An unbeaten Minnesota team will come calling at the Horseshoe on Saturday, trying to continue their 2008 turnaround under second-year coach Tim Brewster, as the Big Ten schedule kicks off for both teams. The Buckeyes will counter with their two most dynamic offensive players together on the field for the first time since the opener, as freshman quarterback Terrelle Pryor gets the second start of his career, and Chris Wells returns from injury as the starting running back for Ohio State. Buckeye Dan previews the game for us. *Saturday, September 27, 2008*

Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio

Ohio State vs. University of Minnesota

12:00 p.m.

TV: Big Ten Network

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Turnaround

The only thing between Minnesota and a 0-12 season in 2007 was a missed field goal by the Miami (OH) placekicker in overtime, in a game eventually won by the Gophers in the third OT. Minnesota finished last in the country in total defense last year, giving up 36.7 points, and 518 yards per game. So it could only get better. And so far, it has. Minnesota has already avenged two of their 2007 losses, to Bowling Green and to Florida Atlantic, winning the rematches 42-17 and 37-3 respectively.

Sophomore quarterback Adam Weber returns as the starter, having thrown for

2895 yards and 24 TD's as a freshman last year, totals accompanied by a conference leading 19 interceptions. He's a dual threat player, and led the Gophers in rushing as well in 2007 with 736 yards. That TD/interception ratio is looking a lot better through four games this season, as Weber has connected for 7 TD's with only one pick.

The Gophers run the spread offense, and Weber's favorite receiving target is Eric Decker, a junior who led the team last season with 67 catches for 909 yards and 9 touchdowns, but they have three other returning players who had more than 20 catches each in 2007.

Sophomore Duane Bennett has been a productive running back for the Gophers so far in 2008. He rushed for 92 yards and scored the winning TD with less than a minute remaining to give Minnesota a 31-27 win over Northern Illinois in their opener, and he posted a 100-yard receiving game in the victory over BG. But the leading rusher for Minnesota has been freshman DeLeon Eskridge, who has piled up 204 yards on 47 carries, and has scored five TD's in the last two Gopher victories.

In the matchup with the Ohio State defense, the Buckeyes will probably play the majority of the game in their "nickel" defense, and will try to limit the Gophers to short yardage completions, and then physically punish the receivers after the catch, much like they did in the Troy game. The defensive alignment will give OSU sophomore Jermale Hines another opportunity to make an impact from his "Star" position, a hybrid safety/linebacker role that is a key to the Buckeyes' defense against the spread. Hines made a big splash last week with seven tackles against Troy, bringing a welcome physical presence and aggressive attitude to the defense.

The other new look on defense for the Bucks is the move of Cam Heyward inside to the tackle position alongside Doug Worthington. Heyward started at defensive end most of last season, and while he had worked at the tackle spot early this season in some passing situations, he is now listed on the official depth chart at defensive tackle, and sophomore Thaddeus Gibson is now penciled in as the starter at end opposite Lawrence Wilson. The move is clearly aimed at getting more pressure from the middle of the defensive line by playing a quicker, more athletic player on the inside. We may see a return to the old alignment when the Bucks face a traditional pro style offensive team, but this looks to be the preferred defense against the spread.

Dynamic Duo

When the Buckeyes have the ball, their fans will see Chris Wells and Terrelle Pryor working together for the first time since Pryor completed a 2-yard pass to Beanie in his first series at quarterback in the Youngstown State opener. Wells was gone early in the third quarter of that game with the infamous toe injury, and Pryor's action was limited until last week against Troy, when he broke out with four touchdown passes against the Trojans.

Coach Tressel has said this week that he doesn't expect Wells to put in a 30-carry day against the Gophers, and of course no one knows how he'll hold up physically. So it's reasonable to expect Wells to share the workload at running back with Boom Herron, who had his best showing of the season last week with 94 yards on 20 carries against Troy.

With a full week of practice behind him as the undisputed starter at QB, Pryor will be expected to show improvement in the passing game, both with his reads and in his delivery. He had only 16 pass attempts in the Troy start, and Coach Tressel would probably be quite content with a similar number this week. That would mean the Bucks have been effective running the football and getting first downs, without asking the freshman to make too many plays in the passing game. Of course, if Pryor can average one TD pass for every four passing attempts like he did last week, Coach Tressel would probably find that acceptable as well.

Although the Minnesota defense looks to be improved from the pathetic unit they fielded last year, they don't appear to have enough playmakers to stop an OSU offense featuring Pryor and Wells. They have added JUCO transfer Trumaine Brock at the free safety position, and he has been perhaps their best defensive player. The Gopher defense already has 13 turnovers in 2008, after forcing only 14 all last year, and they have turned the ball over only twice themselves.

Defensive end Willie VanDeSteeg had 10 sacks in 2006 but then missed lots of action last year with a variety of injuries. His return to health gives Minnesota a quality pass rusher to concern the OSU offense, and the Gopher defense returns seven starters overall, for better or for worse.

On the Buckeye offense, true freshman center Mike Brewster will get another start, and Jim Cordle, the regular center, moves over once again to left guard in place of the injured Steve Rehring. Defensively the Bucks appear fairly healthy, as

as backup linebacker Tyler Moeller is expected back after missing a couple of games, and the team came out of last week's game without any serious injuries.

Last year, Chris Wells scored two first quarter touchdowns, and turned in a workmanlike 116-yard rushing performance in the Buckeyes' 30-7 win over the Gophers. I'd expect a similar outcome Saturday, as the Gophers' quest for an unbeaten season will end sooner instead of later. The Bucks are hoping for a little maturation for Pryor, a healthy toe for Wells at game's end, and a positive tuneup leading up to next week's huge game at Wisconsin.

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