Alright, we officially get the Michigan Week coverage started here on The Blurbs with the first in a five part series from our Buckeye Insider Mike Furlan. In Part I, Furls breaks down the matchup involving the Buckeye defensive line going up against the Michigan offensive line. Stay tuned to The Blurbs all week for more hard hitting analysis of The Game.

Let me start this article with some hard-hitting analysis. Hold on for a second while I put on my Mark May Thinking Cap (TM). OK, it is all coming into focus now. Here we go, here comes some of that famous, insightful Mark May analysis:

The Wolverines feature a big, physical offensive line and Lloyd Carr's first option on the offensive side of the ball is going to be to keep it on the ground. The Wolverines will primarily run to the left behind All American Candidate left tackle, Jake Long.

My goodness, that was profound. What's really going on upfront though?

Well ... the Wolverines do feature Jake Long, probably the second best left tackle in college football. At 6'7" 316 lbs., Long is a mountain of a man, but not only does he possess the requisite size of an All-American tackle, more importantly - he has TREMENDOUS feet. Long is just as effective as a run blocker or a pass blocker and the Wolverines know it. As a result, they tend to run the ball more to the left side of the line than the right.

How will Long do against Ohio State's big, athletic defensive ends? Well, let's just say that I hope the Buckeyes have other hopes for sustaining any type of outside pass rush on the left side. The one advantage that Ohio State has in this match up is depth. Ohio State is

exceptionally deep at defensive end, they actually have five good DEs, and so they should be able to maintain fresh legs on the field.

Buckeyes DEs, Richardson, Gholston, Wilson, Rose, and Barrow, have various specialties, but in general all defend the run well and generally provide excellent outside pass rush and containment. The Buckeyes vary who lines up on the right or the left sometimes, but Gholston has been primarily starting on the left and Richardson has been starting on the right. This implies that Gholston, a.k.a “The Juggernaut”, will be lined up across from RT Rueben Riley and Jay Richardson will be lined up primarily against Long.

Riley, at 6’3” 300lbs, will have trouble with Gholston. Gholston’s outside rush skills and strength create problems for most teams, and if I had to pick a match up on the outside that favored the Buckeyes it would be this one, which features Ohio State’s best DE against Michigan’s weakest lineman on the outside.

Up the middle the Buckeyes feature All World DT Quinn Pitcock. Pitcock has been a one-man wrecking crew in nearly every game and has amassed an amazing seven sacks from his interior line position. Against Michigan, Pitcock will draw much tougher duty. I fully expect to see Pitcock routinely double-teamed by Michigan center and pre-season Rimington Award Candidate Mark Bihl and guard Adam Kraus. The double team should essentially nullify Pitcock, but anytime a tackle draws the double team that opens up someone else to make the play, and in this case, the prime beneficiary should be James Laurinaitis. As a matter of fact, the only time that I expect to see Pitcock one on one is when Laurinaitis blitzes A gap (between guard and center). In that case the guard or center double teaming Pitcock will have to step out and pick up Laurinaitis because I am not sure that Mike Hart will be capable of stopping him.

David Patterson will probably play to a dead heat against the other guard, Alex Mitchell. Mitchell, a red shirt freshman, is a real man-child at 6’5” 310. He possesses the size of a tackle but he does not have great feet.

Michigan uses a lot of zone blocking. Basically what this means is that the Wolverines will

decide to either run a zone left or zone right and each lineman will essentially turn his man in the appropriate direction and block him using a stutter step in that direction. Although there is probably a designated hole, it is usually up to the running back to cut back into the best hole.

The key from Ohio State's standpoint is to:

1. Recognize the zone block
2. Get off the block
3. Fill and maintain gaps.

That sounds so obvious that it seems a waste of space to type it, but a couple of things happen in the zone-blocking scheme that are a bit subtler. First of all, while running the ball, zone blocking Quinn Pitcock will preclude the use of a double team. Pitcock will have to recognize this and not over penetrate, creating a larger gap. The most important aspect of defending the zone blitz is maintaining gap responsibility. The Buckeyes front seven will have to continue to defend their gaps responsibilities even after the ball carrier passes them.

Most of those big runs up the middle following a cutback come from players not maintaining gap discipline and following the ball. After the linebackers abandon their posts it the running back cuts back up the field into an undefended gap and will generally get all the way to the secondary before anyone has a shot at him.

All in all, the Wolverines have the advantage in this match up both when running and passing. In order to successfully defend the run, the linebackers are going to step up and play better than they have lately. Additionally, I do not think that the front four alone will be enough to get immediate pressure on Henne; the Buckeyes are going to have to bring at least one more in order to flush Henne from the Pocket.

If I had to point to a single critical vulnerability in the Wolverine offensive line, it is depth. If anything were to happen to any one of their five starters on the offensive line, they would be in big trouble. Conversely, the depth of the Ohio State defensive line is one of its strengths. The Buckeyes currently use an eight man rotation on the defensive line to keep it fresh, but there has been talk lately of adding a ninth (Robert Rose at DE) and tenth (Dough Worthington at

DT). The Buckeyes should have no trouble keeping their legs fresh, regardless of how much or little Michigan has the ball.

Part II - Ohio State's Offensive Line versus Michigan's Defensive Line - coming tomorrow

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