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Jim Tressel’s Four Worst BCS Championship Calls

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I can certainly accept that Florida is a better team than Ohio State, particularly in the battle

between UF's defensive front and tOSU's offensive front, where the Buckeyes were completely outmatched. The Gators were brilliant in the title game; talented, intense, well motivated and exceptionally well coached by a man who wins big and immediately everywhere he goes. They would have beaten any team in America (except maybe another SEC team on the road). But Florida is *not* 27 points better than Ohio State, any more than Ohio State is worse than Vanderbilt because the Commodores got within six of the Gators. The Buckeyes got thrashed, not because they suck, not because they can't hang with that "SEC speed", but because they weren't prepared for what Florida brought. That's on the coaches.

Here are the four worst decisions (or non-decisions):

1.) The squib kick after Ted Ginn's opening return

Tressel's decision to kick short and allow a Gator return instead of booming it out of the end zone is beyond explanation. It set Florida up at midfield and allowed them to tie the game fairly easily, quickly killing the initial burst of momentum created by Ted Ginn's return. It was a MUST for Ohio State's defense to come out and get a stop right there, with the Buckeyes up 7-0. They may not have been able to get one even had UF started on its own 20... but at least the Gators would have been forced to do something they didn't have to do, really, the entire game- *drive the field*
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The eerie thing was that an almost identical sequence of events helped cost Ohio State the 2005 Texas game at 'Shoe. With 35 seconds left in the first half of that game, following a field goal, Ohio State led 16-10, had scored 16 unanswered points and had momentum completely on its side. So what did Tressel do? Called for a squib kick. Texas returned the short kick to the 31 and, like Florida, got an extra 15 yards thanks to an OSU personal foul, putting the ball near midfield. Vince Young quickly led the Longhorns to a beat-the-clock field goal, cutting the lead to 16-13 going into halftime. Those points were huge- not only did they provide the eventual margin of UT's victory, they helped break the snowballing momentum Ohio State generated in the 2nd quarter of that game. That squib kick might have been the most important play of Texas's National Championship season.

In short, to hell with the squib. If you can kick it out of the end zone- and Ohio State's kickers can- you do it, every time.

2.) No adjustments by the defense

The book on Chris Leak is simple and succinct: get pressure on him, and he will make mistakes. So naturally, Ohio State came out with a three-man rush and eight men dropping into zone coverage. Chris Leak is a senior and a solid quarterback. Give him time to throw- and he had eons on Monday- and he will pick apart any defense. He eviscerated Ohio State's zone. The Buckeyes never adjusted. Never went to press coverage. Never blitzed their linebackers. Even long after it became apparent that the Leakster had zero interest in throwing a pass over 15 yards, tOSU stayed in its cushion. It was a spineless, cowardly defensive game plan. There's just no other way to describe it.

In retrospect, Florida's offense was the worst possible match-up with Ohio State's defense. This year's Buckeye D was drastically overrated, for sure. But, even through three different coordinators the Ohio State defense under Jim Tressel has *always* been susceptible to spread offenses that run a dink passing game as a substitute for a running attack. Even the great 2002 unit, ranked 88th in the nation against the pass, could be burned in that manner. The late Randy Walker's spread offense at Northwestern gave Ohio State fits. Northwestern beat Ohio State two years ago by throwing receiver screens, getting YACs, and converting on 3rd down relentlessly. Leak on January 8 looked like Brett Basanez with a lot better athletes around him.

The OSU defense for years under Tressel has given up yards up and down the field but hung tough in the red zone. In the first half of the 2002 Michigan game, the Wolverines, from a yardage and time-of-possession standpoint, outplayed the Buckeyes as badly as Florida did in the first half last week. Yet their domination only resulted in three field goals and a 9-7 halftime lead. The difference on January 8 was that Florida finished drives with touchdowns and not field goals, largely because Tim Tebow can simply fall forward from the line of scrimmage and gain at least four yards every time.

So it was a lousy match-up for a defense that really, wasn't all that good anyway. Come to think of it, Ohio State needed Will Smith, Kenny Peterson, Matt Wilhelm and Mike Doss a lot more than a different scheme.

3.) the 21-14 series

With 9:25 remaining in the first half, Ohio State trailed by just a touchdown, had finally forced Florida's first punt of the night, and had the ball on its own 20. The Buckeyes had flashed some ability to run the ball on Florida on its previous drive, which resulted in the team's only offensive score of the game. A week earlier, Penn State had beaten Tennessee's fast SEC defense by

ramming Tony Hunt down its throat in the 4th quarter. Ted Ginn was out of the game and Ohio State's tackles were doing turnstile impressions. It was becoming obvious that, with Ginn's injury and the protection problems, throwing the football was going to be problematic all evening. Ohio State would have to return to its Hayesian roots... and run to win.

Three incomplete passes later, Ohio State punted back to Florida. The Gators would get a field goal on its next possession, making it 24-14 and, essentially, ending the game. Jim Tressel calls every offensive play for his team. He abandoned the running game at a point when it still might have been an effective weapon, and he did it despite the overwhelming evidence that Ohio State's passing game was far from its normal prolific self.

I always thought Jim Tressel coached without ego- that he would play the situation all the time, concepts be damned. On January 8 he coached with ego. He was stubborn. He wanted to die with his boots on, with Troy Smith and five wide. I think the offense lulled him and his whole staff into a sense of complacency. *Well, our Charmin defense is getting gashed, but we can wait till halftime to adjust... the offense is fine... we're going to get our points.*

4.) Going for it on 4th-and-1 from the OSU 29 in the 2nd quarter

Scoreboard-wise, it only cost Ohio State three points. Psychologically it was devastating. This was the ultimate give-up call. Tressel might as well have crossed the field to the Florida sideline and announced in his quaint, corny way, "Well, you guys are just too darned good for us, so we're going to go ahead and out of sheer naked desperation run a play you should only run if you're wasted on your couch at 3 in the morning playing *NCAA Football* on your 360. Just making sure you’re darned ready for it."

Or maybe that wasn't it. Maybe in a sense JT *was* drunk- drunk with the night, the venue, drunk with his mighty offense and his Messiah quarterback, drunk with the power and the history of the occasion and with his own role as the center of it. Maybe in a sense going for it there *was* a drunken decision. Maybe JT woke up yesterday and when he bleary-eyed one of his assistants he said something like:

"Did we really go for it on 4th down in the 2nd quarter last night?"

"Yeah, the side judge spotted Beanie a couple feet short. Remember how we were yelling for a spot?"

"Why did you let me do that?"

Ultimately, credit goes where it’s due. Florida played great football in every facet that night. They deserved the victory. There’s only so much a coach can do to offset an opponent that is as physically talented, well led, and razor-sharp as the Gators were January 8. But 41-14 never should have happened.

2007 will probably be a rebuilding year in Columbus. Here’s hoping for a Capital One Bowl bid… and a re-match with Florida.