Five months ago the Buckeyes started the season with modest expectations after losing nearly the entire offense to the NFL draft. They were pegged as a seven or eight win team with absolutely no national title expectations. And while Furls says the Buckeyes are playing with the House's money, the stakes are still high. Another devastating loss in the National Title Game and the Buckeyes will run the risk of becoming the college football equivalent of the 1980's Denver Broncos or the 1990's Buffalo Bills.

It has been nearly half a season since we last saw the Ohio State Buckeyes take the field. Fifty-one days. Seven weeks. Five months ago the Buckeyes started the season with modest expectations after losing nearly the entire offense to the NFL draft, remember most of the national "experts" had the Buckeyes finishing no better than third or fourth in their own conference. After the teams picked to finish ahead of them had fallen to the wayside, the Buckeyes found themselves sitting a top of the Big Ten for the third straight season.

Had I told you that in the beginning of the season that the Buckeyes would finish first in the Big Ten again , I am sure that you would have gladly taken it. The way I see it, right now the Buckeyes are playing with the House's money, but make no mistake about it; the stakes are high. Another devastating loss in the National Title Game and the Buckeyes will run the risk of becoming the college football equivalent of the 1980's Denver Broncos or the 1990's Buffalo Bills; the prom date who gets raped at the dance.

Many of last year's younger Buckeyes get a chance to clear their names. A rare chance to right a wrong that may not have been their's, at least not in whole. During the last fifty-one days, since there was no football to talk about, information about last year's lay off has been leaking out and it has been a bit distressing.

Shortly after last year's loss the coaching staff and players downplayed the effect of the long lay off, but based on recent reporting it appears as though it may have had a much bigger effect on the Buckeyes than many of us laypersons knew. Apparently the team, particularly its superstars were paying far more attention to their own celebrity and future careers than the game.

This year's Buckeyes get a chance at resetting the memories of all Ohio State fans, the haters will still point to 2006 no matter what the Buckeyes do tonight, against the LSU Tigers. In case you live in a cave, or Louisiana, you may not have heard that the Tigersa are the first two-loss team to play in the BCS championship game in its ten-year history. I guess playing in the rough and tumble SEC does have its advantages and the media was able to cram its team into the game.

Introducing the LSU Tigers! Bleaux Tigers!

To say that it has been an up and down season for the Tigers would be an understatement. The Tigers have two losses, but could have just as easily finished the season with four. They played a six-week stretch of uninspired football in the season's "back nine" and really made it more difficult on themselves than it had to be. At times LSU has looked incredible this season (Va Tech can attest to that), and at times it has not (Arkansas).

LSU features the best defensive line in the country. Most analysts project Glenn Dorsey as a top five pick in the NFL draft, many as the top selection. Not bad for a defensive tackle (not exactly the sexiest position on the field), but there is a lot more to this LSU defense. As I rewatched many of this season's games, the guys that really stood out to me were Ali Highsmith and Craig Steltz.

Steltz is terrific against the run and does a great job of playing centerfield. I have seen that his coverage skills are not terrific (yes I am aware that he was a Thorpe finalist), and he could be an exploitable vulnerability for the Buckeyes if they can

catch him in coverage. Highsmith is an animal, and he does everything well. He plays fast in space and plays the run physically, he is in everyway the essence of the SEC linebacker.

Those Buckeye fans worried about a repeat breakdown by the Ohio State offensive tackles have less to worry about this year. Barton and Boone will not be facing a pair of first round draft picks in Tyson Jackson and Kirston Pittman. Both players are skilled but neither of them is anywhere near as quick, strong, or skilled as Jarvis Moss or Derrick Harvey. Those two ends, more than any other single factor, destroyed last year's Ohio State Buckeyes.

Offensively the Tigers switch back and forth from a quirky spread to a very Penn State-style offense. They have a couple of big- playmakers in the diminutive Trindon Holliday and future first round draft pick Early Doucet. Doucet will probably spend much of the night matched up with Malcolm Jenkins when the Tigers are in a pro set and this has to be considered one of the key matchups of the night.

