College football is increasingly a 24/7/365 enterprise, what with winter recruiting, spring games, summer workouts and the fall schedule. The official end of the season is pretty definitive...the end of the 34th and final bowl game in January. The official beginning is harder to pin down. Buckeye Dan Wismar figures for lots of fans of the game, it's right about now. And in his latest installment of Buckeye Leaves, Dan begins to look ahead to the '09 season with an absolutely fantastic early season preview.

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Thinking and talking about the new season begins almost immediately after the cut glass football gets kissed and the confetti settles to earth. Just days after the BCS Championship Game in January, you could find early Top 10 rankings for 2009, but those premature guesses are quickly lost in the shuffle of more immediate sports priorities like NFL playoffs *(somewhere)*, NBA games and Spring Training.

It seems like the discussion of the upcoming season begins in earnest when speculation by fans and media can be compared with the conventional wisdom of the college football 'experts'. Not the pollsters, who get to change their opinions every week, and don't even start till the leaves turn brown...but the serious evaluators who commit to their predictions in print months before the season

starts. And while the ranks of the self-proclaimed gurus have expanded as fast as the Internet allows, it's not until the Big Four preseason magazines hit the newsstands in May or June that the college football 'CW' takes shape.

So I made my annual trek to Barnes & Noble last weekend, and picked up the 2009 issues of *Phil Steele's*, *Lindy's*, *Athlon's* and *The Sporting News* college football previews. I can't say I'm close to having digested them thoroughly, but enough to make a few observations...and maybe a criticism or two.

## The Usual Suspects

There is remarkably little disagreement among the experts about the elite teams in college football for 2009, including zero disagreement on the No. 1 team in the country. All four publications have the defending champion Florida Gators on top, and three of the four have Texas and Oklahoma in the next two spots, with USC at No. 4. Only Steele's has USC breaking into the top 3, with the Sooners at No. 4, but those four teams are the top four in every ranking.

As for the Buckeyes, for the first time in recent memory, individual OSU players are almost completely absent from the preseason All-American lists, as Jim Tressel's talented recruiting classes of the past two years have yet to prove their worth against collegiate competition, and most of the big names have moved on to the NFL. The absence of the OSU brand is also evident in the rankings of position groups that most of the magazines are now publishing. And yet, all four magazines have ranked Ohio State in the Top Ten overall (#10 Steele, #8 Lindy's, #5 Athlon's, #9 TSN). More later on those 2009 Bucks.

## Heisman Race - The Archie Factor

The Buckeye player getting the most prominent mention in this year's previews hasn't played for over 30 years. That is of course because Archie Griffin's record as the only two-time Heisman Trophy winner is in some serious jeopardy going into the 2009 season. The lion's share of this year's preseason hype is understandably centered on the quarterbacks for the top three ranked teams: Tim Tebow, Sam Bradford and Colt McCoy, the trio already annoyingly dubbed "The Three Amigos" by some lazy ink-stained wretch.

In fact, I'll predict right here and now that the average college football fan will be experiencing Favre-like revulsion at the very mention of these three guys' names by the time the season finally starts (let alone ends), such will be the relentless publicity they have showered on them by the media and the their respective athletic departments. Once we get down to playing games, Bradford and Tebow will both be gunning for a second Heisman, making reluctant McCoy rooters out of Buckeye fans everywhere. College football, like politics, makes for strange bedfellows.

Individual performances in a given college football season are anything but predictable, but still it's hard to imagine a player outside this trio of high-profile QB's making any kind of run at the Heisman. Recent years have demonstrated that the Heisman is now almost exclusively an award for the quarterback of a team in serious national title contention. Quarterbacks have won eight of the last nine Heismans, and the only exception, Reggie Bush in 2005, stole it from Vince Young of the national champion Longhorns. So if the nation's three best teams also have the three best quarterbacks (clearly no coincidence), who else stands a chance? Daryll Clark?

Other Contenders

Though the previews all agree on the top four teams for 2009, there's a little more variety in the rest of the Top Ten.

Ranked 5-10 by Steele are 5.Penn State, 6.Mississippi, 7.Notre Dame, 8.Alabama, 9.California, 10.Ohio State

Athlon's has it; 5.Ohio State, 6.Alabama, 7.Penn State, 8.Virginia Tech, 9.Oklahoma State, 10.Mississippi

TSN's 5-10 ranking; 5.Mississippi, 6.Virginia Tech, 7.Oregon, 8.LSU, 9.Ohio State, 10.Oklahoma State

Lindy's has it; 5.Virginia Tech, 6.LSU, 7.Alabama, 8.Ohio State, 9.Mississippi, 10.Oklahoma State

Random comments: Somewhat surprising to me (in addition to the Buckeyes

making every list) was the inclusion of Ole Miss in every publication's Top 10. I understand the thinking behind it. The Rebels avoid Florida and Georgia from the SEC East, and have SEC West Division rivals LSU and Alabama at home...plus they have a budding star in Jevan Snead at QB, 16 starters returning, and a soft non-conference schedule. Still I'll believe that a team just two years removed from an 0-8 SEC record will come out ahead of both LSU and Bama when I see it.

