Saturday, October 3, 2009

Memorial Stadium; Bloomington, Indiana

Ohio State at University of Indiana

7:00 p.m. (ET)

TV: Big Ten Network

Ohio State hits the road for the first time this season (no, Cleveland doesn't count) when they travel to Bloomington to take on an Indiana Hoosier team with a record (3-1) equal to the Buckeyes' mark. The goal for Bill Lynch's Hoosiers Saturday is to prove that it's more than a statistical coincidence.

Until their last minute loss at Michigan last week, most observers wouldn't have given Indiana any shot at staying with OSU, even after they started the season 3-0, but after a strong showing in the Big House, hopes of an upset now spring in Hoosier Country.

It won't be easy. Ohio State has won 14 straight against Indiana, and the Hoosiers haven't scored an offensive touchdown against OSU since 2004 (they haven't played since '06). The Buckeyes are 23-2-1 in Bloomington in the history of the series, with the last OSU loss coming in 1988 by a score of 41-7, a day remembered in Columbus as "Black Saturday" *(OK, I made that part up).* I
n the last ten meetings between the two teams, however, the Buckeyes have won by an

average margin of 28 points.

Factors in the Hoosiers' favor...Ohio State will be without key players on both sides of the ball. Senior captain Kurt Coleman, the starting free safety, has been suspended for the game by Big Ten officials for a late hit in the Illinois game. And Dan Herron is nursing a sore ankle, and will not start at tailback, and it is still not clear if he will play at all in the game. Jim Tressel is 5-3 in road conference openers, and 7-3 in Big Ten road night games as OSU head coach. Both are winning percentages under Tressel's overall OSU mark of 81.1%. *(Hey, you get your hope wherever you can when you're Indiana)*

On top of that, Hoosier spirits are buoyed by the solid effort in Ann Arbor...at least a solid effort by their offense, led by junior quarterback Ben Chappell and some young running backs and receivers with promise. Add to that whatever psychological edge a night game provides to the home team, and at the very least, the Buckeyes can expect to be facing an enthusiastic and emotionally charged Indiana team and crowd.

Road Warriors

But someone has apparently forgotten to tell Jim Tressel and his Buckeyes that life on the road in the Big Ten is supposed to be fraught with peril. On Saturday night the Buckeyes will try to come within one win of tying the all-time Big Ten record for consecutive road victories. Ohio State has won 15 straight Big Ten road games, going all the way back to the 17-10 loss at Penn State in 2005. A win this week and another at Purdue on Oct. 17 would tie Michigan's streak of 17 straight road wins from 1988-1992.

Revamped Offense

Prospects for the Indiana offense were bleak after quarterback Kellen Lewis, their best offensive player for the last two seasons, was dismissed from the team during the offseason. After a 7-6 season and a bowl game invitation in 2007, the Hoosiers regressed to 3-9 last year in Lynch's second season at the helm, and the team was the consensus 11th-ranked team in the conference coming into 2009....or so said the experts.

To put it mildly, the Hoosiers didn't win many converts with an ugly win over E. Kentucky in their nationally-televised opener, and not many minds were changed either by subsequent victories over the likes of
Western Michigan
or
Akron
. And despite the uplifting performance in defeat last week, those experts could still turn out to be right about the identity of the weakest team in the conference.

Chappell has been solid if not spectacular at quarterback for Indiana. He's big at 6' 3", 235, but

relatively immobile, and while he has completed 65% of his passes for 944 yards out of the spread offense, he has thrown four interceptions to just three touchdowns. Chappell has a strong arm, and will not just dink and dunk out of the spread. He'll be trying to stretch the defense throwing it down the field, and he has some talented targets.

The skill position talent at Indiana is better than last year, with the emergence of redshirt freshman tailback Darius Willis (6' 0", 219) as perhaps the best of the lot. He has one 100-yard game this year (152 yds vs Michigan) and teammate Demetrious McCray has another (134 yds vs WMU). It was Willis that raced 85 yards for the go-ahead TD in the 4th quarter against the Wolverines last week, serving notice that he could be the real deal for Indiana for a couple more seasons.

At wide receiver, sophomore Tandon Doss is a guy the Hoosiers will be trying to get the ball to, both in the air and on some rushing attempts as well. Terrance Turner and Demario Belcher are two more big receivers that are potential match-up problems for Buckeye DB's. Glenville's Ray Fisher is a former receiver, now at cornerback for the Hoosiers, but he is their leading kick return threat, with a 91-yard TD on a kickoff return already this year.

The offensive line returns four starters from the 2008 unit, with senior right tackle Roger Saffold the standout of the group. They have done a good job of protecting Chappell in 2009, giving up just two sacks thus far. They'll be facing the best line they have seen this season in OSU's defensive front, and Chappell's mobility, let alone his nerve, will be put to the test on Saturday. The Hoosier offense uses a lot of misdirection, wide receiver rushes, and reverses as a part of their spread package, so Ohio State will have to guard against over-pursuing on defense.

