

The Week That Was: Zip-Lining for Openers

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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I know, I know... it's Akron. There aren't many teams in FBS football worse than the Zips, who went 1-11 last season and are staring down the barrel of a similar record this season. Lesser teams than Ohio State are going to dominate Akron in 2011, so there's no sense in getting too excited about the 42-0 trouncing the Buckeyes handed the Zips on the season's opening, infernally hot Saturday afternoon at the Horseshoe.

Still, it's tough not to get excited about the way the Buckeyes played, never mind the opponent. Opening day is often sloppy in football, with unforced errors and mental mistakes marring otherwise easy victories. But in Luke Fickell's first game as head coach his team was mid-season crisp, executing well on both sides of the ball. That they won is to be expected. But it wasn't about just winning- it was about looking good doing it. And after all the turmoil of the summer, all the controversy, all the suspensions, Ohio State looked good.

Okay, Maybe He Isn't THAT Bad: I've made no secret of my skepticism regarding Joe Bauserman's level of talent, and my suspicion that he's a MAC-level player wearing Scarlet & Gray- a suspicion which may very well be borne out before this season is over.

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But when he performs well I'll gladly give him credit. And Bauserman performed well in his starting debut Saturday. The 25-year old senior played sharp, mistake-free football throughout, completing 12-of-16 for 163 yards and three touchdowns- all to Jake Stoneburner- with no interceptions. He added 32 yards on six carries and scored the season's first touchdown on a [zigzagging 15-yard scramble](#) off a broken play.

There's plenty of uncertainty about how Bauserman will fare against the tougher opponents on Ohio State's schedule, or even how much he'll play with the development of Braxton Miller. But for now, he's the man behind center.

Baby Braxton: For most fans the anticipating centered not around the starting debut of Joe Bauserman, but the college football debut of heralded freshman quarterback Braxton Miller, anointed in many circles as the successor to Terrelle Pryor before he even stepped on campus. Miller entered the game for the first time at the beginning of the second quarter (after much pleading by ESPN analysts Chris Spielman and Urban Meyer.) If you were looking for instant highlights, you were disappointed: a dropped pass and a poor snap waylaid Miller's first series in three plays.

It got better. Miller re-entered the game with ten minutes to play in the third and Ohio State leading 28-0. After a first down and punt on his first series the freshman got the Buckeyes moving, taking his team 59 yards in six plays to a touchdown. Miller completed both of his passes on the drive, including the touchdown when he drilled a 14-yarder through traffic to fellow freshman Devin Smith. Two series later Miller got Ohio State into the end zone again. He opened the short drive with a 33-yard bomb to Evan Spencer, who made a [dazzling one-handed grab](#)

at the Akron five. Rod Smith plowed in three plays later to provide the final margin of victory. Miller's line for the day: 8-of-12 passing, 130 yards, one touchdown, no interceptions and thirty yards rushing on six carries. Not a shabby debut.

I think it's obvious even at this early point that Braxton Miller is ahead of where Terrelle Pryor ever was as a natural passer. His footwork, pocket presence and the zip he puts on passes is far more reminiscent of Troy Smith. Athletically Miller isn't in Pryor's class, but if he performs as well as he looks throwing the football he won't have to be. Spielman and Meyer made much of Miller's seeming disengagement on the sideline- no headphones, no consultations with coaches- but honestly, we really don't know what's going on down there. All we can safely do is judge how Miller looked on the field- and he looked pretty damned good.

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Reserves Rock: With Ohio State's number-one running back (Jordan Hall) and receiver (DeVier Posey) suspended the backups had the opportunity to make some noise. For the most part they did just that. Carlos Hyde pounded out 93 yards on 19 carries while Rod Smith bounced back from a first-quarter fumble inside the Akron five to post 74 yards on 18 carries with a touchdown. Redshirt freshman Verlon Reed made three catches for 66 yards, true freshman Devin Smith added 52 on three grabs with a touchdown, massive (6'5") redshirt freshman T.Y. Williams garnered 34 yards on two catches, while Evan Spencer's one catch was as spectacular as you'll ever see. True big plays were in short supply- the longest play was Spencer's 33-yard grab- but the efficiency and execution were top-notch. Of course, again, it was Akron.



