4:40 PM today. Ohio State - Memphis. With a berth to the Final Four against the winner of North Carolina - Georgetown hanging in the balance? Can the Buckeyes continue their magical run through the Big Dance with a win over the athletic Tigers, winners of 25 straight games? Furls breaks down the big game. GOOOOO BUCKS!!!!!!!

I think college basketball is the only sport where the “also rans” get a lot of credit. A team’s long-term success is decided by Final Four appearances, not necessarily championships. Don’t get me wrong, championships are definitely important, but they are like bonus points. The mark of a great program is Final Four appearances. With a victory over Memphis today, Ohio State’s season will officially be a success. No one will be able to point to this team, regardless of the outcome of a National Semifinal game, and say that they were anything but a success.

After two improbable comebacks and fantastic finishes, the Buckeyes now stand on the threshold of prominence and success. The only thing standing in their way? The Memphis Tigers. In light of the Buckeyes recent games should we, the fans, let down our guard down and dream, exposing ourselves to the letdown almost surely follows any hope for a Cleveland fan? For once you allow yourself to hope, you are now vulnerable.

The agony of defeat, the drive, the error, the fumble, the “Disaster in the Desert,” every Michigan game in the Cooper Era, Dolan’s checkbook, every Cavs free agent acquisition; how could a Cleveland fan avoid being a skeptic? Sarcasm and cynicism are the tools by which we insulate ourselves from the inevitable let down our teams are going to deal us. Why should this year’s Buckeyes hoops team be any different? Much like an emotionally needy woman, the Buckeyes leave you drained and spent after every game, displaying all the instabilities and inconsistencies that implore you to run and hide.

The Memphis Tigers are not only playing this game to make it to the Final Four, they are playing it to validate their season. The Tigers are riding high on a twenty-five game winning streak, ravaging a series of cupcakes (with exception of A&M) in a manner that would make even Oprah proud. The “emptiness” of their victories have not escaped the attention of most in the media, so the Tigers have a serious credibility problem, a victory over Ohio State and the resulting berth in the Final Four would be exactly what the doctor ordered.

Introducing the Memphis Tigers

The Tigers play a much grittier version of basketball than the Buckeyes last two opponents, Xavier and Tennessee. As a matter of fact, the Tigers actually feature a big man that may be able to really test Ohio State center Greg Oden. Memphis junior forward Joey Dorsey is not as tall as Oden, but at 6'9" 260lbs, what he lacks in height, he makes up for in girth. He is a big bruising player that is looking to this game as his opportunity to display his ability. I am not sure if I think he will be successful in substantiating his claims that he will have a 20-rebound game, but you have to like his moxie. I am sure Oden has taken notice.

Much like Tennessee, Memphis generates most of its offense from the guard position. The Tigers leading scorers, Chris Douglas-Roberts and Jeremy Hunt lead the team in scoring, averaging 15.4 and 13.7 ppg respectively. Douglas-Roberts, the Tigers leading scorer, has only attempted 57 three pointers this season. He is more of a slashing guard, like Larry Hughes was supposed to be, and tries to make things happen off the dribble. Jeremy Hunt is the deep threat. He has tried 222 threes (6.2 attempts per game) this season and has converted 38% of them. This is not a bad average, but to give it some perspective, Ohio State has three players who shoot threes at a higher rate, but none that have taken as many shots.

The Tigers blend of speed off the dribble and shooting from range resulted in an average of 79.7 ppg this year as they ran away with the Conference USA championship. In the process, Memphis held its opponents to an average of 62.2 points per game. They played very well on both ends of the court, but how well is a fact that can be disputed. Nearly every good team they have played has beaten the Tigers, losing to three of four tournament teams they faced during the regular season. In all three of the losses (the only win came over Kentucky) this defense did not appear very good and the offense was particularly impressive either.

While it is true that the Tigers have dominated their schedule, it is also true that they played the 75th ranked (by RPI SOS) schedule in the country. That was far and away the worst schedule of any team ranked in the RPI top twenty. What does it mean? How does it translate to the Big Dance? Well ask the Texas A&M Aggies. The Tigers rose up and dispatched the Aggies, in what was essentially a home game for A&M, proving that while Memphis may not have earned its number 2 seed, they have clearly earned their spot in the Elite Eight. Any team that makes it this far has earned it.

