



Saturday November 27, 2010 -

Ohio Stadium, Columbus, OH -

Michigan at Ohio State -

12:00 p.m. (ET) -

TV: ABC -

Ohio State and Michigan will kick off for the 107th time at noon Saturday, and as it so often does, the outcome will impact the Big Ten title race. But there's also a sense of finality to The Game this year, with the conference realigning after this season, and the traditional rivals competing in separate divisions beginning in 2011.

The 8th-ranked Buckeyes (10-1, 6-1) will need to win their seventh straight over Michigan to assure them a share of their sixth consecutive conference title. [Michigan](#) (7-4, 3-4) arguably needs a win even more than that. OSU's current streak in The Game is a growing irritant in Ann Arbor, and it's unlikely that Wolverines head coach Rich Rodriguez can survive another loss to the Buckeyes.

OSU is an 18-point favorite, playing at home, and motivated by a potential BCS Bowl bid. On top of that, it's Senior Day at the Horseshoe, the emotional final home game for 12 Buckeye starters. The Michigan defense is woefully bad, and their offense is as erratic as it is dynamic. There are all kinds of reasons why this year's version of The Game shouldn't be close, not least the fact that Jim Tressel "gets" Ohio State-Michigan, while Rich Rodriguez is still looking for a clue.

The State of The Game

But The Game has never been about six-game winning streaks and 18-point lines. This contest is usually closer, lower-scoring, and less reflective of the rest of the season's results than the on-paper matchup might foretell. The Jim Tressel era, and now the 3-year decline of Wolverine football have conspired to steer The Game into uncharted waters. For all the gnashing of teeth over how the new divisional setup in the Big Ten would irreparably harm The Game, nothing harms that brand more than the same team winning it every year. (see also: Browns v. Steelers)

No player on the Ohio State roster knows what it feels like to lose to Michigan, and no one is more aware of that than every player on the Michigan roster. The Big Ten Conference did their part to save The Game by figuring out a way to have their two divisions and still keep the Ohio State-Michigan game in its traditional place on the calendar. It remains to be seen however, if the Michigan program can return some competitive balance to the annual 60 minutes of football anytime soon.

In the all-time series, the Wolverines still hold a significant edge over Ohio State, leading 57-43-6. Michigan also leads in games played in Columbus 27-23-2. Jim Tressel is 8-1 against Michigan in his OSU career. Rich Rodriguez is 0-2 against the Buckeyes.

Rich Rod on the Block



It's unclear whether a victory over Ohio State could save Rodriguez' job at this point, but it's fair to say a loss would make his return a long shot. What he has achieved in three seasons at Michigan is a 15-19 overall record, with a brutal 6-17 mark in Big Ten play. What he has also brought with him to a proud Big Ten institution is the negative attention of the NCAA, which has dogged the Wolverine program ever since the backlash from Rodriguez' messy departure from West Virginia followed him to Ann Arbor.

The NCAA issues have been less serious than they have been constant, like an open sore that is then rubbed raw by the losing. A 5-0 start to 2010, along with the emergence of the best rushing quarterback the league has ever seen, have given the Wolverine faithful some hope that the Rodriguez program is working. If they gave a Heisman for the first half of the season, it would be sitting on [Denard Robinson's](#) mantle already.

But the combined embarrassments of the last three football seasons have not gone down well with administrators and alumni in Ann Arbor, and new UM Athletic Director David Brandon has no ownership of the Rodriguez hire. Rodriguez is in the third year of a six-year contract, but a third consecutive losing record in conference play might seal his fate.

And we were just getting over losing Lloyd Carr. *(dabs eye with hankie)*

The 10-1 Blues

I can't recall a year when a 10-1 record, a Top 8 national ranking, and the prospect of another Big Ten title generated so much discontent and apathy among Buckeye fans. Yes, this was to be the year...the perfect, championship season, and all of that went down the tubes when they got outplayed one October evening in Madison. Still the persistent "meh" attitude evident in the fan base ever since is a bit disconcerting, though it's not a mystery.

The usually stingy OSU defense proved human in the Wisconsin game, and later against Penn State and Iowa as well, but they're still the [nation's #3-ranked defense](#) overall, despite the injury-riddled secondary. The Buckeyes haven't looked great on the road this year, although Jim Tressel has won 21 of his last 23 Big Ten road games. Special teams have looked less than special at times, including the worst possible start of a game that night in Wisconsin. But OSU's critics aren't talking down the defense or the special teams.

Terrelle Pryor is the main source of their disappointment...and it's understandable, if slightly unfair. OSU is 9th nationally in scoring offense at just under 40 points per game, and 18th (out of 120 FBS schools) in total offense, averaging 446 yards per contest. Pryor is second in the Big Ten and 14th nationally in passing efficiency, and is tied for the conference lead in touchdown passes.

On the negative side...three years into his college career he still has all too frequent lapses in judgment and decision-making. At times he lacks touch on short throws, and too often he throws into coverage when any other option would be advisable. Though he has come a long way in terms of his throwing mechanics and footwork from his debut as a freshman, he still hasn't shown the consistency that fans expected to see by the time their wunderkind got to his junior year.

He hasn't won any Heisman Trophies or national championships yet...in other words, he hasn't

lived up to *their expectations* of him...and he is both the most visible, and the most scrutinized player on the team...so he becomes the object of their discontent. People forget the games (like a week ago in Iowa) that the Buckeyes would have lost with a lesser athlete playing quarterback.

The same lack of perspective can apply to the way some fans look at the team overall...in which the perfect is made the enemy of the good. The Buckeyes lost a game...(and they had the bad form to trail at halftime two weeks in a row before winning both games)...so they can't be all that good. Six consecutive seasons of 10 or more victories - but zero national championships - is a cold streak for the glass half-empty crowd. They will always be with us. Deal with it.

The Buckeyes may well have been overrated at No. 2 to begin the season, but I think they're fairly ranked at No. 8 today. They have a defense that is capable of keeping them in the game with any team in the country, and even without big time playmakers at running back or wide receiver on offense, they have managed to put up 40 points a game.

Ask Texas, Florida and USC how 10-1 sounds right about now.

Even Denard Can't Keep Up