Chappell threw for 270 yards against Michigan last week, but the prospects for a repeat performance even close to that against Ohio State aren't good. This is a Buckeye defense that held Juice Williams and his talented receiver group, including Regis Benn, to less than 80 yards passing last week, albeit in the rain. Even without Coleman, OSU coverage guys and pass-rushers should contain the IU passing attack.

Anderson Russell and Jermale Hines will start at the safety positions for the Bucks. The starting nickel back hasn't been announced by the OSU defensive coaches, but we could see three cornerbacks (Chekwa, Torrence, Amos) on the field in the nickel instead of a third safety. Redshirt freshman Orhian Johnson, a backup at free safety, has been getting most of the practice reps, and would probably be the next safety on the field.

Ends Are The Means

When the Buckeyes are on offense, the young OSU offensive tackles, Shugarts, Miller and Adams, will have to contend with two Indiana defensive ends that are considered the best duo in the conference in seniors Jammie Kirlew and Greg Middleton. You'll see those guys in the Buckeye backfield on Saturday, and they'll have to be contained for Pryor to move the chains consistently for Ohio State.

Indiana has been getting strong play at the tackle spots as well, with redshirt freshman Larry Black Jr. making a name for himself with 5 tackles for loss already, and true freshman Adam Replogle earning a starting spot with his strong early performance.

Matt Mayberry leads the Hoosiers in tackles from his inside linebacker position, and he'll be flanked by Tyler Replogle and Will Patterson on the outside. The secondary is a question mark for this team, with safeties Nick Polk and Austin Thomas possessing good size and hitting ability, but a penchant for giving up some big plays. Ray Fisher and Chris Adkins are the starting cornerbacks, and with the Hoosier defense stronger against the run than the pass, they will both be tested early and often by Pryor and the OSU receivers, weather permitting.

Buckeye Offense Finding Itself?

Last week against Illinois, the OSU offense seemed to figure out what it wants to be...or at least it looked like they were getting an idea, after appearing to experiment with formations, personnel groupings and play calling for the first three games. You may have noticed the changes we saw on offense last week...or not.

For starters, Pryor spent the entire first half in the shotgun, taking just one snap under center, (and that when he was taking a knee on the half's final play.) The weather dictated that they would be primarily rushing the football, and Pryor was handing the ball off to Herron and Saine out of the gun with generally positive results. Herron rushed for 75 yards on 14 carries, for a 5.4 yd average, and Saine had 81 yards on 13 carries, a 6.2 yard average, both well above the season rushing averages for the Buckeyes.

What had appeared to be read-option plays with Pryor electing to hand off most of the time, were later explained by Tressel to be called hand-offs to the backs, with no QB "keeper" option. Pryor did have his own number called enough times to pick up 59 rushing yards himself, on 11 carries, averaging 5.4 yards per rush.

The blocking schemes were different as well, with tight end Jake Ballard lining up as the H-back on most plays, and leading the running back through the hole instead of using a fullback as the lead blocker, as in the I-formation. On certain counter plays, we saw Ballard instead turning to take out the weakside end pursuing the play. For the most part, the OSU offense stayed in their 3-wide set, spreading the field, using zone blocking schemes, and giving the offensive linemen a little more space in which to maneuver. On balance, it worked.

OSU coaches called more of a variety of rushing plays last week, including more counters than we have seen to this point, while staying mostly with the inside rushing attack. Better weather on future Saturdays will help give us a better idea of the full package that is evolving on offense for OSU, but the productivity against Illinois, with the passing options all but removed until the second half, was encouraging. The Bucks totaled 236 yards rushing for the game, but more importantly, they looked much more efficient and precise in their execution of the rushing game than what we had seen in the first three contests.

So to the extent that an offense can establish an identity in a driving rainstorm, what we saw Saturday appears to be the approach this team will use going forward. Pryor seems comfortable running mostly out of the gun, and defenses have to concern themselves with Pryor as a run option for a longer time as the play develops. Keeping linebackers thinking run longer should open up passing lanes for downfield throws, and the zone blocking should help accentuate the strengths of the OSU O-line, which is more a finesse than a power unit.

With Herron a bit hobbled this week, the opportunity is right there for Brandon Saine to break out with a big game. Pryor may also get more chances to run with the football this week, and freshman Jordan Hall will likely see more action than he has been granted in his first two games as a Buckeye.

I think the OSU rushing game will add considerably to the 97 yards per game average the Hoosiers are giving up on the ground. And there should be a few big plays available in the passing game for the Buckeyes, as the IU secondary is probably their weakest link on defense. The Hoosiers will bring enough trickery, misdirection and youthful exuberance to their offensive game plan to dent the OSU defense, but probably not for more than 14 points. I see the Bucks covering the 17-point spread and winning their 16th straight Big Ten road game by something like 33-10.

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2009 Indiana Roster

2009 OSU Roster