

Mid-Season Musings With Jesse and Dan

Written by {ga=danjesse}

Wednesday, October 13 2010 11:46 PM - Last Updated Thursday, October 14 2010 7:45 AM



There's one major change on the college football landscape [since two weeks ago](#) . Alabama, everybody's Number One, has fallen - and Ohio State is now the team to beat at the top of the polls. The conference season has begun and with it the separation between the teams that have it and the teams that don't. Now at the season's midway point, six weeks in, it's time to look back at the first half and see how it reflects on the second, both for the Buckeyes and the college football world at large.

Dan: Jesse, the season is half over, and guess what? The Buckeyes are No. 1. How good do you think this team is, and how do like their chances to go 12-0 and make it to Glendale? Will it even last a week?

Jesse: I think this team is good enough to win the BCS Championship, certainly. There's a three-year starter at quarterback- who happens to be one of the most dynamic athletes in college football- guys who can get open, a veteran offensive line, a superb front seven... there are some defects at running back and the secondary is a little thin, but I don't see any perfect teams out there. Ohio State's chances at landing the crystal football are as good as anyone's.

Having said that, if they're going to lose this is the week to do it. I said before the season that Wisconsin, on the road, at night, would be Ohio State's toughest test and I see no reason to change that assessment.

Dan: I on record as saying OSU will lose one game this year, but it's Iowa that concerns me more than the Badgers right now. I think the Buckeyes get by Wisconsin this weekend. Did I mention that I'll be in the middle of all that crazy on Saturday night? (Yes, Dan, several times)

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Dan: One of the things that makes Ohio State's 6-0 start all the more interesting is how it stands in sharp contrast to the way some of the other traditional powers have fared. Here at the halfway point of the season, three of college football's iconic programs...teams that have largely dominated the last decade of competition...Texas, USC, and Florida, are not even in the Top 25. I heard somewhere that it's the first time all of those teams, plus Penn State, have been unranked simultaneously since about the Ford administration or something. Crazy game, isn't it?

Jesse: Crazy but not overly surprising, really. I think some regression had to be expected from all four of those programs even prior to the season- hell, both of us said that Temple would give Penn State a game in State College weeks before it actually happened. I guess we could be shocked at just how much those programs have regressed, but frankly, it'd be even more surprising to see those four in national-title contention this season, considering their personnel and coaching losses.

You know what's crazy? Syracuse is 4-1. That's crazy. Of course, they have played two FCS teams...

Dan: True, with Texas and Florida, the off year wasn't unexpected, and USC is in transition. You know with the Gators and Longhorns this is a short term lull, because nobody has recruited as well in the last two years as those two programs. It may take a little longer for USC to reassert themselves among the regular top five or so. And Penn State?...well, we'll get to that.

Dan: Jesse, is there a better defensive team in the country than the Buckeyes, and if so, who might that be? OSU is ranked [No. 3 in total defense](#) at the moment, behind TCU and Boise St.

Jesse: Nebraska is ranked only twelfth in the nation in total defense and they've had some attrition from last season- Mr. Suh and some injuries over the summer- but you have to be impressed at the way they've gone on the road and dominated players the caliber of Jake Locker and Daniel Thomas. Plus they've still got the fourth-best scoring defense. LSU has probably the best defensive back in college football in Patrick Peterson, they're third in the nation in sacks, and they've played a huge part in keeping the Tigers unbeaten despite quarterback problems and Les Miles's general zaniness. If any defense is better than Ohio State's it's one of these two.

Dan: Agree on the Huskers. If there's a cornerback in the nation close to as good as Petersen, it's Prince Amakamura of Nebraska. I would throw out Iowa too, as one of the best defenses in the country. TCU has the numbers, but I'm unconvinced that they rank with these other teams.

Jesse: What team has impressed you the most in the first half? (best team of the first half, in

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other words)

Dan: I admit to not having seen much of TCU or Oklahoma, so my impressions there are mostly second hand. Oregon has been impressive, although I still have questions about their defense. And I'm not a Boise-basher. I love that program and that team. They are so well-coached that they don't get enough credit for their talent. I have not seen a defense yet this year as good as OSU's, although Nebraska is close. On paper, Iowa is as good as anybody. I think Ohio State is a legit No.1 right now, if only because nobody else is clearly better. They're followed by Boise St., Oregon, Nebraska and Oklahoma in something like that order. By the way, the SEC has a few pretty good teams too (couldn't resist). Whichever team emerges from South Carolina, Bama, Auburn and LSU could still crash the party in Glendale with one loss.

