Terrelle Pryor celebrated his return to Pennsylvania with three scores, and Ohio State took over the drivers' seat in the Big Ten race by dominating Penn State in Happy Valley 24-7. The Buckeye defense held the Nittany Lions scoreless after the break, and Pryor put the game out of reach with two touchdown passes in the second half.

Iowa's home loss to Northwestern puts Ohio State (8-2, 5-1) into a tie for the conference lead with the Hawkeyes (9-1, 5-1), who come to Columbus Saturday minus their starting quarterback and their unbeaten streak. If the Buckeyes beat Iowa, they'll be heading to Pasadena regardless of what happens in The Game on November 21 in Ann Arbor.

Both teams had come into this game without a signature win in 2009 despite being ranked in the nation's Top 15. And it was the Buckeyes who put together the complete team performance, with more big plays on offense, a defense that mauled the Nittany Lions in the trenches, and superior special teams play throughout.

With a Capital D

A word or two about that Buckeye defense:

- Cam Heyward sacked PSU quarterback Daryll Clark on the Lions' first offensive play, and then proceeded to terrorize anyone who tried to block him all afternoon. Heyward had a career game with 11 total tackles, including three tackles for loss and two sacks.

- With Heyward setting the early tone, the Silver Bullets forced three-and-outs on the first three Penn State possessions, and held the Nittany Lions without a first down till the 1:07 mark of the first quarter. Then, defending a 10-7 lead after halftime, the defense held Penn State to one first down in four 3rd quarter possessions, serving notice to Paterno's boys that there would be no comeback on this day.

- Buckeye linebackers Ross Homan and Brian Rolle had ten tackles each, delivering crunching hits all day, as the domination by the OSU defensive line allowed them to roam free and hit people. Homan intercepted Clark with the Buckeyes up 24-7 in the 4th. That's when the Lions borrowed a student's T-shirt and waved the white flag.

- The defense put the brakes on the Penn State rushing attack, holding Evan Royster to 36 yards on 13 carries, and giving up just 76 total rushing yards for the game. The Lions picked up just two first downs rushing, and three total first downs in the second half.

Pryor Composed in the Clutch

If Terrelle Pryor was bothered by the taunts and other antics of the Penn State students and fans, he didn't let it bother him for long. He looked a little tight at first, and sailed a couple of early passes well over his targets, but over the course of the game, he had as many drops by OSU receivers as he did bad throws. He didn't throw much...8 of 17, for 125 yards and two touchdowns. Bottom line: no turnovers.

After last year's late fumble by Pryor, every preview of this game repeated the blinding insight that turnovers and mistakes could make the difference. In a defensive struggle, they said, the outcome could turn on one big play. With two minutes left in the third quarter, and OSU clinging to a 10-7 lead, Pryor made that play.

Ohio State had run the football on first down on every one of their first *nine* possessions of the game, so Tressel certainly had the element of surprise working for him when Pryor dropped to throw from the OSU 38 on the first play following a Penn State punt. DeVier Posey beat the PSU corner on a fly route and Pryor hit him with the deep ball for a 62-yard touchdown that gave the Buckeyes a 17-7 lead.

With just over a quarter to play, a two-score lead had to look insurmountable to the Nittany Lions, considering the way the Bucks had been playing on defense. The game had turned in a heartbeat, and it was the kid from Jeannette, PA doing the turning.

It was not to be the only time Pryor would deliver in the clutch. He picked his moments to run the ball, finishing with 50 yards rushing, but none was bigger than the 7-yard touchdown run to grab the early lead. Pryor shrugged off a hit from PSU linebacker Navorro Bowman and stretched out from inside the 5 to place the ball over the goal line. The Nittany Lions would never see the lead.

Special Play

Two long punt returns by Ray Small set up Buckeye touchdowns, including Pryor's early score. Small took the first Penn State punt of the game at midfield and dashed all the way to the Nittany Lions' 9-yard line, sparking the Buckeyes to the early advantage. Then with OSU leading 17-7 and the 3rd quarter winding down, Small took a pun at the OSU 8-yard line and returned it out over midfield to get the Bucks out of a deep hole and snuff out any hope the Lions had of getting back in the game. Small piled up 130 yards on seven punt returns.

Coach Tressel didn't show a lot of faith in backup placekicker Devin Barclay when he passed on a field goal attempt on 4th down from the Penn State 29-yard line with a chance to go up 10-0 in the 1st quarter. Tressel chose to punt instead, netting only nine yards after the touchback. But

Barclay connected from 37 yards out later in the half to give OSU the 10-7 halftime lead.

