Saturday, September 5, 2009

Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio

Ohio State vs U.S. Naval Academy

12:00 p.m. (ET)

TV: ESPN

The 2009 Ohio State Buckeyes open the season Saturday at Ohio Stadium where they'll meet the U.S. Naval Academy for the fourth time in their history. The Midshipmen under second-year coach Ken Niumatalolo bring their triple-option flexbone rushing attack into Columbus looking for their first win over a Big Ten opponent in 30 years.

That last win was in 1979 when Navy won at Illinois, and just one year after the Buckeyes last lost a season opener, dropping a 19-0 decision to Penn State in Art Schlicter's first ever game at Ohio State in 1978. And to close that loop...the last time the Buckeyes met Navy, it was in the

other bookend game of Schlicter's OSU career, the quarterback's final appearance as a Buckeye in the 1981 Liberty Bowl, a game the Buckeyes won 31-28.

Speaking of celebrated quarterbacks who started as true freshmen in Columbus, this game also marks the beginning of the first full season of the Terrelle Pryor Era at OSU. Having seen what Pryor can do with little preparation and a limited playbook in his nine 2008 starts, OSU fans are on the edge of their seats with anticipation of what they'll witness from the sophomore sensation with the benefit of a full offseason of coaching and practice.

Ohio State has won all three previous meetings with Navy, pitching shutouts over the Middies in 1930 and 1931. Those games featured Buckeye All-Americans Wes Fesler, who threw for three scores in the 27-0 win in 1930, and Sid Gillman, who scored a TD in the 20-0 homecoming game victory in '31.

But so much for nostalgia for our fathers' fathers. In the era of plastic helmets, the Buckeyes are 8-0 in season openers under Jim Tressel, and as noted above, 30-0 in openers since the 1978 loss. Overall, Ohio State is 103-12-4 in season openers.

Saturday's game features enough sideshows that some may need a reminder that a football game was the original reason for gathering 105,000 people together. Don't get me wrong. I'm into the pomp and pageantry of college football as much as the next guy. There's just a lot to keep track of.

A coordinated display of respect for our armed forces has been called for when the Navy team takes the field (all cheering, no booing, please), and a flyover by The Flying Bengals (Marines) will be part of the pre-game festivities. Ticket holders have been advised to get to their seats 20 minutes before kickoff.

At some point, OSU linebacking great Chris Spielman will be honored for his selection to the College Football Hall of Fame, and the Ohio State team has planned a special new entrance to the field, the nature of which remains something of a secret, at least to me. And the highlight of the day's non-football activities will be the dotting of the "I" in the band's "Script Ohio" at halftime by John Glenn. *Whew*. Let's play ball.

The Navy Game Plan

Since Paul Johnson introduced the triple-option attack at Navy in 2002, the Midshipmen have made no secret of what they are going to try to accomplish offensively. They run the ball, and they do it better than any other team in the country. The Midshipmen have led the nation in rushing for the last four seasons, something no other school has ever accomplished. When Notre Dame gave up 178 yards rushing to Navy last year, a total most coaches would take in a minute, it represented Navy's lowest rushing yardage total of the season. They averaged 292 rushing yards per game in '08, the lowest total in their four-year run.

And not only does Navy run....they win. Navy has strung together six consecutive seasons of eight or more victories, and while they haven't beaten a top ten ranked team in 25 years, the Midshipmen own 13 victories over teams from BCS conferences since 2003.

Going up against a bigger and more athletic team like Ohio State, the goal of the triple option is to control the ball and limit the number of possessions the more explosive opponent has to score, while of course putting up some points of your own. You know how this works (if not, watch some old Oklahoma Sooner video)...on virtually every play, the quarterback either fakes to, or hands off to the fullback between the tackles. If he pulls the ball out of the fullback's gut, he can then cut it up and run himself, or pitch to one of the slot backs. The fourth option is to throw the football, but Navy only averaged seven pass attempts per game in 2008.

