

## The Season That Will Be: Buckeye Schedule Talk

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Friday, August 05 2011 11:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, August 05 2011 8:47 AM

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Ohio State picked a bad time to play its most grueling schedule in years. Eight of the Buckeyes' twelve opponents played in bowl games in 2010; four of those are ranked in the preseason Top 25. Three games in four weeks are against teams that won or tied for either division or conference titles. With the program in upheaval the Bucks could really use a 2007-style cupcake-fest: instead they get a relative meat-grinder.

**Sept. 3: Akron-** Luke Fickell couldn't have picked a better opponent for his first game as a head coach. Akron was absolutely putrid in 2010, losing its first eleven games while sporting the second-worst offense in the country, ahead of only ghastly New Mexico. The Zips have lost fourteen in a row on the road dating back to the 2008 season and haven't beaten a Big Ten opponent since 1894. That opponent, way back during the second Grover Cleveland administration, just happened to be Ohio State. Don't look for a repeat of Akron's Gilded Age heroics in Week One at the Horseshoe. Even with the expected growing pains, the Buckeyes won't be challenged in this one.

**Sept. 10: Toledo-** The Rockets may be in the same conference as the Zips, but they aren't in the same league: with Eric Page finishing fifth in the nation in receptions the boys from Jamie Farr's hometown went 8-5 and reached the Motor City Bowl. Not bad, and with the bulk of the team- including Page- returning, the Rockets should be even better in 2011. Still, Toledo's returning talent shouldn't be enough to trouble the Buckeyes, who defused the Rockets 38-0 in the last meeting between the teams back in 2009. Toledo played two national programs last season- Arizona and Boise State- and lost those games by a combined score of 98-16. With Ohio State untested and still adjusting to a new head coach and a new quarterback, the Rockets might keep things interesting early. Still, the Buckeyes should have this game put away by the fourth quarter.

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**Sept. 17: @ Miami (Fl.)-** Three weeks in comes the first interesting game of the 2011 season. Like the Buckeyes, Miami is led by a new head coach in Al Golden. That's where the resemblance ends. Golden has been ensconced in Coral Gables since last December, while Ohio State fully expected to be led by Jim Tressel until the Vest was blown out of Columbus by the bombshells of the spring. Unlike Luke Fickell, Golden is no interim boss. Indeed, he's probably the Hurricane program's best hire since Butch Davis, a winner who turned around Temple, the most forlorn program in the nation when he took over in 2005.

That having been said, he won't have the 'Canes playing at their old dynasty level overnight, certainly not when the Buckeyes come to town. Golden has inherited a talented but undisciplined and mistake-prone team which repeatedly killed itself with turnovers and penalties during 2010's lackluster 7-6 campaign. He also inherits quarterback Jacory Harris, who has thrown 32 interceptions the last two seasons, including four in the loss to Ohio State. (There's also Stephen Morris, who chucked nine picks of his own.) And while this game will be played in Miami, the home-field advantage that fueled the Hurricane dynasty is gone with the Orange Bowl. There may be as many Buckeye fans as Miami fans in the stands at Sun Life Stadium.

I have to admit I'm pretty apprehensive about this game. Miami has been down for several years but in terms of sheer athleticism the 'Canes match up well with just about anyone, including Ohio State. The Buckeyes will be far from home- they haven't played in Miami since the 1977 Orange Bowl- with a greenhorn head coach and a greenhorn quarterback, against a fast, athletic and highly motivated opponent, and it will be hot in south Florida in the third week of September. This game is fraught with all sorts of hazards. Not to come off as a pessimist, but this could be the week in which it really comes home to Buckeye fans that the Jim Tressel era, and the expectations that accompanied it, is over and done with.

**Sept. 24: Colorado-** Another opponent, another rookie head coach. Former Buffalo tight end Jon Embree is the new man in Boulder, charged with turning around a program that hasn't had a winning season since 2005. Embree isn't the only thing that's new in Colorado football. After spending more than six decades in the Big Eight/Twelve the Buffs are now a member of the Pac-10 Conference- a move that won't have much of an effect on their fortunes, at least in the short term. Colorado will drag ass in the Pac-10 much as it dragged ass in the Big Twelve recently.

And Colorado should drag ass in Columbus as well. Miami has been merely down in the last several years; the Buffs have been way down. A road loss to the Hurricanes would be

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understandable; a home loss to Colorado will be flat-out catastrophic, particularly considering the schedule the Buckeyes will be facing after this game.

So in a way this, and not Miami, is the most important game of the first month- assuming that Akron and Toledo are near-automatic wins, of course. Ohio State can withstand a loss to Miami. A loss to Colorado would send this season into a tailspin. Fortunately that probably isn't going to happen. Can you imagine the Buckeyes, even in a denuded state, losing in the Horseshoe to Colorado? Neither can I. Ohio State should take care of business in this game. And after that the real fun begins.

