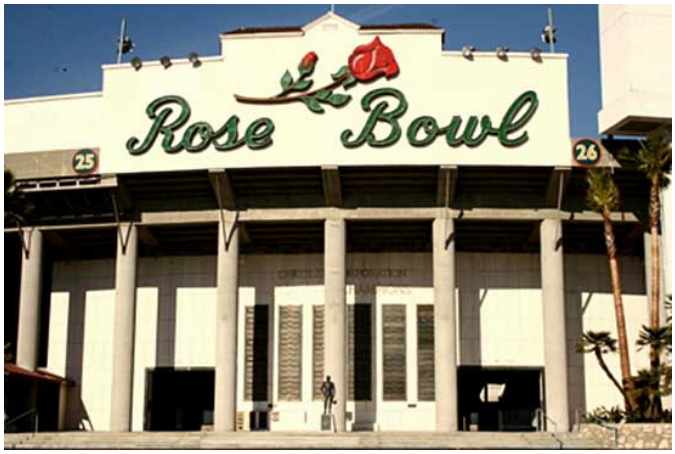

Friday, January 1, 2010

Rose Bowl Stadium, Pasadena, CA

Ohio State (10-2) vs. Oregon (10-2)

5:10 p.m. (ET)

TV: ABC

After winning six conference titles in nine seasons under Jim Tressel, the Ohio State Buckeyes finally arrive Friday at the destination that is supposed to be automatic for the Big Ten champions: The Rose Bowl in Pasadena. Chip Kelly's 7th-ranked Oregon Ducks will represent the Pac-10 in the 96th edition of the Granddaddy of all bowl games, but the identity of the opponent is incidental to the task at hand for the Buckeyes.

For Oregon, their Pac-10 title affords a rare opportunity to play on the big stage. For No. 8 Ohio State, nothing short of winning on that big stage will be enough to begin restoring some national respect for the Scarlet and Gray and for the Big Ten Conference. That's what this game is about for the Buckeyes.

Lately, when January rolls around, we're somehow always talking about the quest for "redemption" for Ohio State. Although their reputation as big game losers is belied somewhat by their 4-3 record in BCS games (3-3 under Tressel), that tag still dogs them. That's mostly because memories are short, and ever since Ohio State strutted into the Fiesta Bowl three years ago as the nation's consensus No. 1 team, only to get their hats handed to them by the Florida Gators, January has been about trying to set things right once again.

A couple of years later, with two more hats in hand, those four BCS wins seem way off in the

distance somewhere, and the three consecutive January losses are what OSU fans feel sticking in their collective craw.

It doesn't matter that the Buckeyes' thrilling championship game victory over undefeated Miami following the 2002 season was recently voted the Game of the Decade....you know...*this* decade. And it doesn't matter that last year's loss to No. 2 Texas looked like a win with less than 30 seconds left in the game. Close doesn't count. There are no moral victories in January.

All that matters is that it's been four years since A.J. Hawk was seen sacking his future brother-in-law Brady Quinn, and the Buckeyes won their last game of the season. Even six straight over Michigan doesn't make up for three high-profile losses with the whole college football nation watching. *(Okay, it helps a little)*

When you lose a bowl game to the best team from another major conference, your domination of your own conference is diminished. It's that simple. The Big Ten title is kind of hollow when the conference goes 1-6 in bowl games.

There's a big difference between the Top 5 and the Top 10-15 in college football. The sport's elite teams are the ones in the Top 5. Climbing back into college football's elite is OSU's goal this Friday. That's why this game could be against the Bruins, the Huskies or the Trojans instead of the Ducks, and it wouldn't change a thing.

Some Stats and Some History...

Let's get some of the obligatory numbers out of the way before we take a closer look at the game:

The Buckeyes are 7-0 lifetime against the Oregon Ducks, having last played in 1987, a 24-14 win for Chris Spielman, Tom Tupa and the Bucks. The series included four meetings in the 60's and two in the 80's, so it's about as meaningless a statistic as you'll find...unless it helps you to think the Buckeyes will win this matchup because they *always* do.