Steele's track record is impressive, but it's strange to see him rank Notre Dame at No.7. They do have an experienced and talented O-line and excellent receivers for Clausen...and the schedule is ridiculously easy outside of USC. But I don't think they're even close to being one of the ten best teams in the country. They just might turn out to be the weakest 10-2 team ever.

Oklahoma State, on the other hand, just might be one of the ten best, but the record may not show it at the end of the season. They compete in the brutal Big 12 South with Texas and Oklahoma and Texas Tech, and they open the season with Georgia. They do get the Longhorns at home on Halloween, and in Zac Robinson and Dez Bryant, they have this year's version of Harrell and Crabtree.

Virginia Tech and Alabama both make three of the four Top Tens, and they'll square off in the opener at a neutral site (Atlanta) to set the tone for their seasons. That game is one of two great matchups on the season's first weekend, Sept. 5. The other is that Georgia at Oklahoma State game.

Are the Buckeyes Built for 2010?

That has been my contention since the post-USC game shift to Terrelle Pryor at quarterback last year, and I see no reason (other than the triumph of hope over experience) to re-think that position going into 2009. As I mentioned above, I can't remember the last time the Bucks went into a season without at least one consensus first or second team All-American in the preseason rankings, but that is precisely where we are. (As far as my memory is concerned, don't ask what I had for lunch yesterday) But the national experts are looking at the OSU roster for individual talents that are among the best in the land...and pretty much coming up empty.

Phil Steele goes four All-American teams deep in defensive players without naming a Buckeye, and the lone 4th-teamer he names on offense, guard Justin

Boren, has yet to play his first game in Scarlet and Gray.

Steele does have the OSU defensive line unit rated at No. 5, their defensive backs 9th, and their QB's ranked 10th, as the only units ranked in the top 15.

No Ohio State player makes TSN's first three teams of preseason All-Americans, and they don't rank the position units.

Lindy's has senior Buckeye safety Kurt Coleman on their 2nd Team, yet somehow ranks him 11th on their list of top safeties. The only other Buckeye to make their top performer lists, which go 12-deep for most positions and 20 and 25 deep for receivers and running backs respectively, is Pryor, who is rated 10th at quarterback.

Maybe Lindy's thinks OSU deserves to be ranked 8th in the nation on the strength of some position groups as *units*, right? Wrong. Ohio State doesn't make a top ten unit ranking at any position on the field.

Athlon's selects three teams deep in their All-American picks. Zero Buckeyes. They rank the OSU defensive line as the third best unit in the country, and they have the Bucks' DB's 8th, and their offensive line 9th. Athlon's too thinks the Buckeyes will be doing it with mirrors this fall. They pick OSU to win the conference, but have just one Buckeye (Kurt Coleman) projected to their All Big Ten 1st team.

By the way, I have no serious gripes about any specific Buckeye player being left off the preseason "watchlists". Who could argue that projected starters like Ross Homan or Chimdi Chekwa or Boom Herron were done an egregious wrong by their omission? Who should Pryor bump from the top three QB's? Tebow, McCoy or Bradford?

The only conclusion I can draw from the opinions of the experts is that these guys know that the Buckeyes have good talent, but that they are young and unproven. They know the Bucks will be able to win most of their games, and compete for the Big Ten title once again, in spite of their lack of star power. So they're penciled into everybody's Top Ten teams because they're the odds on favorites (along with PSU) to win their conference....

Which brings me to the next topic. Their conference isn't very good.

The Big Ten in Disrepute

It's not a secret. The Big Ten has been slipping into mediocrity for several years. The nation notices. The Lindy's preview has a piece on the Big Ten's image problem. Two photos accompany the article. Todd Boeckman getting crunched by LSU, and a shot of Jim Tressel.

There's just no getting around the inconvenient truth that the conference's so-called 'image problem' is largely wrapped up in Tressel's failure to win the big games more than he loses them. No need to get into the litany of BCS losses in recent memory, but it's enough to say the 2002 title game win and the 2006 regular season win over Texas don't balance them out.