Buckeye punter Jon Thoma punted eight times for a 38 yard average, with three punts downed inside the 20-yard line, and zero return yards for Penn State. It is notable that Thoma has had just three punts returned all season, for a total of *20 yards in returns*...in ten games!

Thank You Kirk!

The most glaring statistical differential in this game was in rushing yardage, with the Buckeyes outgaining Penn State on the ground 228 to 76. Credit the best game of the year by the Ohio State offensive line for that outcome, and give a little credit to ESPN analysts Kirk Herbstreit and Todd McShay too. Buckeye tackle Jim Cordle told reporters after the game that comments by Herbstreit and McShay on ESPN's football coverage that cited Ohio State's offensive line play as their reason for picking Penn State served to fire up the OSU linemen. Hey, whatever works.

The Bucks took it to the Lions on the ground with Dan Herron carrying the load in the early going, totaling 58 yards on 16 carries, almost all of it in the first half. Brandon Saine alternated with Herron and finished as the leading rusher in the game with 68 yards on 20 carries. Pryor added 50 yards on just five attempts, with very little of that coming on designed runs for the quarterback, as the OSU coaches elected to hand the ball off to their tailbacks instead of running any option looks.

Six different Buckeyes had double-digit gains on rushing plays, with Jordan Hall joining Herron and Saine as tailbacks with runs of 10 or more yards. Pryor had a 24-yard run, and receivers Ray Small and DeVier Posey got into the rushing stats as well, with 13 and 12-yard gains respectively.

OSU had some success early in the game getting the ball to Posey behind the line of scrimmage and letting him use his athletic ability to pick up yardage on the outside. Posey picked up 19 yards on consecutive lateral pass plays in the 1st quarter, but for whatever reason the coaches never revisited the idea.

Zach Attack

One guy who didn't show up much on the stat sheet but had a significant impact on the game was true freshman fullback Zach Boren, a 6' 3", 255 lb. battering ram in the rushing attack. Boren knocked linebacker Sean Lee on his butt on a 16-yard run by Herron in the first quarter, and had crunching lead blocks on several other OSU running plays.

Boren would meet up with Lee again at a crucial moment later in the game...and it was a play that exemplified the physical dominance the Buckeyes showed for much of the day. With the Bucks up 17-7 and driving in PSU territory, they faced a 3rd and 3 at the Penn State 16-yard line. As Pryor dropped to throw, Boren shot through the line, put a brutal lick on Lee, knocking

him flat on his ass...again...and then calmly turned and caught a little dump off pass from Pryor for a first down at the 11-yard line. The 3-yard TD pass to Saine that followed made it a three-score game at 24-7, and it was Boren's play that had sustained the drive.

Sean Lee will be seeing Zach Boren in his sleep this week. The offensive players for Penn State will be dreaming mostly about Cam Heyward.

Credit Where it's Due

Jim Tressel has come under relentless criticism for his conservative approach in general and for his lack of imagination in play-calling in particular. More than a little of that criticism has come under my byline. To be fair then, I've got to give the coach credit for mixing it up in this game with some creativity and unpredictability in the offensive attack.

Against an excellent defensive front, Tressel had the Buckeyes ready with some well conceived and well-executed running plays that got outside the containment and went for good yardage. He ran the lateral passes to Posey, the end-around to Small, threw down the hashmarks to Sanzenbacher in the forbidden middle of the field, threw to his tight end...and to his fullback...and to his tailback...for a touchdown. Pinch me, I'm dreaming.

Tressel kept his dynamic quarterback under control. He put Pryor in situations where he could succeed, and kept him away from the mistakes that have plagued him in other games. Even running the ball on the first play of nine consecutive possessions looked like strategic genius when he caught the Lions napping on the tenth one with a 62-yard TD on the first play.

Nice job, coach. You outcoached that older gentleman on the other sideline. (And your defensive coordinator didn't do a bad job either. Props to Coach Heacock for another stellar game by the D.)

Starting right tackle J.B. Shugarts left the game with an injury to his knee, and was replaced by freshman Marcus Hall. Later in the game, the Buckeyes were going with Andrew Miller and Jim Cordle at the tackles.

Dan Herron appeared to have re-injured his ankle when he was tackled in the third quarter.

So...yours truly picks against the Buckeyes in my game preview for the first time in memory...and they come up with their best performance of the year...and in a crucial, big-time game, no less. Coincidence? I think not. If you see me doing this again in the future, feel free to question my motives.

Links:

OSU - Complete Game Statistics

ESPN Box Score