Jesse: What's interesting about this year is that everyone is just a little bit flawed. Oregon is the highest scoring team in the nation but can be pushed around a little on defense. Nebraska has the defense and the running game, but it's tough to win a title with a freshman quarterback, even a redshirt. (Bernie Kosar and the '83 Hurricane may beg to differ, though.) Oklahoma has tons of talent and experience on offense and excelled against probably a tougher first-half schedule than the other elite teams- but the Sooners are 93rd in the nation in defense. LSU has mediocre quarterbacks and a lunatic for a head coach. Ohio State struggles to run the ball. Alabama, well, lost. I'm going to have to pass on this one. This is one of those seasons where no clear-cut "best" team has shown itself yet.

Jesse: Who is your top freshman of the first half?

Dan: Two guys come to mind right away... [Marcus Lattimore](#), the South Carolina running back who I have yet to see go down on the first hit, and

[Le'Veon Bell](#)

of Michigan State, who also looks like a keeper. Lattimore went for 93 yards on 23 carries (4.0) against Alabama in the biggest game of the year so far, so he has the edge for me. Of course, if redshirt freshmen count, it has to be Nebras

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(737yds) are terrific, and he's thrown the ball enough to get by (660 yds), plus he's quarterbacking an unbeaten Top 10 team.

Jesse: Right now- and we are including redshirt freshmen- it's Taylor Martinez. He's fifth in the nation in rushing yards, tops in yards-per-carry at a surreal 10.8 and tied at number one with 12 rushing touchdowns. He was completely unstoppable in Nebraska's road wins at Washington and Kansas State and has electrified what last season was, to put it nicely, a pedestrian offense. I still want to see what happens when he has to win a game through the air- and that might happen as early as Saturday against Texas- but as of now Martinez is my guy. Obviously

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Lattimore and Le'Veon Bell deserve mention, as does James White of Wisconsin. Defensively, Kent State has end Roosevelt Nix who ranks in the national top ten in sacks, tackles for loss and forced fumbles.

Dan: We've both watched a ton of football already Jesse. What's the best, or most interesting game you've seen in the first half of the season?

Jesse: Maybe it's just that the memory is fresh, but [South Carolina's win over Alabama](#) last week was the most dramatic and entertaining game of the first half. First of all, it was just a good football game. But it was also lacquered with running subplots: could Alabama find a way to win its 30th straight regular season game despite being outplayed? Could South Carolina finally step up and win this kind of game, something they haven't done often- if at all- in the history of that program? Could Stephen Garcia overcome that horrendous safety and his checkered reputation and be the leader that brings home the victory? It was, I think, the most significant game of the season so far. Number One goes down- that's bigger than everything else in the first six games. It didn't have the great finish- but it had damned near everything else.

Dan: That Monday night opener with [Boise St. vs. Virginia Tech](#) was an entertaining one, and for sheer early season drama and personal vested interests, it was hard to top [OSU-Miami](#)

. Speaking of drama, how about the Spartans [overtime thriller](#)

over Notre Dame on a

[fake field goal touchdown pass](#)

? And then there was Denard Robinson's Week Two

[coming out party](#)

against the Irish, when he totaled 502 yards of total offense. And any game watching Oregon's offense, or Nevada, with

[Colin Kaepernick](#)

is going to be entertaining. I love it all, Jesse. I can't pick just one.

Jesse: Dan, what's behind the struggles of Ohio State's running game?

Dan: Brandon Saine's struggles running the ball effectively are documented, and he has been gradually phased out (zero carries against IU) and replaced with Dan Herron as the #1 tailback. The offensive line has had problems at times, but every team OSU has faced has stacked the box and dared Pryor to throw. Jim Tressel has obliged them, and Pryor is asserting himself nicely as a passing quarterback. As the season goes along, I think we'll see more and more of Jordan Hall and Jaamal Berry in relief of Herron, and the rushing game will benefit from that shift.

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This running game is unique in recent years of OSU football. The best running back doesn't play running back...he only has 4-6 planned rushing attempts per game, and still leads the team in rushing. In November, as the temperatures drop and conditions worsen, Ohio State knows they will have to be better at rushing from the tailback position than they have been to this point. And I think they will be, with Saine a receiving threat from the slot, Pryor with a thigh at 100%, and the two young backs spelling Herron.

Sooner or later, some OSU opponents will look at how Pryor is carving up these run-stuffing 8-men-in-the-box defensive fronts with his passing, and drop a safety or a linebacker back...even just a spy for Pryor...all of which should open things up for the rushing game.

