock is up, at least temporarily, along with Dantonio's, and that the bloom is off the rose for Purdue's Danny Hope.

Okay, who did I miss?

Jesse: Up-wise the guy who jumps out at me is Tom O'Brien at N.C. State. After three straight seasons under .500 he's got the Wolfpack sitting at 4-0, the ACC's last undefeated team, and with a legit stud QB in Russell Wilson. Rich Ellerson at Army is doing an excellent job with a program that's been down for a while; he improved the Black Knights to 5-7 in 2009 (best record since 1996) and they're off to 3-1 start in 2010. Brady Hoke turned around Ball State's program and he's doing the same thing at San Diego State; the Aztecs are a last-minute loss to Missouri from being 4-0. June Jones continues the turnaround at SMU; the Mustangs are only 2-2 but were very respectable in their two losses to Texas Tech and TCU.

Down-wise let's start with Tim Brewster at Minnesota. The Gophers are 1-3 after a non-conference slate that included games with Middle Tennessee State, South Dakota and Northern Illinois. He was [serenaded](#) with chants of "Fire Brewster!" after Minnesota's loss to NIU last Saturday. He's a dead coach walking. Paul Wulff is now 4-24 at Washington State and still can't put a team on the field that can even compete in the Pac-10, a conference the Cougars won twice under Mike Price. Mike Locksley is 1-15 at New Mexico; the Lobos are 0-4 this season and have been outscored 225-41.

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Dan: One more before we wrap it up, Jesse. What two teams do you think will wind up in Glendale playing for the BCS National Championship?

Jesse: I [called](#) Ohio State-Alabama in the title game and haven't seen anything in this first month to make me change that call. (I also predicted BCS spots for Pitt, North Carolina and Oregon State as well as an SEC East title for Georgia, but never mind that.)

Dan: For some reason I don't think Alabama is going to get through their SEC schedule unscathed, so I'm going to go with Oklahoma to meet the Buckeyes in Arizona.

Tell you what, let's do this again in a week or two, and we can revise these picks if necessary. By November, nobody will remember the crazy stuff we said in September.

Jesse: Sounds good to me. For now, it's time to sit back and watch the real season- the conference season- begin, starting Saturday at noon in Champaign.