No "Stone" Hands Here: If Jake Stoneburner's opening-day performance is any indicator, the tight end position won't be a forgotten one this season as it often was under Jim Tressel. Stoneburner finished with a game-high four catches for fifty yards and was on the receiving end of all three of Joe Bauserman's touchdown passes. Perhaps the best tight end prospect the program has had since Ricky Dudley- maybe since the great John Frank- Stoneburner is a matchup nightmare: too fast for linebackers, too big for defensive backs. If the Buckeyes continue to feature him in the passing game- and with the limited Bauserman and the inexperienced Miller behind center they likely will- he could be on the way to a huge season.

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Crisp & Clean: For a season opener played in 95-degree weather with a rookie head coach, a first-time starting quarterback and eight starters out with suspensions, Ohio State's overall execution was very good. The Buckeyes committed just three penalties on the day and turned the ball over once on Rod Smith's first-quarter fumble. The last time they opened the season against Akron, in 2007, the Buckeyes committed five penalties and turned it over five times in an ugly 20-2 win.

Silver Bullets Flying: Maybe it was the influence of the youthful Fickell, or the influence of new defensive assistant Mike Vrabel, but the Buckeye defenders seemed more aggressive on Saturday than they have in recent years, when Jim Heacock was content to rush four men and drop the rest into zone coverages. (Not complaining- it's a strategy that has largely worked and I'm not a big blitz advocate anyway.) Blitzing early, late and often, Ohio State sacked Akron quarterbacks five times and held the Zips to five first downs and a measly ninety total yards. In twelve total possessions Akron only crossed midfield once. The field-position edge also went decisively to the Buckeyes: the averaging starting field position for the Zips was their own 19-yard line, and five of their possessions started at or inside their fifteen.

Zippy Feeling Chippy: One man who wasn't happy about Ohio State's defensive aggressiveness was Akron head coach Rob Ianello, who is now 1-12 in his season-plus with the Zips. Ianello had some sharp words for Luke Fickell when they met at midfield after the game, chiding the new head coach for continuing to dial up blitzes long after the game had been decided.

Ianello's anger is understandable. On the other hand, if you have a shutout going, I don't see anything wrong with keeping your foot on the gas defensively to preserve it. Compare it to baseball: if a pitcher has a shutout going in the ninth inning he's not going to simply groove fastballs, even if he's up by ten runs. He's going to keep bringing his best stuff in order to finish the whitewash, and no one will think anything of it.

Anyway, it wasn't as if Fickell kept his starters on the field late in the fourth quarter. As a former high-school scout-teamer I've always been an advocate of letting the backups play to the fullest on the relatively rare occasions in which they get the chance. Those guys work just as hard as the starters and far more thanklessly: they deserve the opportunity to cut loose and have fun. It isn't about embarrassing your opponent: it's about rewarding players for hard, selfless work.

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Around the Nation

Game of the Week- Baylor/TCU: We've got four months to go in the 2011 college football season, and in those four months we might not see a wilder, crazier or



more dramatic game than Baylor's 50-48 upset of TCU in Friday night's opener on the Brazos. Played in the hundred-degree heat of Waco, this thriller featured 98 combined points, 1,030 combined yards, nine lead changes and two unbelievable comebacks in the fourth quarter alone.

What's most astounding isn't that the Bears won, snapping TCU's 25-game regular-season winning streak. It's that they had to win twice. Going into the fourth quarter Baylor led 47-23 behind five touchdown passes by Robert Griffin III. Then came the meltdown, a ten-minute blizzard of penalties, bad kick coverage and worse defense that enabled the Horned Frogs to score 25 unanswered points and take a 48-47 lead with 4:27 left. That devastating sequence should have been a gut-punch. Yet somehow Griffin, whose fumble set up the go-ahead field goal for TCU, led his team on an [eleven-play, sixty-yard march culminating in an Aaron Jones field goal](#) that gave Baylor the lead with 1:04 left and, ultimately, the win- again.