It's not a Buckeye-bashing piece, instead putting forth a different explanation for the inability of the best in the Big Ten to hang with the best of, for example, the SEC. The one position area in which the SEC has clearly been superior in the recent matchups with the Big Ten is in the athletes that their region has been able to produce at the defensive line positions, specifically at defensive tackle.

And it's impossible to argue the point. The Big Ten has not produced too many Glenn Dorseys or John Hendersons lately...in fact, the conference doesn't produce many NFL defensive linemen at all. Only four Big Ten linemen were taken in the entire 2008 draft, and it has been six years since a Big Ten defensive tackle was selected in the first round of the draft (PSU's Jimmy Kennedy).

The DT spot has been a weakness for the Buckeyes for several years now, showing up as a problem even before they get to the national stage. The respect they are getting this preseason for the defensive line as a unit owes more to the talent and depth they have at the defensive end spots than to any great improvement at the tackle positions over recent campaigns.

But the problem is conference-wide, not just a failing of the team that has won at least a piece of the last four conference titles. It's just that when the problem is exposed by the Buckeyes in BCS games, 30 million people are watching.

Oh yeah...the conference went 1-6 in bowl games last season. That doesn't help the image either. A Fiesta Bowl that was 16 seconds shorter would have given the conference a boost.

All-Decade Team

Mining a few other gems from the CFB Previews....

The decade is almost over...even before we figured out what we should call it....(the "aughts"...the "oh's"?) and some of the preview mags are selecting college football All-Decade Teams for the '00's, with both individual and team awards. I thought some of the results would be of local interest...lots of familiar names represented.

Lindy's selections (see entire team here ) for All-Decade included Buckeyes A.J. Hawk and James Laurinaitis at two of the 1st Team linebacker spots, and Ted Ginn Jr. makes the 1st Team as a special teamer, as does Kellen Winslow Jr. at tight end. OSU's Mike Doss is on the 2nd Team defense, and Joe Thomas makes 2nd Team as well. Biggest surprise to me was the guy selected as the second best center (after Minnesota's Greg Enslinger) in all of college football over the past *decade*...drum roll, please.....Alex Mack. So there you have it.

Team-wise, the 2001 Miami Hurricanes are the No.1 team of the decade, according to Lindy's, followed by 2004 USC, 2005 Texas, 2000 Oklahoma and 2005 USC. If Florida repeats, the '08 and '09 Gators would have to vault to near the top of that list, don't you think?

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In a *deja vu* kind of experience, everybody's No. 1 non-conference game of the year is Ohio State-USC, slated for September 12. And like last year, the Trojans will come into the game as a prohibitive favorite, despite playing in Columbus, and despite having lost their quarterback, plus the *eight* players drafted from their 2008 defense onto NFL rosters. I'm pretty sure the Bucks will be much more competitive in this year's game, but I also acknowledge that if they win, it'll be an upset.

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22 teams are beginning the 2009 season with new head coaches, a number that's pushing 20% of all FBS programs. And some big names too....Auburn, Tennessee, Washington, Oregon, Purdue, Clemson, Mississippi State, Boston

College, Kansas State, and Syracuse off the top...

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Penn State lost a big chunk of their 2008 offensive line, all of their receivers and some defensive line starters, but still look like they could conceivably run the table in 2009. The schedule has them hosting OSU and Iowa, and their two toughest road games are at Illinois and at Michigan State...not exactly daunting. And Paterno gets an all-time Cupcake Award for this non-conference slate: Akron, Syracuse, Temple and Eastern Illinois. Are you kidding me? Apparently Coastal Carolina had a conflict this year. Tough break, Joe.

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If you're looking to pick up just one of the college football preview magazines, my recommendation has to be Phil Steele's. Some of the others do more with style and layout and color, but for content, there is nothing out there as exhaustive as Steele's book. It's 328 pages crammed with usable information, as complete a resource for the college football fan as you can find. It's $9, compared with $8 for the other three, but it's an extra buck well spent.

If there's a flaw in it, it may be Steele's obsession with his own track record over the recent past. It sometimes takes a while to get through his recounting of his predictions from 2005-2008 for, say, the running back position at Nebraska, before he gets around to what he thinks about it in 2009. It's a minor quibble, though. By comparison, everyone else's past predictions are lost in a black hole.

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More on 2009 College Football on tap throughout the summer here in Buckeye Leaves. In the next edition we'll catch you up on the Bucks' football recruiting for 2010, and take a look at the incoming freshmen for this fall.

Links:

AthlonsSports.com

Lindy's Big Ten picks and National Top 25

Phil Steele's Blog

The Sporting News - CFB