

The Week That Was: Miller on Tap

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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If you're old enough as a fan, you remember a time when Colorado was regularly one of the most talented teams in college football. With names like Darian Hagan, Eric Bieniemy, Kordell Stewart, Michael Westbrook and Rashaan Salaam on offense, and Alfred Williams, Chad Brown, Ted Johnson and Deon Figures on defense, the Buffs of the early '90s were annually in the mix for conference titles and big-time bowl berths. They even won a piece of the National Championship in 1990 (albeit [a tainted piece](#) .)

The Colorado team that ventured to the Horseshoe for the first time since 1986 is a faint shadow of those Bill McCartney-coached powerhouses of two decades ago. These Buffaloes haven't had a winning season in six years, are 22-45 since the start of the 2006 season and currently in the throes of an eighteen-game road losing streak, longest in the nation. Darian Hagan and Eric Bieniemy aren't walking through that door.

Braxton Miller, however, is. A new era of Ohio State football began on Saturday with the talented freshman from Huber Heights under center. The kid didn't exactly set the world on fire with his arm, but the occasional good throw and some active legs were plenty good enough to help bounce the Buckeyes back into winning form after the disastrous showing in Miami the week before. At 3-1 Ohio State is done with its non-conference schedule and more or less right where it was expected to be at this point in the season- young, raw and with plenty of room for improvement. You can say the same of its freshman quarterback.

Miller High Life: In his first career start Braxton Miller didn't make anyone forget Buckeye field generals of the past, at least not in terms of throwing the football. Miller was just 5-of-13 through the air for 83 yards and most of his passes were end-over-end wobblers, not tight spirals. Still, he did throw a pair of touchdown passes, one a very nice fade rout to Devin Smith, and most importantly, he didn't throw an interception.

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As could be expected, Miller's best moments were with his legs. The freshman ran for 83 yards, matching his passing yardage output, and many of his runs were [broken-field delicacies](#) . Miller repeatedly used cutbacks and spins to leave Colorado defenders grasping at air. After fumbling twice last week at Miami, Miller didn't put the ball on the ground once.

At this point Miller is no better as a passer than Joe Bauserman, and actually might be a little worse. But he adds an extra dimension with his running ability, one the Buckeyes will sorely need as they move into the Big Ten portion of the schedule. And he will get better as the season goes on. Saturday he moved the sticks, protected the football and made a few plays- and that was all his team needed. They'll need more against opponents that aren't Colorado if they want to salvage their season and make a run at the Big Ten title, or at least the title of whatever the hell division they're in.

Unbalanced Line: Needless to say, Luke Fickell and Jim Bollman weren't exactly looking to air it out with a true freshman making his first start at quarterback. Ohio State ran three times as many running plays as passing plays on Saturday. The first nine plays from scrimmage for the Buckeyes were running plays, and Braxton Miller didn't actually complete a pass until more than twenty minutes of game-clock had elapsed. For the second consecutive game Jake Stoneburner was held without a catch.



Go Tigers: The only shining performer in the pass game was Devin Smith, who hauled in three catches for 64 yards and two touchdowns. The freshman from Massillon is averaging 22.9 yards on his eight receptions and has three touchdowns thus far on the season.

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Ground Balance: Ohio State's total offensive output might have been lopsided in favor of the ground game, but the ground game itself was far from a one-man show. The Buckeyes pounded out 226 rushing yards on the day and the headlining was almost equally split between two players. Jordan Hall picked up 84 yards on 18 carries with a touchdown while Braxton Miller ran for 83 on 17 totes. Carlos Hyde added forty yards on six carries with a score. This team is going to have near-ridiculous depth in the backfield when Boom Herron comes back in a couple of weeks- it'll be interesting to see how the carries are divvied out.

Bounce-Back... Kind of: Give Ohio State's defense credit for one thing- they weren't as bad against Colorado as they were against Miami. That is damning with faint praise. The Buffs may have gained only 76 yards on the ground, but they ran the ball just sixteen times and came out with a fairly robust 4.8 yards-per-carry average. In other words, Colorado held itself to 76 yards rushing more than they were held to that total by the Buckeyes.

Ohio State's linebackers are not impressive. They don't tackle or cover particularly well. No one in the middle of the Buckeye defense could handle Colorado tight end Ryan Deehan, who was wide open for all three of his catches for 71 yards. Let's be blunt- when Andrew Sweat is your best linebacker, you've got some issues. Sweat is a nice player, but he should not be your headliner. He's more Anthony Schlegel than A.J. Hawk. There isn't much to say about Storm Klein or Etienne Sabino because they don't do much worth talking about.

The front is pretty good, the secondary has promise, but this is not vintage Ohio State linebacker play we're seeing this season. The playmaking, the pressure, the big hits, all of the things we've come to expect about the men in the middle of the Buckeye defense- they aren't there. It just isn't a very dynamic group, and unless the light goes on for a few of these guys- namely, the once-touted Sabino- it's hard to see that situation changing for the better.

Special-Teams Nightmare: Statistically the game was surprisingly close. Ohio State outgained Colorado by a modest 336-314, although much of the Buffaloes' yardage came after the outcome was all but decided. Special teams was where Colorado really lost this game, as a series of disastrous plays in that area put the Buffs behind the eight-ball time and time again. To wit:

Following a three-and-out on their first offensive series, punter Darragh O'Neill shanked a twenty-yarder, setting up the Buckeyes at the Colorado 43-yard line. Seven plays later Jordan Hall vaulted over from the one to put Ohio State ahead, 7-0.

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Early in the second quarter with his team trailing 10-0, Columbus-area native Rodney Stewart ill-advisedly fair-caught a punt at his five-yard line. The resultant poor field position, combined with a three-and-out, gave Ohio State the ball at the Colorado 46. Six plays later Braxton Miller hit a wide-open Devin Smith for a 32-yard touchdown strike to make it 17-0 and blow the game open.

With fifteen seconds left in the half and the Buffs trailing 17-7 and having stolen the momentum going toward halftime with a touchdown and a defensive stop, Rodney Stewart collided with a teammate and fumbled away a punt, setting up the Buckeyes at the Colorado eleven. They parlayed the break into a field goal and a 20-7 halftime lead.

After Colorado went three-and-out on the opening possession of the third period, O'Neill dribbled a 33-yard punt to midfield. Six plays later Miller and Devin Smith hooked up for their [second touchdown connection of the afternoon](#), making it 27-7.

After a Colorado field goal cut the margin to 27-10 late in the third, the Buffalo coverage team gave up a ninety-yard return by Jordan Hall, leading to a five-yard Carlos Hyde scoring jaunt on the next play that made it 34-10.

In addition to these blunders, the Buffaloes were twice whistled for holding penalties on kickoff returns. They also gave up a long return of the opening kickoff by Jordan Hall which was wiped out by a completely unnecessary holding penalty on Zach Boren well behind the play. Had it not been for the repeated disasters on special teams, Colorado could have at least hung in the game and made it mildly interesting.

Decisive Field Position: Colorado's special-teams struggles also contributed to the lopsided edge in field position enjoyed by the Buckeyes. Ohio State started

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