The Match Ups

Ohio State Offense vs. Memphis Defense

Ron Lewis has found the rim. Lewis is going to the rim and further complicating matters for opposing defenses with solid shooting from the outside. Lewis' play down the stretch in the last two games has bourn a striking resemblance to that of Kobe Bryant, he has put the Buckeyes on his back (with the help of Mike Conley) and personally carried this team across the finish line in the last two games.

Greg Oden has been a non factor in the last two games, and shockingly, the Buckeyes have seemed to be a better team without him on the court. It isn't that the Oden does not have the

tools to get it done underneath (when he is not in foul trouble), it just appears that the Buckeyes are not really sure how to use him and inexplicably, have struggled to get him the ball. One thing is clear, if the Buckeyes are going to play with the big boys, UNC and Florida, they are going to need to discover Oden and Oden is going to have to come up big on the glass.

Joey Dorsey seems to think that he has the size and drive to play with Oden, but I am not sure that he really knows what he is dealing with. Oden's post techniques are such that he would be a difficult defensive match up in the NBA. Let's face it, there isn't much you can do to affect the baby hook of a seven footer. Dorsey's best hope is that Oden continues to push to hard on offense and draws those silly offensive fouls that he really does not need. He has the size to operate in close quarters, so he does not need to push it so hard to generate space. These mistakes have cost him two crucial fouls per game in the Buckeyes last two games. Judging by the way that he was officiated late in the Tennessee game, Oden now has a "Charles Oakley" like reputation, so every time a player hits the ground around him, Oden is going to get the foul.

At times this Buckeyes offense has too closely resembled Mike Brown's hopeless Cavaliers sets with all the standing around and bull crap you might expect at your company's water cooler, not on a basketball court. All too often the Buckeyes are guilty of standing around on the offensive end and chucking threes four seconds into the set. The Buckeyes, like every other team in the country, are at their best when there is a lot of movement and back cuts on the offensive end. Let's see if they have learned that yet.

Ohio State Defense vs. Memphis Offense

Well, it is a good thing that the Tigers do not rely on Joey Dorsey to do a lot of scoring in the paint. I suspect that he will not be able to do much against Greg Oden, who has been able to score on him consistently? Furthermore, the Tigers situation on offense is further exasperated by the fact that they are dribble drive team first. Oden specializes in providing help in the paint and Ohio State guards know that they can aggressively play their opposite numbers because they know that the big man has their back and no shot will go uncontested.

This has caused the Buckeyes some trouble though. Each of these dribble-drives puts a lot of pressure on Oden and provides him an additional opportunity to commit a foul. He has done well defending these plays, but with the additional scrutiny he has been under lately any opportunity for him to foul is scary.

On the defensive end, Ohio State's guards have played very good defense all season long. They have done well in not allowing dribble penetration and when they are beat they have done well in providing the big men enough time to react to the ball. The Tennessee guards scorched the Buckeye defenders in the first half on Thursday night, but who would not have been given the way Lofton and company were shooting. They were not able to get real pressure on the Tennessee shooters until they started guarding them at 24 feet in the second half. Jamar Butler's defense was exceptional in the second half and he really affected Chris Lofton's game. Luckily, Memphis has no one that even compares to Lofton.

What do I expect to see?

I have no idea what to expect. Which Buckeyes team will we get? The “Cavs” style that we saw in the first half of the Tennessee game, or the Phoenix Suns version that we saw in the second half. I would think that two wake up calls would be enough to drive the Buckeyes to play their best basketball of the season, and that is what I am predicting. This will be the magnum opus for the Buckeyes and expect to see a win that will completely invalidate the Tigers season. The Buckeyes will not be credited with handily beating the Tigers, the Tigers will be criticized for their easy schedule and horrid conference.

In short, I am daring to dream. I am daring to dream of final four berth and a championship run that will put “The Disaster in the Desert” far into the rear view mirror. I am daring to dream that one day the nightmares of the fumble, the drive, and the Indians 1-6 finish in 2005, will recede into the background of an improbable championship run that will long be remembered for two incredible early round comebacks.

I am daring to hope, but I will expect nothing. I am pretty sure we all remember what it felt like when we EXPECTED a championship in January.