



Saturday, October 2, 2010

Memorial Stadium, Champaign, IL

Ohio State at Illinois

11:00 a.m./Noon (ET)

TV: Big Ten Network (BTN)

The Buckeyes open the Big Ten schedule Saturday as guests of the Fighting Illini of Illinois with a noon kickoff at Memorial Stadium in Champaign. [No. 2 Ohio State](#) (4-0) will embark on their quest for a record sixth consecutive Big Ten title against an Illini program that has fallen on hard times since engineering a stunning upset over a 10-0 OSU team at Ohio Stadium in 2007.

The Buckeyes are trying to equal the six-year reign atop the conference achieved only by the OSU teams of 1972-1977, but they also know there are no more Marshalls or Eastern Michigans on the schedule, and they'll be the target for every Big Ten team's upset aspirations. In Big Ten play, every week will bring an opponent playing at their emotional peak, trying to take down the perennial powerhouse from Columbus.

For the young Buckeyes with no knowledge of the long term competitiveness between the two schools, Jim Tressel has reminded his charges this week that in the OSU-Illinois series over their two-decade lifetimes, OSU has a slim 10-9 edge in the last 19 games played. In his OSU career, Tressel is 5-2 against the Illini, having won five of the last six outings since a 34-22 Illinois win in his first year at OSU in 2001.

How Hot is That Seat?

Head coach Ron Zook is in his 6th season at [Illinois](#) , and he'll be opening conference play against Ohio State for the second year in a row. His 2009 Illini team went 3-9, including a [30-0 drubbing](#) by the Buckeyes in a driving rain at the Shoe in September. He is 21-39 overall in five seasons in Champaign, and 12-28 in Big Ten play, making him a regular feature lately in those "Coaches on the Hot Seat" columns you see every fall.

This year, Zook has a revamped coaching staff, with new coordinators on both sides of the ball, and he enters the 2010 season without the two marquee names on offense that most concerned opposing coaches in recent years...quarterback Juice Williams and receiver Arrelious Benn. Zook has been variously described this fall as beleaguered, embattled, and up against the wall. His teams have won just five conference games in the last two years combined. So why is this man [smiling](#) ?

To begin with, expectations are low, and the Illini have started the season 2-1 after losing six of their first seven games a year ago. So there's hope, even though it's still early. After a season opening 23-13 loss to Missouri, a game the Illini led at halftime, the wins have come against Northern Illinois (28-22) and Southern Illinois (35-3). Zook thinks his team should be 3-0, and he's of the opinion that there is more talent on this year's Illinois roster than they had when they knocked off the top-ranked Buckeyes three years ago. Well, what's he supposed to say?

Zook has had two weeks to prepare for the Buckeyes, as the Illini were idle last weekend. OSU fans concerned about this should note that Illinois is 0-5 coming off a bye week under Ron

Zook.

Right Where They Want To Be

Ohio State leaves the comfortable confines of Ohio Stadium for the first time this season, but by all appearances, they are confident and anxious to get into Big Ten play. No player on this OSU roster has ever been on a team that didn't win at least a share of the Big Ten title, and there is a palpable pride in that fact, and a determination to see it continue, that come through in their public statements. Not only will there be mentions from coaches this week of Purdue in 2009, but also of Illinois in 2007, and Penn State in 2008, to remind the players that no Big Ten game can be taken for granted.

As a team the Buckeyes come into Illinois in pretty good shape physically. Starting cornerback Chimdi Chekwa is fine after missing the middle two quarters against EMU with back spasms, and #3 cornerback Travis Howard will also be available to play after missing one game with a shoulder sprain. Backup linebacker and key special-teamer Dorian Bell also returns to action this week.

Tight end Jake Stoneburner has a high ankle sprain, and he might be held out of this one even though he has been practicing on the ankle, and has lobbied the coaches to allow him to play.

On the heels of their 73-point outburst against EMU, the Bucks are ranked second in the nation in scoring, averaging 49.25 points per game, and are 8th in total offense, with 506.75 yards per contest.

On defense, OSU is No. 2 in the nation in turnover margin at +2.5 per game, and they rank 5th nationally in rushing defense, giving up 71.0 yards per game.

The Bucks also have some individuals among the nation's leaders after four games. Kicker Devin Barclay ranks 4th in scoring at 12.75 points per game, and 5th in field goals, with 2.25 per game.

Terrelle Pryor is 13th in the country in total offense, averaging 302 yards per game, and he is also 13th in passing efficiency, with a 167.17 rating.

A New Look on Offense for Illinois

Zook brought in Paul Petrino from Arkansas to be his new offensive coordinator, and Petrino has gone away from the spread look we've become accustomed to seeing from Illinois, and has the Illini running mostly a pro-style set with a heavy emphasis on rushing the football. It helps that they have a good pair of running backs in juniors Mikel Leshoure and Jason Ford, and a starting quarterback in Nathan Scheelhaase who is a good runner in his own right.