**Oct. 1: Michigan State-** A visit from Mark Dantonio's Spartans kicks off the murderous middle of Ohio State's schedule. Michigan State finished in a three-way tie for the Big Ten title in 2010 and brings back the bulk of its offensive contributors, including quarterback Kirk Cousins and the two-headed tailback monster of Edwin Baker and Le'Veon Bell. Sparty will score points. But with defensive leader Greg Jones having used up his eligibility, Sparty will give them up as well.

Traditionally the Spartans have been a thorn in the side of Ohio State going back to the Woody Hayes era. Jim Tressel reversed that trend, however, going 6-0 against the boys from East Lansing. Michigan State hasn't beaten the Buckeyes since 1999, John Cooper's second-to-last season in Columbus. Indeed the Spartans, along with perennial bottom-feeders Indiana and Minnesota, were the only Big Ten teams Coach Tressel didn't lose to.

Which means Michigan State might just be overdue. Ohio State hasn't lost its conference opener since the Northwestern upset in 2004. But with a well-entrenched coaching staff and experience at quarterback, the Spartans will be a dangerous opponent, even in the Horseshoe. Even at the best of times Michigan State is never a team to be underestimated, and these are most definitely not the best of times, at least for Ohio State football.

**Oct. 8: @ Nebraska-** Now, this is a game to look forward to. Ohio State hasn't played Nebraska since 1956, and never in Lincoln. Now the Buckeyes and the Huskers will be on the same field- and as Big Ten rivals, no less. In terms of tradition and fan fervor Nebraska takes a backseat to no one, including Ohio State. In addition to their loyalty, Cornhusker fans are known for being as classy and sportsmanlike as any in all of college football. If you're road-tripping for the Bucks, this is the game to go to.

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Ohio State fans should expect a friendlier reception than their team. Ex-Buckeye safety Bo Pelini, he of the bulging eyes and pounding temples, will bring a powerful unit into the game. Speedy quarterback Taylor Martinez and 951-yard rusher Rex Burkhead key an explosive ground attack, although the passing game will lag behind. Pelini has rebuilt the Blackshirts as well- Nebraska has finished eleventh and ninth in the nation in total defense the last two seasons. The flip sides are an offense that disappears at times and a tendency toward penalties. Nebraska was one of the most penalized teams in college football last season, and Pelini's hysterical tirades at the officials didn't help in that department. Pelini is a good football mind, but he isn't the most disciplined man in the game, and his team reflects his lack of self-control.

It's fairly simple: if Ohio State wins this game, it'll likely be a result of forcing Taylor Martinez to throw and Nebraska self-destructing with penalties and turnovers. If Nebraska wins it'll likely be a result of the Buckeyes failing to move against the Cornhusker defense and failing to put the brakes on the Cornhusker running game.

**Oct. 15: @ Illinois-** Ron Zook may have saved his job in 2010. Bolstered by some shrewd (if desperate) assistant-coach hires and the standout play of redshirt freshman quarterback Nathan Scheelhaase and tailback Mikel Leshoure, the Illini went 7-6 and routed Baylor in the Texas Bowl for their first postseason win since 1999. The Zooker is still an overly modest 28-45 since taking the Illinois job in 2005, but despite it all he still has his job.

Winning seasons are one thing in Champaign. Sustaining them is quite another. Illinois hasn't had back-to-back winning seasons since 1989-90. With LeShoure and defensive leader Martez Wilson off to the NFL and a new athletic director in charge, Zook is still under the gun to produce right now. Another season along the lines of 2008 and '09, when the Illini went a combined 8-16, might spell doom for the seventh-year head coach.

Beating Ohio State for the first time since 2007 would be a huge boon for the perennially embattled Zook, and he has the tools to do it even without LeShoure and Wilson. The Buckeyes will be on the road for this one, amid the always tricky winds of Memorial Stadium, and unlike previous seasons they won't have the playing or coaching talent to overpower their orange-clad opponents. Not to mention Ohio State will be coming off a physical and emotional road trip to Nebraska. In previous seasons Buckeye fans took wins for granted in games like these, concerning themselves simply with how dominant their team looked in them. No longer. A win-any win- is all that matters.

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**Oct. 29: Wisconsin-** After a merciful bye week the Buckeyes host the one team that beat them on the field in 2010- and beat them decisively. Bret Bielema got his first win over Ohio State last October as his BCS-bound Badgers rolled up 184 rushing yards in a 31-18 runaway. With James White and Montee Ball- who combined for more than 2,000 yards- both back, along with receiver Nick Toon and new quarterback Russell Wilson, late of N.C. State, Wisconsin is more than capable of dealing out a similar brand of punishment, even in Columbus.

Matter of fact, this may be Ohio State's toughest game of the season- tougher, even than the road trips to Miami, Nebraska or Michigan. They don't come more physical than Wisconsin, and the Badgers always play the Buckeyes tough, even in defeat. And Wisky has a history of coming up big in Columbus. Indeed, the Badgers have a winning record in the Horseshoe since the 1999 season (3-2) and in their last visit two years ago dominated statistically despite losing 31-13. And with the teams now grouped together in the new Leaders Division this might be the most important game of Ohio State's season as well as the toughest.