Defending the triple-option requires discipline on defense, with attention by each defender to his own assignment in the scheme. If Ohio State, for example, can't stop the fullback on option No. 1, they're in for a long afternoon. On the other hand, when the Navy offense is optioning laterally and pitching out behind the line of scrimmage, and the defense has lots of big, fast athletes penetrating into the backfield, bad things can happen to them too.

One bit of good fortune for Ohio State is that the contest against this unique and complicated offensive scheme comes in the season opener, which has allowed the coaches to spend more time working on defensing it than an average mid-season game week would have allowed. The other good news is that the Navy offense is replacing eight starters from last year's team.

The trigger-man for the Navy offense this year will be Ricky Dobbs, who came off the bench last year often enough to roll up 495 yards and eight touchdowns from the quarterback spot, including 224 yards on 42 carries against SMU. Coach Niumatalolo says Dobbs is the best passer Navy has had in some time, so we should expect him to throw the ball downfield more than Navy normally does, but they won't get away from the game plan unless they fall way behind early.

Much has been made in the lead-up to this game of the chop block or "cut" block technique, refined to an art form by the Navy offensive linemen. Outweighed as they are by OSU defensive linemen by some 40-50 pounds per man, the Navy blockers will go low for the legs of the defenders, trying to to chop them to the ground and avoid the apparent mismatch on the basis of pure physical ability.

Repeated use of this potentially dangerous technique can begin to play with the heads of defenders as the game goes along. Determined to avoid getting chopped, linemen can lose

focus on their assignments and the primary goal of tackling the ball-carrier. Watching how the Buckeye linemen deal with the cut block technique will be an interesting side story to follow as the game progresses.

Because the triple-option is so difficult to simulate in practice by teams who don't use it or see it very often, Navy has had success early in games while defenses are getting acclimated to what's going on. They scored on their first possession in 12 of their 13 games in 2008, and even the talented OSU defense can be expected to struggle at the outset on Saturday.

My best guess is that the sound tackling and superior athleticism of OSU will be more than the inexperienced Middies offense can overcome on any kind of consistent basis....and besides....there's no way they stop the Buckeye offense...

Buckeyes on Offense

When Terrelle Pryor and the OSU offense have the ball on Saturday, I think we can expect close to a 50-50 run-pass mix in play-calling, using a short and intermediate passing attack by Pryor, with a goal of also proving they can run the ball inside, especially early. They clearly have confidence in their running attack, so we'll see it unfold, and see if Navy can contain it. I'm sure the OSU coaches would like to start establishing some rhythm on offense...you know, move the chains... dictate the pace of the game....but there's also a lot of big play potential on this team, and I can foresee a three-play touchdown drive or two before the day is out.

The Buckeyes have so much more speed on the offense this year. When you consider you're substituting Washington, Posey and Herron (or Saine) for last year's group of Hartline, Robiskie and Wells, it's obvious. Add Small, Berry, and Flash Thomas to the 2009 mix, and it becomes more like night and day. The upgrade in speed will jump out immediately at anyone who watched this team last year. These kids are anxious to show what they can do, and Pryor loves to throw the ball. I wonder if he'll be as patient as the coaches want him to be.

A few things to watch for on offense:

- Dan Herron (#1) and Brandon Saine (#3) both getting carries in the rushing game, and the Buckeyes working on running the ball between the tackles early. Offensive line coach Jim Bollman has said he has been pleased with the quickness and crisp blocking of the line in the running game, and it will be interesting to see how they execute in that phase of the game.

- Both freshmen running backs, Jordan Hall (#28) and Jaamal Berry (#4), are also expected to play, and according to Tressel, backup quarterback Joe Bauserman (#14) will see action for at least one series sometime in the first half.

- Keep an eye on the left offensive tackle position, the subject of much conversation this fall. Junior Andrew Miller (#55) will get the start, with J.B. Shugarts (#76) to see action as well. Miller has more experience and is the better pass blocker of the two. Mike Adams, the third candidate

for that spot, will not play for disciplinary reasons. The effectiveness of the Buckeye left tackle in protecting Terrelle Pryor's blind side is a key not just to this game, but to the whole season.