[Leshoure](#) (6' 0", 230) finished fast in 2009 to wind up 6th in the Big Ten in rushing, and he is off to a good start in 2010 with 398 yards and three TD's in the first three games. That's good enough to rank him 7th in the nation in rushing at 132.7 yards per game. Right now that puts Leshoure in the company of John Clay and one or two others as the top running backs in the conference at this point of the season. Ford is another big powerful back at 6' 0", 235, who has 64 yards and two TD's so far this season.

At quarterback is the 6' 3", 195 lb. redshirt freshman [Scheelhaase](#) , who has already rushed 40 times this season for a 5.1 yard average and one rushing touchdown. As a team, the Illini have run the ball more than twice as often as they have passed it. Scheelhaase has excellent speed and the Illinois coaches like his intelligence and aptitude for the game, but he is not known for his passing prowess..at least not at this point in his college career. Through three games, he has completed 31 of 57 passes for 380 yards, with three TD's and three interceptions.

As you can see, it's not all pro-style offense for this team, with a quarterback rushing 14 times a game on average. They run some read-option stuff to take advantage of the speed and athleticism of Scheelhaase and take some pressure off of Leshoure. And although Scheelhaase isn't a guy with a power arm, he is fairly accurate in the short to intermediate ranges, and they have some talent at the receiver spots.

Junior wideout A.J. Jenkins has been the Illini's most productive receiver so far, with 12 receptions for 190 yards and two scores. Jarred Fayson, who transferred from Florida before last season, (and if you recall, had a bad case of the drops against the Bucks last year) is the other starting receiver. Fayson has eight catches through three games.

Eddie McGee was Juice Williams' backup at QB last season, and he's still the backup behind Scheelhaase, but he's officially a wide receiver these days, and he's the Illini's third option in the passing game. Zach Becker, who was the presumed starter at tight end, missed the first three games with an injury, but he is expected to play against OSU.

On the offensive line the Illini are solid at the tackle spots, with returning starters junior Jeff Allen and GlenOak product senior Ryan Palmer the starters. There's good experience on the inside as well with returning starters at two of the three inside positions on the O-line.

On Defense, It Can't Get Worse

The man chartered with turning around the awful Illinois defense of the last couple years is Vic Koenning, formerly of Kansas State, who was brought in as Zook's defensive coordinator this season. There are seven starters returning from the 2009 defense, and based on last year's performance, it's unclear whether that's a blessing or a curse.

It helps that Martez Wilson is back healthy at the middle linebacker spot, seemingly ready to fulfill some of his considerable potential and give the defense a dynamic force in the middle. Wilson leads the team in tackles with 25, and has added three TFL and one sack. Defensive end Clay Nurse is the other veteran presence on defense for the Illini, and Corey Liuget brings

some experience and toughness to the defensive line at one of the tackle spots.

Watching the starting Illinois secondary, you'll be excused if you confuse the names of Trulon Henry, Tavon Wilson and Travon Bellamy, two safeties and a cornerback respectively. Bellamy is a senior and probably the best of the bunch. The Illini may also be getting cornerback Terry Hawthorne back from an injury that has kept him out of all three games so far. The Illini have had numerous injuries and discipline issues with their secondary, and their next interception will be their first of the season.

Illinois is solid in the kicking game, with one of the league's best punters in Anthony Santella, and a junior placekicker in Derek Dimke who has made all four of his attempts this year, with a long of 52 yards.

Idle Speculation

The Illini have been fairly effective in their rushing defense in the young season, while the secondary seems like the weak link for them. Therefore, I see no reason for the Buckeyes to alter their preferred formula of throwing the ball to set up the run, and letting Pryor improvise when the rush or the coverage causes pass plays to break down.

Getting Brandon Saine untracked in the rushing game would be nice to see, but I'm not sure anyone really expects it to happen on any given Saturday anytime soon. His role is increasingly as a situational pass receiver and an occasional rusher, while the Buckeyes get the majority of their rushing yardage elsewhere. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. The team is scoring 50 points a game.

For the OSU defense, slowing down Mikel Leshoure is the biggest challenge they have had to face this season in terms of containing a quality running back. Leshoure is averaging 6.9 yards a carry, and the threat of a fast, athletic running quarterback means they can't focus on the tailback alone. Clearly the OSU priority will be to stop the run and force the youngster Scheelhaase to throw the ball for first downs. When the Illinois team strength of running the ball meets the OSU defensive strength of stopping the run, my money is on the Buckeyes over four quarters.

The Bucks have won seven straight games in Memorial Stadium, but they have often been tough, tight games. It's a difficult place to play, but this OSU group is a veteran team that has been in tougher venues, against far better teams than this Illinois bunch, and come out on top.

I think Illinois will get move the ball on offense enough to score in double digits, but they'll also make some mistakes on offense that turn into Buckeye points. In the end, the talent differential will more than make up for the home field advantage. Buckeyes 31-13.

Links:

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

[2010 OSU Roster](#)

[2010 Illinois Roster](#)