OSU is 6-7 in their 13 Rose Bowl appearances. They are 18-22 in bowl games in their history and under Jim Tressel they are 4-4 in bowl games, including the 3-3 mark in BCS contests. This Rose Bowl appearance by OSU is their fifth straight BCS bowl game. Let's see...that's five straight BCS bowls for Tressel...not counting the national championship year of 2002...all in nine years at the helm at OSU. Whatever shortcomings this coach may have, inconsistency is not among them.

Ohio State is playing in the Rose Bowl for the first time since January 1, 1997, when John Cooper's troops defeated Arizona State 20-17. For the complete rundown on the Buckeyes' mediocre bowl track record over the last 25 years, you're a click away from my colleague Jesse Lamovsky's nice summation. Can't beat that.

Tressel is 14-1 in games against teams with a first-year head coach, losing only to Danny Hope at Purdue this season.

Oregon's last Rose Bowl appearance was in 1994, when they lost to Penn State 38-20.

Duck Hunting

First-year Oregon coach Chip Kelly was quoted this week as saying the number one goal of his offense is *to score*. While this may not strike most football fans as a blinding insight, it does differ slightly from the stated philosophy of the guy who will be standing on the opposite sideline on Friday afternoon in Pasadena, and who reveres the punt play as the most important in football. *(I'm quoting JT here..."our No. 1 role as an offense is to not put our defense in poor position")*

The point is, the Ducks *do* score...to the tune of 37.7 points per game, and they can do it in a big hurry. Kelly functioned as offensive coordinator under the previous Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti, and his offense hasn't lost a thing in the transition. They are fast, they are well-drilled, and they are explosive.

How explosive? Averaging just 27 minutes per game in time of possession, their offense is on the field less than their opponents, yet they are 10-2, and putting up 425 yards and 37 points per game. Nearly 40% of Oregon's scoring drives this season took less than two minutes, and fully two-thirds of them took less than three minutes. *That* explosive.

If they were primarily a passing team, it would be easier to understand the time of possession differential and the lightning-quick scoring drives...but they're not. Oregon is the nation's 6th-ranked rushing team, running for 236 yards per game. 30 of their 37 touchdowns this season have come on the ground. So how is this happening?

It starts with junior quarterback Jeremiah Masoli (5' 11", 220), a two-year starter who directs the attack, and contributes as a strong runner in his own right, with over 1300 career rushing yards and 22 career rushing TD's. The Ducks offense is a true read-option scheme, featuring lots of misdirection and a variety of looks in the rushing attack.

In 2009, Masoli has piled up 659 rushing yards, with 12 TD's. He's an excellent ball-handler and decision-maker with a penchant for making big plays in the passing game. As a passer, Masoli completed 58% of his throws in 2009, for 2066 yards and 15 TD's, with just five interceptions. The Ducks surprise a lot of teams going for big yardage in the passing game on first down, as opponents get so geared up to limit the first down rushing yardage that they can beat DB's down the field for big plays off play action.

Then the Ducks hit you with their dynamic one-two punch at running back, with Pac-10 Offensive Freshman of the Year LaMichael James (5' 9", 180), who set an Oregon freshman record with 1476 yards (and an amazing 6.9 yards per carry), paired up with LaGarrette Blount,

who is returning from a suspension for punching a Boise State player in the Ducks' 2009 opener. *(No truth to the rumor that one must be named LaSomething to play running back at Oregon.)*

Blount's suspension was supposed to be for the entire season *(one wonders...if sucker-punching an opposing player in the jaw after a game...then fighting with coaches, fans and cops while being escorted from the field doesn't merit a full-season suspension...what would?)* but he was reinstated by Coach Kelly for the final Oregon regular season game, and contributed 51 yards and a touchdown against Oregon State.