In early articles I covered the general match ups between the LSU Defense and the Ohio State Offense
and
vice versa
. The specific match ups are ultimately going to be what decides the game.

Early Doucet vs. Malcolm Jenkins: In order for the Buckeyes to win, they are going to have to come out with an impassioned, aggressive defense. The Buckeyes will need solid match ups on the outside in order to free up the players to take chances at the line of scrimmage. This match up is crucial to that end. Jenkins is an EXTREMELY physical corner, so much so that the Buckeyes rely on him to play a lot of safety in the nickel, but do not allow this to distract you from Jenkins coverage skills. Jenkins, a junior, is almost certainly going to declare for the NFL draft, and he knows that this game will make or break his position. I look for him to come up big.

Vernon Gholston vs. Carnell Stewart: I look for the Buckeyes to go to the mismatch. Gholston, a junior, is a sure fire first round pick based largely on his efforts in the Michigan game. Surprisingly (insert sarcastic grimace), the media got it wrong, Gholston was not repeatedly beating All World tackle Jake Long in the Michigan game, although he did beat Long a couple of times. He was beating Michigan's lead footed right tackle. Gholston, a right end, should have been matched up with Long at left tackle all game long, but the Buckeye coaching staff moved Gholston to a position where he could dominate the game, and I look for them to do that again tonight. LSU's right tackle, Carnell Stewart is a train wreck compared to LSU's superior left tackle (first team All SEC) Will Arnold.

Todd Boeckman vs. His inner Demons: Todd Boeckman was phenomenally poised through the first two thirds of the season. So much so, that many of us were left asking ourselves why we didn't see this coming. Somewhere along the line, Boeckman lost this composure. Hopefully fifty-one days was enough time for him to find it. The Buckeyes will not be successful on the ground unless they convince LSU that they have to respect the passing game. Based on recent events, the Tigers have little reason to do so.

Ben Person vs. Glenn Dorsey: Yes, I am aware that Dorsey cannot be single blocked on the inside. Yes, I am aware that Dorsey will shutdown an A-gap. What Person has to do is stop the Dorsey's center push in pass protection. In the running game, Ben Person will have to be able to turn Dorsey away from the running play. If he can do that with consistency than he will be the hero of the game, freeing center Will Cordle to take on another man. Teams have actually had some success running straight at Dorsey if they can turn him out of the play.

In the end, I trust in the Sweater Vest. Last year's humiliation was the exception not the norm. The Buckeyes offense will come out firing, throwing the ball a lot more than people expect. I am not looking for the risky deep routes early, safe stuff to Brian Hartline and Rory Nichol in the middle of the field, possibly even off of play action. TSV is no dummy and he knows that LSU will be looking to take away Beanie early. Once the Buckeyes establish a passing game, keeping the linebackers and safeties honest, I look for a balanced offensive attack from the Buckeyes.

Defensively, I look for the Buckeyes to play it close to the vest early. Conservative and cautious to get a feel for the match ups, keeping an eye on how Jenkins does on the outside with Doucet. Once the Buckeyes staff is confident that Jenkins can survive on an island, I look for the Buckeyes to pull out the stops. The coaching staff knows that a bad start early could destroy this teams mental edge, so they will keep it tight early defensively.

If I were a betting man: Take the points and feed on the national media's perception of the Big Ten. The Big Ten actually did pretty well in bowl competition despite a losing record in bowl compeition, so the Buckeyes +4.5 in a game that I think they will win out right seems like easy money. I like the Buckeyes looking over their shoulders in a game that is easier than most expected: 34-24, but don't hold your breath waiting for the national perception to change.

The story of the day Monday, "Buckeyes are Champions?" With a championship will come more debate over whether the BCS worked and even whether LSU was really the best team in the SEC. Some things never change.