Ohio State's relentless rushing attack and an opportunistic defense were too much for Illinois on Saturday, and the Buckeyes' 30-20 victory in Champaign now has them one win away from clinching a tie for their fourth straight Big Ten title. The Buckeyes' heralded one-two punch of Terrelle Pryor and Chris Wells did their thing with over 100 yards rushing apiece, but it was a lesser known backup linebacker who came up with two of the biggest plays of the game. Dan recaps the Bucks win.

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Jim Tressel's Buckeyes (9-2, 6-1) won their 15th consecutive Big Ten road game, two short of the conference record of 17, held by Michigan (1988-92). And a home win over the 3-8 Wolverines next Saturday would clinch a tie with the Penn State-Michigan State winner for the conference title. When you consider all that has happened in this up-and-down, transformational season for the Buckeyes, it's rather remarkable that the Big Ten championship is still achievable with just one game to play. Or should I say..."The Game"?

Passes?...we don't need no stinking passes!

Pryor (110 yds. on 13 carries) and Wells (143 yds. on 24 carries) slashed, barreled and hurdled their way through the Illinois defense, and the Buckeyes were able to score 30 points while electing to throw the football only 10 times, just twice in the second half. OSU rushed for 305 yards in the game, while Pryor threw for 49 yards on 6 of 10 passing. But the big game-changers came on defense.

Two first-half turnovers by the Illini both led to Ohio State touchdowns, and helped

the Buckeyes jump out to a 23-7 lead despite being out-gained offensively in the first half by Illinois. And sophomore linebacker/safety Tyler Moeller was in on both of them. With just over three minutes gone in a scoreless game, Moeller blitzed and rocked Juice Williams from behind in the backfield, causing the fumble deep in Illini territory that set up the first Ohio State touchdown.

With the Bucks ahead 16-7 early in the second quarter, Williams had driven the Illini to the OSU 12 on an 11-play 70 yard drive. But again it was Moeller wreaking havoc, blitzing on Williams' blind side on second down from the 12, and putting a solid hit on the quarterback as he threw. The ball sailed a bit, and OSU safety Kurt Coleman picked off the pass, preserving the lead. It was the biggest momentum shift in the entire game. And then Pryor took charge.

Six plays later, he had the Bucks in the end zone again, with a 20-yard touchdown pass to Dane Sanzenbacher on the drive's only 3rd down play. It was his longest completion of the day, and OSU led 23-7. Pryor had the drive's other big play as well, a 35-yard dash on a quarterback draw, the play that is fast becoming the freshman's signature.

The Illini seemed to move the ball at will between the 20's, and they added two field goals before halftime to make it a 23-13 game at the break. But Ohio State had proven that they could run the ball effectively, and they would own the second half as a result.

Playing the Wind

Champaign's Memorial Stadium is always one of the conference's windiest venues, even more so in November, and this day was typical. OSU enjoyed a stiff breeze at their backs in the first quarter, and it helped the Illini kick two second quarter field goals to stay close. The way the wind had affected the kicking and field position in the first half, it seemed crucial for Illinois to capitalize on it during the 3rd quarter if they were to cut into the 10-point deficit. They didn't.

Ohio State battled the wind and the Illini to a scoreless 3rd quarter, missing out on the best scoring opportunity for either team when Chris Wells fumbled at the Illini 22 after the Bucks had driven 62 yards following the second half kickoff.

But the Buckeyes put the game away early in the 4th quarter, on an 84-yard drive which included a key 29-yard burst by Wells that got Ohio State out from deep in

their own end. After a personal foul on Illinois kept the drive alive, Pryor drove in the dagger with a 26-yard run down to the Illinois 13-yard line. Boom Herron carried it in from the 12 for the final Buckeye points, and a 30-13 lead three minutes into the final period, and Ohio State would grind it out on the ground the rest of the way.

November Football

The Buckeyes dominated the time of possession in the second half, nearly doubling the Illinois total, 19:47 to 10:13. Meanwhile the OSU defense was blanking the Illini in the second half until the final minute of the game, even though the Illini continued to gain yardage in big chunks. All in all, it was a textbook display of how to play with the lead in November in the Big Ten.

Juice Williams and the Illinois offense had a big day statistically, gaining 455 total yards, to out-gain the Buckeyes by 101 yards. Williams was 17 of 26 passing, for 192 yards and two touchdowns. He rushed for an additional 60 yards on 9 carries, but was again dogged by his tendency to turn the ball over. His two first half turnovers were so costly to his team that all the other numbers were rendered pretty much insignificant. Williams was benched for the entire 4th quarter in favor of backup Eddie McGee.

I can't recall a game in which one team racked up 455 yards of total offense, yet scored just one touchdown before the game's final minute. And I'm not sure if that should be cause for concern or congratulations for the OSU defense.

Getting Noticed

Other notable contributors in Scarlet and Gray:

Nader Abdallah - Continued his late-season surge with another strong game at defensive tackle...knocked down a pass, recovered a fumble.

Brian Hartline - Had a 16-yard reception and two rushing attempts on end-around plays, including one for 18 yards.

Tyler Moeller (see above) Five solo tackles, two tackles for loss, two assists. We need to see more of this guy.

James Laurinaitis - Can we stop with the whispers about JL being overrated? Eight tackles, five solos, 1.5 tackles for loss, a forced fumble, a pass break-up, half a sack.

Kurt Coleman - Coming on at safety. Led the team in tackles with 11 total, six solos, an interception and an 18-yard return.

Malcolm Jenkins broke up three passes and blocked a punt for a safety.

A.J. Trapasso - Punted five times for a 39.6 yd. average...and also a 39.6 yard *net average*
, as in
zero
return yards....with a long of 58 yards.

The Game

It's Michigan Week. I know...they're 3-8. They're awful. They lost to Toledo. They have no business beating Ohio State in Columbus this year.

Those are all reasons why this game scares the hell out of me. They'll be desperate. They'll be loose. It's their chance to salvage a horrible season. And they're due. Ohio State has won four in a row. Five game winning streaks are not what Ohio State-Michigan is about.

I'm officially worried.

Links:

OSU Athletic Communications - Game Stats

ESPN.com Recap

Bucknuts.com Game Story