



Ohio State survived both an early touchdown deficit to Illinois and an injury to their star quarterback to get by a feisty Fighting Illini team and stay unbeaten with a 24-13 victory Saturday in Champaign. Ohio State (5-0, 1-0) won for the eighth consecutive time here, but as usual in windy Memorial Stadium, it didn't come easily.

Illinois (2-2, 0-1) drove for a first quarter touchdown to take a 7-0 lead, but the OSU defense adjusted well, and held the Illini to two field goals the rest of the way. The Buckeyes' offense looked flat and tentative in the early going, with Terrelle Pryor's running providing the only real spark.

Pryor had runs of 66 and 35 yards in the first half, both of which answered Illini scores and set up Ohio State touchdowns, but the junior went down without contact when he "felt and heard something pop" in his quadriceps on a running play early in the third quarter. He returned after treatment on his thigh having missed only seven offensive plays for the Buckeyes, but he was limited in what he was able to do from that point on, and admitted to playing with some discomfort for the final two quarters.

"The worst thing was when I came back and the guys thought I was all right and they were saying, 'Come on Terrelle, lead us,'" Pryor said. "There was no way I could do anything but hand the ball off and maybe get a couple passes." Not exactly confidence-inspiring stuff as we look ahead to the grind of the season.

The Buckeyes found a way to run the football when it mattered though, after struggling most of

the game to find someone other than Pryor to move the ball on the ground. Dan Herron ran on six consecutive plays in a late 4th quarter touchdown drive after the Illini had pulled within four points, and the Buckeyes were finally able to get some breathing room when Herron ran it in for a score with 1:49 left in the game.

Pryor Answers Adversity

The Buckeyes failed to get a first down after the opening kickoff, and Illinois moved 55 yards in nine plays to draw first blood. The big play was a double-pass throwback play to quarterback Nate Scheelhaase that netted 23 yards and got the Illini a first down at the OSU 8-yard line.

"Early on, you could see they came up with some things that hurt us," said Tressel afterward. "They had some gadgets they worked on, and those worked for them." But it didn't take long for Ohio State to draw even.

On the first play after the kickoff, Pryor took off around right end, got the corner, and raced 66 yards to the Illinois 8-yard line. Two plays later, Pryor found Brandon Saine alone in the endzone for an 8-yard touchdown reception, and the early Illinois momentum was broken. The OSU offense had struggled their way to just one first down in the quarter, compared to five for the Illini, but the score was 7-7 after one.

With the wind at their backs in the second quarter, the Bucks failed to do much on offense, and it turned into a punting contest for most of the period. Then with under five minutes to go in the half, the OSU offense managed to do what the defense hadn't allowed since the first possession...give Illinois an opportunity with the ball deep in OSU territory.

On the first OSU offensive play following an Illinois punt, Pryor stared down his receiver a little too long, and the Illini's Trulon Henry stepped in to intercept the pass and take it down to the OSU 24. The OSU defense held at their 10-yard line, but a Derek Dimke field goal gave the Illini the lead once again at 10-7.

A nice kickoff return of 31 yards by Jaamal Berry and an Illinois penalty gave the Buckeyes good field position at their own 43, and again Pryor would shoulder the load to bring the Bucks back. On the first play, Pryor took off again around right end, and bolted 35 yards down to the Illini 22-yard line. A 16-yard completion to Dane Sanzenbacher, his first catch of the game, got OSU a first-and-goal at the Illinois 6-yard line, and after a sack of Pryor, he went back to Sanzenbacher for an 11-yard TD pass to give OSU the lead for good.

Going Conservative Against the Wind

Clinging to a 4-point lead and facing the wind in the 3rd quarter, Tressel went conservative even by his own Buckleyesque standards. And that gasp you heard out of the west early in the quarter was Buckeye Nation holding their collective breath when Pryor went down and didn't get up on the first OSU offensive series of the half.

Playing in relief of Pryor, Joe Bauserman squandered an OSU opportunity in Illini territory set up by a Jermale Hines interception, by promptly throwing a pick of his own. The quarter ended scoreless, and it was "Boom-time" for the Buckeyes.

Grinding One Out

With his quarterback hobbled, Tressel turned to his reliable running back Boom Herron as the 4th quarter began, and Herron responded with 14 workmanlike carries on the two OSU possessions of the final period. "He's always ready to be that physical back you want him to be," Tressel said of Herron after the game.

The first Buckeye possession used more than half the quarter, chewing up 7:52 on a 14-play drive that netted a 32-yard Devin Barclay field goal to make it 17-10 OSU. But the Illini were game from the start in this one, and they still had a little something left in the tank.

The Illini were able to answer with their first good drive since the first quarter, moving quickly into OSU territory on a 26-yard run by Mikel Leshoure. Then a 29-yard completion from Scheelhaase to Jerrod Fayson set the Illini up at the OSU 16, and it looked like the game might be headed to overtime. Faced with a 4th and 7 at the OSU 13-yard line, and 4:36 left in the game, Illinois coach Ron Zook opted for a field goal try, and Illinois closed the gap to 17-13 on Derek Dimke's 30-yarder.

The Illini shot themselves in the foot with a personal foul on the ensuing kickoff return, helping the Buckeyes start their possession near midfield, and Herron took over once again. OSU went 53 yards in six plays...all six plays runs by Herron, and he went in untouched over the left side for the final points of the game.

Zook, who leaves himself open to criticism just by showing up, will no doubt be asked about the decision to opt for a field goal when he was down seven points with a 4th and 7 on the OSU 13 with just over four minutes to go in the game. His choice to go for three left him still needing a touchdown on his next possession, something the Illini had been unable to accomplish since the game's first few minutes. As it turned out, Herron and the Buckeyes scored again anyway, but I'm guessing that won't stop the Illinois people from second-guessing their coach.

Style Points?

This game was anything but an artistic success for the nation's 2nd-ranked team, and the players were well aware that they need to play better than they did on this afternoon if they are going to achieve their goals. Pryor was one of several Buckeye players happy to pocket the Big Ten road win, but candid about the need to improve. "We've got a target on our backs, and my hat's off to Illinois," he said after the game. "We just have to keep on getting better and pushing forward, because we can't play like the way we did today."

Tressel's postgame comment probably won't land him in Bartlett's, but it sums up the

one-game-at-a-time approach necessary to slog through conference play on the way to the goal. "That's the way it is in the Big Ten. Every battle is a battle."

When the goal is the national championship, every game is evaluated by fans by asking if the performance was worthy of an elite team...a championship team...and by those standards, this road win for Ohio State over a mediocre Illinois team doesn't measure up.

The bottom line though, is the 5-0 record, and injuries to key players like Pryor and Tyler Moeller are of much greater concern as the memory of the Illinois game fades away. Moeller sustained an injury to a pectoral muscle, and could be lost to the team for a while. Freshman Christian Bryant played well in relief, but Moeller's experience would be hard to replace.

As for Pryor, there is no replacement. Joe Bauserman threw an interception Saturday, but he can't be faulted for not being Terrelle Pryor. It's just a simple fact that this OSU offense is an entirely different animal without Pryor, and in his absence the Buckeyes are just not a very good offensive team.

Indiana is next for the Buckeyes, and their passing attack should provide a stern test for an OSU secondary that is once again depleted by injuries with the loss of Moeller.

For now, the thigh of Terrelle Pryor is Ohio State's greatest worry.

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