Ohio State will be back home Saturday trying to right the ship and regain some confidence against another group of Trojans, this time from Troy University in Alabama. Having answered all the questions last week as to whether or not they are a great team, the Buckeyes will be looking to prove to their fans, and perhaps to themselves, that they are at least good. Buckeye Dan Wismar previews Ohio State/Troy.

September 20, 2008

Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio

Ohio State vs. Troy University

12:00 p.m.

TV: Big Ten Network

More Trojans

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No facet of the Buckeye football program escaped the wrath of Buckeye Nation this past week, from the coaches' competence to the players' "heart". I think the waterboy took a few jabs to the ribs too. With plenty of blame to go around and few positives on which to build from the 35-3 beating in L.A., at least this game can be approached as a fresh start. Players as well as fans must adjust expectations and deal with disappointment, because there is still a lot to play for, not least a record third consecutive outright Big Ten championship. But first...

The Troy Trojans were easy to spot on the schedule as a potential "trap" game for Ohio State, for a number of reasons. First, there was bound to be an emotional letdown for the Buckeyes after the USC game regardless of the outcome. Troy plays in the Sun Belt Conference, but their location in SEC country lands them regularly on the schedules of some of the best teams in the country, so they are accustomed to tough road games against traditional powers in large, loud stadiums.

In 2007 , they traveled to The Swamp to face the Florida Gators, and managed to score 31 points in one of the nation's toughest venues, albeit in a game that was pretty much over by halftime. Later in the season, they traveled to Georgia, and though they lost by ten points to the eventual #3 team in the country, they led the Bulldogs after one quarter, and outscored them in the second half. It's also fair to assume they were in front of their TV's last Saturday night, which had to do wonders for their confidence. Let's just say it would be foolish for the Buckeyes to count on any intimidation factor against the Troy Trojans this week.

Troy has also had a pretty impressive record of producing NFL talent of late. The Super Bowl champion Giants' roster included Troy kicker Laurence Tynes and DE Osi Umenyiora last season, and DeMarcus Ware of the Cowboys and Buffalo cornerback Leodis McKelvin are also Troy alums recently taken in the NFL's first round.

Defense Can't Rest

The big question marks for Troy coming into 2008 centered on their ability to replace the skilled position talent they lost at quarterback and wide receiver, as well as the loss of their offensive coordinator Tony Franklin, who was recruited to Auburn. Franklin's young protege Neal Brown, 27, has taken over the no-huddle, spread offense, and sophomore quarterback Jamie Hampton has so far stepped

in and handled the quarterback position admirably.

Troy is 2-0, having beaten Middle Tennessee 31-17, and last week annihilating Alcorn State 65-0, a game in which the Trojans rolled up 736 yards in total offense, and scored an incredible 38 points in the second quarter to put it away. The game that might have given Ohio State a better indication of the strength of this Troy squad, a scheduled September 6 matchup against LSU, was postponed due to weather.

Troy has also found a couple of running backs in DeJuan Harris and Maurice Greer, who didn't start last year, but who have each recorded 100-yard rushing games already in 2008. The Trojans will play a single back set, with four wide receivers in a full blown spread, and will pass to set up the run. The quarterback Hampton is a second running threat for Troy. He averaged 7.5 yards on six carries last week.

Much has been made of the difficulty Ohio State's defense has had defending the spread offense. Perhaps too much. Purdue and Northwestern have been running the spread for years, and Indiana and others are going to it more recently, and they have caused the Buckeyes few headaches. YSU ran the spread and got shut out. It's about the talent, not necessarily the scheme.

But if the strength of the offensive line, and their ability to protect the quarterback are major factors, then the Trojans may fare better than most spread teams against OSU. The Troy OL unit returns intact from 2007, with standouts at both tackles in Dion Small and Chris Jamison. That group is thought to be the strongest on the team, and is being counted on to carry an offense that is fairly inexperienced at the skill positions. So far, so good.

For the Buckeyes on defense against Troy, look for the play up the middle, from the defensive tackles and the safeties, to once again be the keys to success or failure for the OSU defense. The tackles must get penetration and disrupt the action in the backfield. The safeties are coming off a very lackluster game against USC. They need to anticipate better and tackle better in space to limit the yards-after-catch for the spread offense receivers, and prevent any big plays.

Serving notice early in the game that the OSU defensive backs are going to hit anything that moves in that secondary can pay off late in the game with a certain tentativeness by opposing receivers. It would be a refreshing change to see some

more physical play from that group.

50-50 at QB

On offense, it's fair to say the Buckeyes are looking for an identity. It was hard to tell which team was more confused by the alternating quarterback system last week, USC or the Buckeyes themselves. This week, Coach Tressel has announced that the snaps will be fairly evenly divided between Todd Boeckman and Terrelle Pryor, but it will matter little who is under center if the offense shows the same lack of discipline and execution that marked their performance in Los Angeles last week.

The vertical passing game was non-existent against USC, partly a function of the Trojan pass rush to be sure, but the decision not to even try to stretch the defense served only to compound the problem, as the defenders didn't even have to worry about a deep threat. Boeckman was All-Big Ten last season based largely on his success throwing the ball down the field, but the guy we've seen wearing No. 17 so far this season bears little resemblance to that character. It's understandable that he lacks "rhythm", since he's constantly looking over his shoulder after every play to see if Pryor is coming in to replace him.

Boeckman is exhibiting the same limitations and mistakes though, that he showed late last season, and the OSU coaches have every reason to look to Pryor (or Bauserman) more often for help if the shaky performances continue from the senior.

For his part, Pryor will have to establish himself as a reliable passer before teams will stop keying on him to run every time he takes a snap. Here's hoping the coaches let him air it out down the field Saturday, if only to open things up a bit when he does tuck it and run.

Once again, Chris Wells will not play for the Buckeyes, so the task once again will be to establish something on the ground with relatively inexperienced running backs. Boom Herron showed some flashes against USC, and should remain the first backup to Wells, but there's merit to the idea of rotating Brandon Saine and Mo Wells in there to see if anyone gets the hot hand.

Troy will bring in a good defensive line, especially all-conference defensive end

Kenny Mainor. Boris Lee is probably their most talented linebacker, and the secondary is solid too, even though they lost both starting cornerbacks from 2007, one a first round draft pick (McKelvin) and the other the nation's leader in interceptions (Elbert Mack). New cornerback starters Michael Ricks and Trevor Ford look like capable replacements.

It will be gut-check time for the Buckeye offensive line this week, after two consecutive games in which they came in for heavy criticism. Two-year starter at left guard, Steve Rehring is out for this game with a foot injury, with sophomore Andy Miller the likely replacement. The entire offensive unit is under the gun for this game, because the Troy offense looks capable of putting more than a few points on the board, and the OSU offense has only scored two touchdowns in the last two games. That lack of proficiency is the result of what has essentially been experimentation at the running back and quarterback positions, and an offensive line that has been playing below the level of their press clippings. Throw in the unimaginative and predictable play-calling by Jim Tressel, and you've got a stagnant offense.

This Troy contest is no less a "trap" game than it looked like six months ago. The Buckeyes will have their hands full with a wide-open Troy passing attack, and an athletic and fast Troy defense. If the Buckeyes can't shake off the disappointment of their trip west, and come out ready to knock some heads, they could be looking at a losing streak. I anticipate a close, relatively high-scoring game, with the Buckeyes coming out on top. Let's say 31-24.

Links:

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