Jesse: For whatever reason, Ohio State just has never had that dominant run-blocking offensive line since Tressel got here. I don't think it's the caliber of athlete up front- I think it's more a mismatch between the type of athlete and the scheme. Whatever the reason, the running game only seems to function with the superstar back, the Mo Clarett, the Beanie Wells- and Ohio State doesn't have that guy right now. It's a dicey combination.

So what can they do? Other than rely on Terrelle Pryor to get all of the big plays in the running game? They need to create running lanes the NFL way. Teams are going to keep putting eight and nine in the box against Ohio State. So the Buckeyes need to set up the run with the pass, like they did against Oregon. Put Terrelle in the pocket and take advantage of those one-on-one match-ups with Sanzenbacher and Posey. Stretch out the defense, force them to back off the line of scrimmage and go from there.

Jesse: Probably a no-brainer on at least one side of the ball, but I'll ask anyway: who are your midseason offensive and defensive MVP's for the 2010 Buckeyes?

Dan: First half MVP on defense for the Buckeyes is a tough one. Nate Williams has been as active as anyone the last few games, and Dex Larimore has a case to be made, but it comes down to Cam Heyward or Ross Homan for me. Homan is the glue guy and Heyward is the havoc wrecker. Homan leads the team in tackles and consistency so he's the guy.

Offense on the other hand is a no-brainer. Terrelle Pryor is the offense. Runner up is Dane Sanzenbacher, who has 27 grabs for 411 yards and 7 TD's. He dropped a ball Saturday for the first time in about a year. It was only a foot off the ground, but still a shock. Third is Dan Herron, who is one of the toughest guys on this team, and one of the most reliable lately, as Saine has struggled.

Jesse: Offensively it's Terrelle Pryor, and I've got the same order as you- Dane Sanzenbacher second and Dan Herron third. At this point no one else is really in the running, although DeVier Posey will have every opportunity to stand up and be counted in the second half of the season.

Defensively it gets a little bit murkier. Cam Heyward doesn't necessarily have the numbers, but his presence opens things up for his teammates- especially Nate Williams. Cam still leads the

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team in tackles for loss and made what in my opinion was the defensive play of the year so far- his 80-yard interception return against Miami. Nate Williams has been all over the place. Brian Rolle leads the team in interceptions, is second in tackles and has scored Ohio State's only defensive touchdown so far. But Ross Homan is so steady, leads the team in tackles- he's the guy so far.

Dan: After two Big Ten games, we're learning more about how the conference race will play out, and I think the teams are beginning to separate somewhat. What Big Ten teams have surprised you in the first half, and which ones have shown you less than you expected?

Jesse: Illinois is a surprise. They're very young, they've underachieved so badly over the last couple of years with a veteran team (8-16 in 2008-09.) Who could have expected the Illini to hang with Ohio State and absolutely kill Penn State on the road? Michigan State is finally winning those close games, something they hadn't been doing in the first few years under Mark Dantonio. (Maybe I should've mentioned Sparty above- they've looked really good so far, although they could stand to get more pressure on the quarterback.)

On the bad side, well... I thought Minnesota would struggle, but I didn't expect them to be 1-5 at this point. I thought Penn State was overrated, but I didn't anticipate them falling apart the way they have. For the most part, though, this Big Ten season has more or less gone according to form. Ohio State, Wisconsin and Iowa were projected to be the big three of this conference, and with the exception of Sparty making it a big four, that's happened. Michigan came down to earth a little bit, which we figured to happen. And so on and so forth.

Dan: It seemed like the real separation in the conference happened last week when previously unbeaten Northwestern and Michigan tasted defeat for the first time, and Michigan State kept going the other direction with an impressive win over Michigan, after knocking off Wisconsin the week prior. Iowa has looked very good since stumbling at Arizona in Week Two. Illinois has done the biggest jump out of nowhere, as you said, while Purdue, Minnesota and Indiana are about where everyone thought they'd be.

The Penn State situation increasingly looks to be in a downward spiral to which there is just one long term solution...a coaching change. It's a shame to see one of the all-time greats of the game potentially departing the scene on the heels of a disappointing campaign by his team, but that end game looks more and more likely as the weeks go by. Let's hope that however the school orchestrates Joe Paterno's ultimate exit, they do it with the appropriate class and dignity, and in a manner befitting his great career.

Jesse: Let's wrap this up, Dan. Ohio State is Number One. For how long?

Dan: I'm bullish on the Buckeyes chances this weekend, as I said. (Did I mention I'll be there?) I think they go into Iowa in November still unbeaten and ranked No. 1. Lets do this again in a

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month, and I'll make that call then.

Jesse: If the Buckeyes can get out of Madison with a win, they'll be playing for the crystal football in January. We'll check on that prediction in a couple of weeks.
