

Bucks Snap Skid, Surprise Illinois

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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Mired in a two-game Big Ten losing streak and coming off one of the worst in-game collapses in the history of the program at Nebraska, Ohio State was in desperate need of something positive to happen when it headed to windswept Champaign to take on undefeated Illinois on Saturday afternoon. Offensively the Buckeyes, to put it nicely, struggled to find balance. But with Dan Herron back in the lineup and the defense shutting out the Illini for most of the game, the combined effort was good enough for a 17-7 victory. It was Ohio State's ninth straight win in Memorial Stadium, where they haven't lost since 1991.

Balance? We Don't Need No Stinkin' Balance: When you run the ball 51 times out of 68 plays, actually attempt four passes and complete a total of one- and that at the 13:06 mark of the fourth quarter- you're just a tad one-dimensional. On the road with a freshman quarterback and with twenty-mile-per-hour winds whipping through Memorial Stadium, Ohio State had no thought whatsoever toward throwing the football on Saturday.

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But the Buckeyes made it work, with the help of newly returned Dan Herron and a befuddled Illinois coaching staff. Despite not having played since the Sugar Bowl ten months ago, Herron stepped right in as if he'd never left. The little power back ran through the Illini defense for 114 yards on 23 carries and scored a touchdown. Most of his and the rest of Ohio State's 211 rushing yards came on the lead draw, as Buckeye backs repeatedly slipped behind the hard-charging Illinois defenders for solid gains.

Draw plays should only work if they're executed by an offense that is having success throwing the ball. At some point Illinois defensive coordinator Vic Koenning should have realized that rushing the passer was a fool's errand, because there was effectively no passer to be rushed. Yet time and time again the Illini- which entered the afternoon leading the nation in sacks- would push up the field, only to see the Buckeyes spring the draw play for yardage. Illinois never adjusted to Ohio State's single-minded offensive strategy.

Doctor Drew: Moving exclusively on the ground, Ohio State marched 45 yards in ten plays on its first possession before the Illinois defense stiffened at its 26-yard line. With the wind blowing across his face, Drew Basil came on and drilled a 43-yard field goal that started right, straightened out in the breeze and slipped just inside the upright, giving the Buckeyes an early 3-0 lead. Three points can loom mighty large in a low-scoring game and Basil's expert kick gave Ohio State early but significant control- and a lead they would never relinquish.

Bounce-Back Defense: Ohio State's defense came back strong after falling apart late in the Nebraska game. The Buckeyes held Illinois to 285 total yards- well under its season average of 424- and shut out the Illini for nearly 54 minutes. Dual-threat quarterback Nate Scheelhaase compiled 218 yards throwing and passing but averaged barely four yards per play, while A.J. Jenkins finished with eight catches for 80 rather ineffectual yards, as the Bradley Roby and the secondary helped cash the check [Roby's mouth had written](#) earlier in the week. Fueled by standout performances from John Simon and big Jonathan Hankins, the Buckeye front whipped Illinois on the line of scrimmage all afternoon.

Like the Silver Bullets of old, the defense set up touchdowns as well as stopped them. Leading 3-0 at halftime, Ohio State blew the game open with a pair of second-half touchdowns that were direct results of turnovers forced by the defense. The biggest turnover was Bradley Roby's interception and return to the Illinois 12-yard line on the second play of the half. One play later Herron skirted left end and found the orange turf of the end zone, making it a 10-0 game. Tyler Moeller's strip of A.J. Jenkins set up Ohio State's second touchdown when, on the only

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completion of the game for the Buckeyes, Braxton Miller zipped a 17-yard strike to Jake Stoneburner early in the fourth period.

All He Does... Jake Stoneburner has 12 receptions this season. Six of them are for touchdowns. Big, fast, a matchup conundrum for most teams, Stoneburner is on pace for 22 catches. In a coherent offensive system he'd be a 50-or-60-catch guy, because he's a weapon.

They Got Zooked: Even by his own standards Saturday was not the finest hour of Ron Zook's career, or that of his staff. The lack of adjustments to Ohio State's offensive strategy has already been noted. Zook's decision to punt from the Buckeye 32 early in the second quarter with his team trailing 3-0 was an odd one; Illinois was going into the wind but Derek Dimke is fully capable of hitting a 49-yarder, even in gusty conditions. Clock management on the Illini sideline left a lot to be desired as well. Illinois's lone touchdown drive, a 16-play, 80-yard marathon, chewed up nearly seven minutes of the fourth-quarter clock in large part because of slowness in getting plays off. Zook had done pretty well up to this point in guiding Illinois to its best start since 1951. But on Saturday he was outcoached by Luke Fickell. That pretty much says it all.

Survive and Advance: It probably doesn't matter in terms of Luke Fickell's future, or that of his staff, but Saturday's win gives Ohio State a chance to withstand the rugged four-game stretch that began with Michigan State and ends with Wisconsin on October 29. A loss to the Badgers would bring the Buckeyes to 4-4 overall and 1-3 in the Big Ten heading into a manageable three-game November stretch of Indiana, Purdue on the road and Penn State. Wins in all three- certainly not an unlikely occurrence- would assure a winning season and a .500 record in the Big Ten regardless of what happens in the finale at Michigan.

Hoping for a .500 conference record and a December bowl bid is not what you'd call vintage expectations for Ohio State, and there's some doubt as to whether the Buckeyes would even play in a bowl with what is almost certain to be chaos on the coaching staff. But it beats an out-and-out meltdown.

Next: The Buckeyes will be on the bye next Saturday as they prepare for the Halloween-weekend showdown with undefeated Wisconsin. The 6-0 Badgers will be busy next weekend- they'll be in East Lansing to face Michigan State, the only team to beat them during the 2010 regular season.