



- *Saturday, October 15, 2011*

- *Memorial Stadium - Champaign, Illinois*

- *3:30 p.m. (ET)*

- *TV: ABC (Regional) - or ESPN -*

Ohio State and Illinois square off for the 98th time this Saturday in Champaign, and like so many aspects of OSU football this season, things seem a little upside-down this time around. For starters, [the Illini](#) are ranked, undefeated, and favored, while the Buckeyes (3-3, 0-2) are none of the above. Ron Zook's 16th-ranked charges are riding high at 6-0, while the team that has dominated Big Ten play for a decade is looking up at...well, everyone...in the league standings.

Ohio State will try to avoid falling to 0-3 in the conference by winning in Champaign for the ninth straight time. Memorial Stadium has a reputation as a tough place for the Buckeyes to play even though they haven't lost there in 20 years. The [last Illinois win](#) over the Bucks came in Columbus in November of 2007, and cost Jim Tressel's then 10-0 OSU team an unbeaten regular season. OSU leads the all-time series 63-30-4, and they have won three in a row, six of the last seven, and are 34-12 in Champaign.

A scheduling quirk of Big Ten realignment has the Buckeyes playing at Illinois for the second

year in a row. The unbeaten Bucks started out flat in [that game](#) a year ago, and when an injured Terrelle Pryor left the field in the third quarter to be replaced by Joe Bauserman with OSU clinging to a 14-10 lead, it was nervous time for Buckeye fans. Bauserman threw a scare into them too, going 1 for 2, for one yard, and an interception before Pryor returned. Good thing the Buckeyes don't have an injured quarterb...oh, wait...

Braxton Miller is said to be good to go this week for Luke Fickell's troops, his sore ankle presumably having responded well to treatment. OSU fans filled with despair at the prospect of playing without Miller should know that junior Kenny Guiton has reportedly been [getting more reps](#) at QB in practice this week, so it's at least possible that he will see action if the starter's ankle gives out. But Miller's coaches say the freshman should be able to play without limitations.

State of the Buckeyes



You might not be bowled over to learn that an OSU player has been suspended for this game, but we report them all. Sophomore cornerback Dominic Clarke, who has been arguably the best cover corner on the team this season, will miss the game after being arrested for disorderly conduct after [an incident](#) involving a paintball gun at a public shopping-eating area.

Clarke began the season with the first unit while Travis Howard served a 3-game suspension, and from where I've been sitting, Clarke has outplayed the more-heralded junior since Howard's return. True freshman Doran Grant (SVSM) has moved up to the #3 corner spot on the depth chart in Clarke's absence, and it was also reported this week that Corey ("Pittsburgh") Brown was going to shift back to corner from safety, reversing the position change he made last year.

This season we've come to expect bad OSU news in bunches, and this week is no exception. Senior defensive end Nate Williams, who had arthroscopic knee surgery a month ago, has now been ruled out for the rest of the season, and could undergo a micro-fracture procedure on that knee. Williams could get an injury redshirt year and play again in 2012, but there is no word yet on what his plans are.

Dan "Boom" Herron (*pictured*) will be available for duty against the Illini, and Fickell says he will

get some touches, but will have to play his way back into the starting lineup. It will be Herron's first action of the season following two separate suspensions for rules violations, although he has been practicing with the team from the start.

With left tackle Mike Adams back, Andrew Norwell has moved over to left guard and should settle in there. One change this week is that Jack Mewhort is now listed as the starter at right guard ahead of Corey Linsley.

The mental and emotional state of this OSU team is anybody's guess. You'd think that the Letdown in Lincoln last week would have the potential to deflate these guys once and for all. But by all accounts, Fickell and his staff have not let that happen, and I expect the pride they have in their program to be evident on the field the rest of the way. The losing is brand new to these guys...no one on the Ohio State roster has ever finished outside of first place in the Big Ten, so everyone is in uncharted waters.

Key Personnel - Illinois



While the Buckeyes are trying to save face, the Illini are trying to win the Leaders Division of the Big Ten, and right now they find themselves tied with Penn State at 2-0, with Wisconsin (5-0, 1-0) also unbeaten in conference play after an open date last week. This Illinois team has not always looked great getting to 6-0, but that mark is their best in over half a century, since the 1951 team started 7-0 on their way to a share of the national championship.

The Illini had three straight 3-point wins before running away from Indiana 41-20 last week, and they are winning the close ones with balance, and by avoiding the big mistakes that have plagued Zook's Illini teams in recent years. On offense, the Illini are near the top of the Big Ten statistical charts in scoring (4th), first downs (1st), total offense (3rd), 3rd-down conversions (3rd), and passing efficiency (2nd). Feel free to check out the comparable offensive ranks for OSU at [the link](#) .

