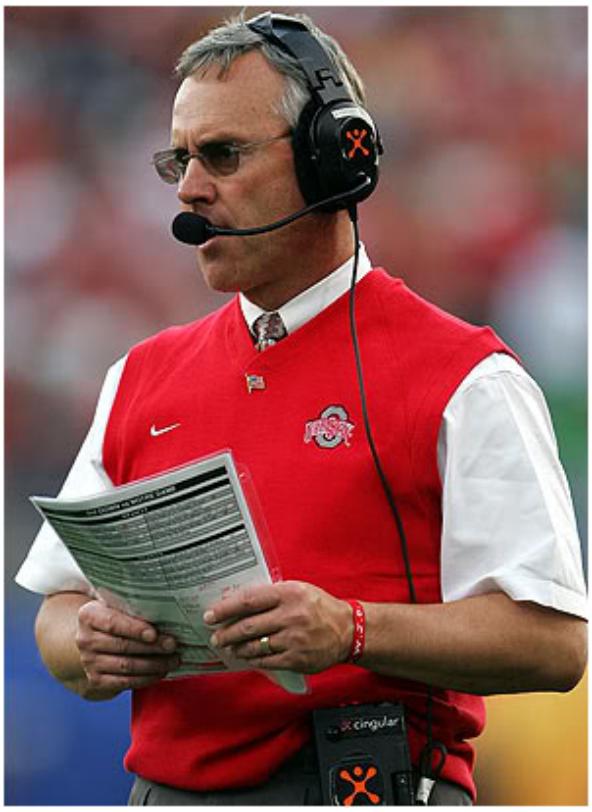

To the extent that the weakened Big Ten has become the target of national media potshots, the Buckeyes and Jim Tressel have been the bullseye. So why is this man smiling?

As if it weren't enough to be taking a transitioning young team into an early season rematch with USC in the midst of an 0-4 streak against Top Five teams, Tressel now also seems to be shouldering the burden of the sagging fortunes of the whole Big Ten Conference. Any given off-season article on the Big Ten's fading reputation is likely to have a shot of the guy in the sweater-vest front and center.

By habitually winning the Big Ten and then losing in January with millions more people watching, Jim Tressel has become the media's poster boy for the Big Ten's problems. Who better?....you might legitimately be asking. Well, for starters, how about some of the coaches who *haven't* won the conference four consecutive times?

A survey of (less than 100) college players by ESPN the Mag voted OSU the nation's most overrated program.....(which raises the question of how a program so universally ragged on nationally can be called overrated, but I digress.) Granted, the two big high-profile losses to national champion teams in the '06 and '07 seasons, plus the pasting last fall by USC, did collectively prove that OSU was a step below the two or three elite teams in the country in those particular years, even as they racked up four straight championships in their own declining conference.

That conference's 1-6 record in bowl games last year hints that the decline continues, and as the flag bearer of the league's dominant program of the decade, Tressel might be excused for

feeling like he's carrying around a boulder on his back, especially as the second USC game looms. But if his attitude and demeanor this spring and fall are any indication, it doesn't seem to be bothering him. If anything, the coach seems more relaxed than ever.

I've always thought it a bit rich that writers and other media figures rip a team for not being as good as the writers and media figures said they would be before the season. Hey guys...it wasn't Tressel who rated OSU the No. 3 team in the country before last season....it was you. *(O K, full disclosure...it was me too, but that's beside the point.)*

Believe me, I feel and understand the effect of the Florida and LSU games on the program and its reputation. But it's still kind of bizarre to see the image of Jim Tressel projected nationally as a symbol of failure and trouble....as a loser. It's a notion so bizarre that it's ridiculous...and shall be subjected to ridicule forthwith...

Without generating a whole lot of numbers on the Tressel record, it should suffice to cite his eight-year record of 83-19 at OSU..(for the math-challenged, that's roughly a 10-2 average season), his five postseason Top 5 national rankings in eight years, three BCS Championship games in a seven year span, a 3-3 record in six BCS games, five Big Ten championships, and one national championship just six and a half short years ago. Oh, and a 7-1 record against his arch-rival.

One time (2004) since his first season at OSU in 2001 has Jim Tressel lost more than two regular season games. He was the first major college coach in over 100 years to go 14-0. And since 1999 (Tressel Era +1 year) Ohio State has had more players drafted by NFL teams than any other school, and trails only U. of Miami in 1st round picks.

As Jesse Lamovsky points out in his fine recent TCF piece on John Cooper, Tressel won the championship in 2002 with lots of players recruited by Coop, but since that time, Tressel has refined his own recruiting machine, and in addition to elevating the talent level in Columbus significantly, he has arguably raised the caliber of young man brought in to play football at Ohio State at the same time. That is, of course the only really subjective judgment in this brief accounting of Tressel's accomplishments, but it is one that is shared by many other observers of the program.

Even the sum total of all that good stuff doesn't completely counteract the negative effects of getting drilled in back-to-back BCS title games. But it helps frame those two losses in the big picture context of an eight year track record of consistent and enviable successes, let alone his pre-OSU track record of multiple national championships at YSU.

Still, short memories abound, national media narratives prevail, and besides...when the Buckeyes lose their last game of the year, it can never be a wholly satisfactory season. That has happened three years running now, two of those losses embarrassing ones, the third a gut-wrenching nail-biter that might have hurt as much as the two whippings, offering as it did a brief late-game shot at redemption of a sort.