Win or lose, Gary Patterson had to be numbed by the performance of his defense. Ranked number-one in the nation in total defense the last three seasons, TCU was shredded for 564 yards, including six touchdown passes of 28 yards or more in the first three quarters. The fifty points Baylor scored was the most allowed by the Frogs in a non-overtime game since [October](#)

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when Kevin Kolb and Houston racked up 55. Worst of all, Patterson's proud defense couldn't stop Baylor at the end, when one more stop would have preserved a quasi-miraculous comeback win.

But dwelling on the inadequacies of the TCU defense is unfair to Robert Griffin III and the show he put on Friday. RGIII was spectacular all night, completing 21-of-27 for 359 yards, five touchdowns and no interceptions. He even made a big fifteen-yard third-down catch in traffic to keep Baylor's victory drive alive. Griffin had a bunch of opportunities to break out of the pocket and showcase his world-class speed in the open field, but he stayed with the plays, kept looking downfield and kept finding open receivers. Once upon a time RGIII was a track athlete playing quarterback. Now he's a quarterback, period- and a terrific one.

What a game. Once you get past the off-the-field BS, college football is a pretty good game, isn't it?

Player of the Week: It can only be Robert Griffin III, who racked up 412 total yards passing, rushing and receiving and accounted for five touchdowns in Baylor's thrilling victory. I don't think RGIII will win the Heisman Trophy this season, because his team will lose too many football games. (My tentative pick is Trent Richardson of Alabama.) I do think Griffin might be most deserving, however.

It Only Prevents Victory: There were three-and-a-half minutes left and Utah State seemed well on the way to the biggest upset in school history, leading 38-28 at Auburn. Up to this point Aggie head coach Gary Anderson had called a near-perfect game: bold, imaginative and, most importantly, successful. His team was three-of-three on fourth down and had just converted a [fake field goal](#) to set up the touchdown that made it a ten-point game. Now the Aggies, who haven't had a winning season since 1996, were on the verge of beating the defending National Champions on the road. With everything set up for the win, Anderson decided to go to the prevent defense in an effort to run out the clock.

What ensued was entirely predictable. It took a minute-and-a-half for Auburn to go 65 yards to the touchdown that made it 38-35. After [recovering an onside kick](#) the Tigers drove another 56 yards, scoring the game-winning touchdown on Michael Dyer's one-yard plunge with thirty seconds left. Just like that, Auburn had come back to steal the game, 42-38- thanks in no small

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part to Gary Anderson's decision to take his foot off the gas and play not to lose.

It's amazing. The prevent defense almost *never* works. It almost *always* backfires. Coaches have to know this. Yet they continue to employ this nonsensical strategy every week, and every week the strategy leads either to an outright loss or a narrow escape in a game that should not have been in doubt. It's as if they can't help themselves.

The mentality is all wrong here. Three-and-a-half minutes are a long time in college football, where the clock stops after every first down. With a ten-point lead- particularly on the road against a more-talented opponent- it isn't time to go into the mindset of running out the clock. The mindset needs to be: We have to get a stop, because if we get one more stop we're going to win this game. When you go into the prevent defense you're essentially giving your opponent free points, free momentum and a free shot at winning. You're surrendering the initiative and reducing your margin of error to the point where one big play- in this case an onside kick- can beat you. It's a strategy that is disastrous on its face, and yet coaches go to it time and time again. It's an addiction that seemingly can't be cured.

And because of it the Aggies lost a game they never should have lost.

(I shouldn't be too critical, though. I play college football video games and whenever I get a late lead, what do I do? I go into the prevent defense. I can't help myself, either.)

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