There are a lot of questions surrounding this season's Ohio State team, and one of them involves the ability of the defense to stand in there physically against a team that relies more on power than on speed. Over the last several years the Silver Bullets have evolved into more of an SEC-style speed-oriented unit- a strategy that works like a charm against most opponents but proved bankrupt against the straight-ahead beef and brawn of Wisconsin. At home, at night, on Halloween weekend, can the Buckeyes keep from getting pushed around? We'll see.

**Nov. 5: Indiana-** The brutal midsection of the season concluded, Ohio State begins the final month with a home layup against perennial bottom-feeder Indiana, now led by former Oklahoma offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson. The new head coach is already making waves with his signing of blue-chip quarterback Gunnar Kiel- but Kiel won't be on campus until 2012, and for the time being Wilson will have to deal with the talent that got Bill Lynch fired with a 3-21 Big Ten record the last three seasons. Indiana doesn't beat Ohio State unless the Hoosiers are way up and the Buckeyes are way down. That isn't the case this year.

**Nov. 12: @ Purdue-** Two years ago in West Lafayette the Boilermakers upset Ohio State, 26-18. Other than that glorious afternoon the best thing about the recent vintage of Purdue football is Danny Hope's cop-stache. Since taking over as Joe Tiller's hand-picked successor, Hope is a dismal 9-15 and seems cursed, with inexplicable losses and demoralizing injuries haunting his program. The glory days of the Tiller era seem lost in the mists of history.

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But even with star receiver Keith Smith and stud defensive end Ryan Kerrigan off the scene, things might be better for the Boilers this season. Tailback Ralph Bolden is back after missing all of 2010 with a knee injury, most of the offensive line is back and the defense looks solid. With a forgiving early portion of the schedule, Purdue might actually go bowling for the first time in Danny Hope's tenure- if the Boilermakers can avoid the close defeats that have characterized the last two seasons. Purdue is 3-7 in games decided by eight points or less since the beginning of 2009.

I don't have to tell anyone that this is a dangerous game. A better Buckeye team lost in West Lafayette two years ago. Purdue has an excellent kicking game with Carson Wiggs and plays reasonably well against the run, Ohio State's specialty. Last season the Buckeyes walloped the Boilermakers, 49-0. But that game was in Columbus- among other differences. It may be chilly November but Buckeye fans will have to sweat this one out.

**Nov. 19: Penn State-** Ohio State has spent much of the last several years beating the daylights out of its would-be rival to the east. Seven of the last nine meetings have gone to the Buckeyes, four of the last five by an average score of 32-11. That includes last season's vacated 38-14 beat-down in Columbus. Of course, that happy state of affairs was authored by Jim Tressel. The Vest is gone, of course, but Joe Paterno, the Emperor Franz Ferdinand of college football, just keeps on keeping on.

Penn State doesn't look very good this season, the preseason Top-25 ranking notwithstanding. The talent just isn't there. The defense is solid as usual, but other than wide receiver Derek Moyer there isn't a remotely scary performer on the offensive side- not scary to opponents, at least. Mr. Moxie himself, Matt McGloin, is back at quarterback along with the promising Rob Bolden, but neither will make anyone forget Todd Blackledge or Kerry Collins. The biggest threat on offense is probably tailback Silas Redd, who went for 5.7 yards per carry in 2010 and ran well in the first half of last season's game in Columbus.

All in all, it's looking like another lackluster season in State College, as Emperor Paterno's endless reign continues unabated. Penn State fans might have pretenses to rivalry status with the Buckeyes, but it's just that- pretense. Ohio State will be down in 2011, but not at the level of the Lions. This one-prestigious matchup should be just a tune-up for a Michigan game that has suddenly shot up several notches on the fascinating scale.

**Nov. 26: @ Michigan-** No head coach since Fielding H. Yost dominated the Ohio

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State-Michigan rivalry like Jim Tressel. 9-1 overall, 4-1 in Ann Arbor, seven straight wins, the last four by an average score of 29-7, two Wolverine coaches either fired or forced into early retirement in the last four years... this is the legacy of the Vest when it comes to the Game.

But oh, how things have changed. There's a new swagger and confidence wafting out of Ann Arbor with the hiring of former Wolverine assistant Brady Hoke, who turned around moribund programs at Ball State and San Diego State and is promising to do the same at Michigan- [right now](#)

. For the first time in a long time between these programs- ten years, to be exact- it feels as if the School Up North owns the initiative.

Look, we all know the worm has to turn sometime in this rivalry. Remember, it wasn't that long ago that the Wolverines were on the dominant end, beating the Buckeyes ten times in thirteen tries between 1988 and 2000. Part of the fun of the last decade, when it came to Ohio State's ownership of the Game, consisted of knowing it wouldn't last forever, and savoring it while it lasted. Of course, no one had any idea it would be in danger of ending now- but we know it has to end at some point. And while we can't see three-and-a-half months into the future, it does feel as if we're in for a radical turn in this rivalry- starting soon. Perhaps as early as this season.

Looking at the schedule, I see three losses. I won't say where. But with so little experience on the sidelines and under center, and so many games against quality opponents, this schedule will play out with some heartbreak. By Ohio State standards it won't be a vintage year. But it'll have its moments.