And so, as the national conversation about the sad state of the Big Ten continues, Tressel's Buckeyes approach 2009 without the two defensive All-Americans and the 1200-yd. rusher from last year. Just five starters return to the offense, and two of those are moving to new positions. Starting unproven talents at linebacker, cornerback, running back and offensive tackle are legitimate cause for concern.

So why does Jim Tressel have the look of the cat who swallowed the canary?

My best guess is that he feels rejuvenated by the spirit and the promise of the young talent he has assembled around him, and is having more fun with the job than he has had in the last couple of years. Despite the fact that the just-departed Buckeye senior class never finished out of first place in the Big Ten, never lost to Michigan, and played in four consecutive BCS bowl games, there are people close to the program who say that some in that group of seniors never got over the Florida defeat, and that their exit as Buckeyes allows a clean break with that dark day.

There was also more dissension and turmoil on the 2008 team than the public knew at the time. Benching the senior starting QB after three games in favor of the brash young freshman recruit was a Tressel move that didn't go down well in the locker room with all the troops, and it is still being debated by fans and media to this day. Tressel can't have been sorry to see that little drama come to an end.

In hindsight, his decision looks pretty good, because even as it became obvious (in Game Two?) that the 2008 Buckeyes were not a national title caliber team, neither did they fold the tent after USC, and they battled to a BCS berth at 10-2, and won a share of the conference title. And because Pryor went on to get the experience of 10 starts under his belt, he and the team are far better off today because he had the opportunity. And for at least the next two years, Tressel has no questions about who the starting quarterback ought to be. That counts for some peace of mind for the coach.

Just as Coach Tressel has that relaxed look about him, some of his previously strict rules on fan and media access to the program have relaxed as well. The old line that it was easier to get into Ft. Knox than into an OSU practice was an exaggeration....but not by too much, from what I'm told. This year, however, the coach has opened up several fall practices to the public, and he allowed the media in to the kick scrimmage and the jersey scrimmage, both departures from past practice. Players as well as media have commented on the coach's upbeat and affable 2009 persona, and while he has always been jocular and fun-loving with players and others close to him, there is still a sense that something is different this year.

I'm thinking the outlook for his 2009 OSU defense is part of what's keeping Coach Tressel smiling this summer. After Pryor and the offense struggled mightily against the defense in the jersey scrimmage, and he was asked if he was disappointed about that, the coach who

consistently fields the best defense in the Big Ten quipped, "it's hard to be disappointed when you're rooting for both teams."

In fact, Tressel had intentionally handicapped his star quarterback and the offense that day... first by putting Pryor in the no-hit, black jersey, and taking away his run option completely, and then by ordering his defense to blitz liberally, while he called predominantly passing plays...all of it designed to give Pryor a large dose of trouble, as preparation for what he can expect in the long season to come.

As an offensive line with new names comes together, and young running backs and receivers get used to doing it with 100,000 people watching, Tressel no doubt draws comfort from what he knows will be a solid, if not a truly special defensive unit. Just as they did down the stretch last year, Tressel's defense is capable of carrying this team while the offense gets rolling.

And then there's Pryor. Talk about a reason for a coach to be upbeat.

When it became apparent to anyone who was paying attention last season that OSU was in possession of a singular, special talent in Terrelle Pryor, the coach's focus in the offseason turned to making the most of the next two years. Tressel consulted with other schools' coaching staffs, and sent the eager Pryor home with the full playbook that had been largely withheld from him in his starts as a true freshman. The staff went to work on his footwork and his throwing mechanics, and Pryor's receptiveness to coaching and his fierce determination to be the best started to show in the results.

After having been thrust into the starting QB job in mid-season, and just weeks out of high school last year, Pryor will benefit from his first offseason education, his first spring camp, and his first fall practice as the undisputed starter. And he'll take the field running an offense designed around his strengths and unique abilities.

Just as natural athletic talent cannot be taught, neither can a burning desire to excel and win be instilled by coaches in a player who arrives at the college level without it. Fortunately, just as Terrelle Pryor clearly has boatloads of the former, he has demonstrated in his first year at OSU that he possesses the latter in near equal measure. Small wonder Jim Tressel feels good about the state of his Buckeye program going into Pryor's sophomore year.

There has been a lot of talk this summer about a new attitude on this team this season. How much should be made of such talk is debatable of course, but my sense is that it represents a renewed emphasis on toughness, individually and as a team...a feeling that an OSU team should dominate wherever and whenever it can...that games against lesser teams shouldn't be close at the end. And more than anything else, it's a sense that OSU has something to prove to the college football world, and that they are united in their resolve to do it.

That they have something to prove is not debatable. It should be fun finding out if they can pull it off with a team seemingly getting a bit ahead of themselves.

Regular readers of this space know I have repeatedly observed that this OSU team is built for 2010. There are so many unknowns for them going into 2009 that it is conceivable that they could lose as many as three regular season games. USC is a tough hurdle, and they have road games at Penn State and Michigan. Iowa and Wisconsin aren't games that can be mailed in either, and everyone will be gunning for the conference's top dog, as usual. (See Navy)

Maybe Jim Tressel really does feel the pressure as the most prominent face of a conference currently suffering an image problem, and the leader of a team with a lot to prove and a reputation to set right. If he does, he's doing a heck of a job hiding it from everyone.

Or just maybe Jim Tressel knows a few things about the 2009 Buckeyes that we don't, and his demeanor reflects a quiet confidence in a team he thinks will be better than people have any reason to expect.

One good thing is that we only have five days before we start finding out.