- Look for the Boren brothers, especially when the running game is in operation. Junior left guard Justin Boren (#65) will be playing his first ever game as a Buckeye, and he'll be a key to the success of the rushing attack. And in something of a late camp surprise, his brother Zach (#44) a true freshman, is expected to get the starting call at fullback, and at 6' 1", and 255 lbs., he'll be hard to miss. Another true freshman, also the younger brother of a Buckeye starter, Adam Homan (#49) brother of Ross, is the other fullback to keep an eye on.

- How does Pryor look throwing the football? Fans who haven't seen TP since the Fiesta Bowl are going to surprised at the improvement in his footwork and throwing mechanics, let alone in his confidence and understanding of what's happening in front of him. And he seems equally comfortable throwing on the move as he does standing in the pocket. He showed that ability several times last year, (see 2:40 and 3:40 marks) and now it seems like it's a habit.

- The Bucks are likely to open the game in the 3-wide receiver set, which will have DeVier Posey (#8) and Taurian Washington(#5) out wide and Dane Sanzenbacher (#12) in the slot. They will use at least six receivers in the regular rotation, with freshman Duron Carter (#9), Ray Small (#82) and Lamaar Thomas (#7) as the next three guys onto the field at the WR spots.

- How many times will Pryor's number be called on designed running plays? Tressel has said he doesn't want his quarterback getting hit 20 times a game, a hint that he will limit the number of rushing attempts he will allow for his quarterback this year. Will he cringe every time Pryor takes off out of the backfield on a scramble?

- Redshirt freshman Jake Stoneburner (#11) will alternate with senior Jake Ballard (#86) at tight end. It will be Stoneburner's first game action at OSU, and it will be interesting to see how they try to take advantage of his rare combination of hands, size and speed. There *will* be more passing to the tight end this year. I swear.

Bucks on D

A couple of things to watch when the OSU defense is on the field...

- At cornerback, Chimdi Chekwa (#5) is the entrenched starter at one corner, but 5th-year senior Andre Amos (#13) and junior Devon Torrence (#10) have been competing for the other cornerback position. They'll both play a lot, and while this game is sort of a unique test for the defense, the guy who plays the better game of the two should get the start next week against USC.

- Two linebackers will be getting their first starts for OSU, and a third one will be seeing

significant action. Co-captain Austin Spitler (#38) has paid dues behind Laurinaitis for three years, but he's a big hitter and an solid player in his own right, and will start at the SAM (strong side) linebacker. And I think OSU fans are going to love the non-stop intensity of junior Brian Rolle (#36), who gets the start in the middle, and will have a lot of responsibility for stuffing the fullback option in the flexbone of Navy. And Etienne Sabino (#6) could play at either the MLB or the SAM linebacker spot, getting his first real chance to shine. Ross Homan (#51) starts at the Will linebacker.

- Defensive ends Thad Gibson (#90), Cam Heyward (#97) and Nathan Williams (#43) will have to play more contain defense against Navy than the more pass rush-oriented scheme that we'll be seeing against conventional offenses later in the season. How they do will speak to their versatility, but it's even more important that they all come out of the game healthy after getting cut blocked all day. Ditto Larimore, Denlinger, Rose and Worthington.

- We could be getting our first looks at incoming freshmen LB Dorian Bell (#11), DT John Simon (#54), LB Storm Klein (#32), and possibly cornerback C.J. Barnett (#14) and a few more if it gets out of hand.

I can see the defense struggling a bit early in the game, but the Buckeyes are simply too talented to allow a young Navy team to come into the Horseshoe and play them close to even. This game is close for a quarter before OSU pulls away for a convincing win. I see it 38-10.

Links:

OSU Athletic Communications - Game Notes (pdf)

2009 OSU Roster

2009 OSU Schedule