Offense:

It starts with a maturing quarterback in [Nathan Scheelhaase](#) , the 6'3", 185 lb sophomore, who is improving in all phases in his second season as the starter. He is 80 for 120 (66.7%) through the air, for 1238 yds, with 10 TD passes and 3 interceptions. Scheelhaase is also a dangerous

threat as a runner in the Illini's mix of option and zone read sets. He has rushed for 347 yards on 94 carries, with four rushing TD's.

The rest of the rushing attack for Illinois has been spread out fairly evenly among three solid tailbacks. [Troy Pollard](#) (37 att, 361 yds, 1 TD) is the bigger back option, with senior [Jason Ford](#) (85 att, 279 yds, 5 TD) and freshman [Donovonn Young](#) (47 att, 318 yds, 4 TD) providing the lightning to complement Pollard's thunder.

The blossoming big-play receiver for the Illini is senior [A.J. Jenkins](#) (6' 0", 190) who leads the conference in catches and yards per game. He has racked up 815 yards already on 46 receptions, with seven TD's. Jenkins has help in the form of [Spencer Harris](#) (13 rec, 121 yds) and [Darius Millines](#) (10 rec, 174 yds, 1 TD), plus a big tight end in 6'6", 250 lb, [Evan Wilson](#) (5 rec, 77 yds, 2 TD)

The offensive line is big and experienced, with 2nd Team All-Big Ten tackle [Jeff Allen](#) the best known of that group. As a unit they have allowed 17 sacks to rank 11th in the league in that category, but they've performed well in run blocking, and the passing efficiency (2nd in BT) hasn't suffered for it.

Defense:



Illinois will play a nickel defense almost all the time, using [Trulon Henry](#), a former starter at safety, as the 5th DB in the role of a hybrid Safety/LB. The secondary is strong overall, with [Tavon Wilson](#) and [Terry Hawthorne](#) starting at the corners, and [Supo Sanni](#), a big (6' 3", 220) free safety who returns after missing the 2010 season with an injury.

The linebacking corps is led by middle backer [Ian Thomas](#) (34 tackles, 5 TFL), and he is flanked by sophomore [Jonathan Brown](#) and Henry, to give the Illini a very active and hard-hitting unit.

The Illini are getting terrific productivity out of their defensive ends, both of whom came into the season as relative unknowns. Junior [Whitney Mercilius](#) (Akron Garfield) leads all FBS players in sacks with 8.5, plus 4 TFL and 24 tackles. And on the other end, [Michael Buchanan](#) has been another pleasant surprise, with 27 tackles and 4.5 sacks.

The Illinois special teams are a mixed bag. They have one of the nation's best kickers in [Derek Dimke](#) (7 for 7 on FG), but their kickoff and punt return teams are both last (12th) in the Big Ten.

Idle Speculation



You can talk about pride...and you can talk about trying to avoid being 0-3 in the Big Ten...or under .500 for the season...but it's still hard to shake the feeling that Illinois has more to play for in this game than the Buckeyes do. And windy Memorial Stadium (with that white flying saucer parked out back) is a tough venue for any visitor, no doubt more so when the home team is unbeaten at the halfway point.

Without beating up on Joe Bauserman any more than is in good taste (it's not *his* fault he's been the backup QB at Ohio State), it's still safe to say the Buckeyes' chances to win rest in their ability to keep Braxton Miller upright for the whole game.

The Illini appear to be a team without major identifiable weaknesses. They are unspectacular but solid on both sides of the ball. They frustrated OSU last year with their ability to possess the ball for long stretches on offense, and they have been even better at that in 2011. The running game is among the best in the conference, and the passing attack is efficient if not scary. On defense they are tough and opportunistic. The DB's take chances and they hit hard.

I do think Ohio State will be able to run the ball, as they have in most every game this year. Having Herron back will help, as will the ongoing improvement of Carlos Hyde. Fickell admitted this week that he probably should have tried harder to pound the ball with his big running back in the fourth quarter in Lincoln last Saturday.

Until the OSU offense shows me that they can throw the ball down the field, and can mix the run and pass effectively to keep a decent defense off balance, I will remain skeptical that they can do it. Another factor in the realm of the unknown is the weekly progress to expect in Braxton Miller's on-the-job-training. Maybe it'll be a baby step...maybe a major leap.

I think that OSU will have to score either on defense or on special teams in order to pull out a win in this game, and they have not yet shown the propensity to do either of those things in the season's first half. (OSU has one special teams score, Chris Fields' punt return, in six games)

Maybe this will be the week that someone sparks this young OSU team with some leadership on the field...a big catch...a big hit...a pick six. But this Illinois team is hungry, and just like every other Big Ten team that has been smacked around by Ohio State for the better part of a decade, these guys want to kick the Buckeyes while they're down.

I look for a close game, but I see the Illini staying unbeaten based on their ability to keep their offense on the field when it matters. I'll guesstimate it at 23-17 Illinois.

Links:

[OSU Athletics Communications - Game Notes \(pdf\)](#)

[2011 Ohio State Roster](#)

[2011 Illinois Roster](#)

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