The Oregon wide receivers are productive, if not overly impressive physically. Junior Jeff Maehl (6'1", 175) is the leading pass-catcher with 52 receptions for 686 yards and six TD's. He's the go-to guy when the Ducks go down the field. D.J. Davis and Lavasier Tuinei are the other two starters at receiver, and they have 22 receptions each in the regular season. The Ducks would clearly rather not throw the football. Hence the OSU strategy to make them throw the football.

Can the Buckeyes Slow Down This Offense?

The key storyline to this Rose Bowl game will be the emerging answer to the above question. In a case of team strength against team strength, the celebrated Ohio State defense will be put to the test against one of the most explosive offensive attacks in the college game today.

Something has to give when the 6th best rushing offense (236 yds per game) meets the nation's 5th-ranked rushing defense (83.4 yds allowed per game). The Ducks average 5.5 yards per carry. OSU holds opponents to 2.7 yards per carry. Oregon averages six plays per game of 20 yards or more. OSU gives up an average of two such plays per game. The team that holds closest to their averages will probably win the game.

I am of course breaking no new ground here, when I speculate about what it will take for the Bucks to shoot down the Ducks, but here go my best guesses...

- *create penetration on the defensive front* - to mess up the timing and blocking schemes of the option offense. The Buckeyes seem well-suited to do just that with starting tackle Dexter Larimore returning at 100% health for this game...to be teamed up with all-conference lineman Cam Heyward, senior captain Doug Worthington, and budding freshman star Johnny Simon all in the middle of the defense...with Nathan Williams, Thad Gibson and Solomon Thomas (or Heyward?) coming from the outside on the defensive line. The Ducks' offensive line is fairly young, and they haven't seen a defensive line this talented and deep.

- *counteract the Oregon speed with team speed at linebacker* - sideline to sideline, I like the OSU trio of Brian Rolle, Jermale Hines and Ross Homan to run with the Oregon backs and keep them from getting to the edge...at least often enough to make a difference...

- *tackle well* - so many of the Oregon big plays this year have come as a result of shoddy tackling by opposing defenses. This is a strong suit of the entire Buckeye defense in the Jim Heacock era, and could be another telling factor in the game.

- *control the gain on first down* - easier said than done, of course, but the penetration and sure tackling should help the Silver Bullets limit those first down gains and narrow play-calling options on subsequent downs.

- *create turnovers off pressure and penetration* - Masoli and James are fast and talented, but they are not big, and they will put the ball on the ground when hit. As a team the Ducks have lost 15 fumbles this season, second in the country in that category. Ohio State led the conference in turnover margin, and led the country in interceptions. Force Masoli into third-and-long passing situations, and the Buckeyes are where they want to be.

- *hold them to field goals in the red zone* - considering how they move the ball on offense, it's unrealistic to think the Ducks won't have several scoring opportunities...and if OSU gets into a "shoot-out" type game, their chances to win drop precipitously. Oregon has been very effective at converting red zone opportunities to points (94%) with 48 scores on 51 chances. The Bucks have managed to hold opponents to 12.2 points per game in large part by forcing teams into field goal attempts instead of giving up touchdowns. If we see a lot of Oregon placekicker Morgan Flint, let it be for field goals, not extra points.

As Usual, OSU Offense Depends on Pryor

It's probably not fair to refer to the Ohio State offense and the Oregon defense as team "weaknesses". After all, both teams were champions of their respective conferences, and those units are only weak relative to their teammates on the other side of the ball. On the other hand, the Buckeyes *were* dead last in the Big Ten in passing offense...and the Ducks *did* give up 33 or more points in a game four times in 2009. Depends on where you sit, I guess.

With all the focus on the Oregon offense and the OSU defense, it's entirely possible that this game could turn on how effectively Terrelle Pryor and the OSU rushing attack (no slouches themselves at 198.9 yards per game) can keep the Ducks' offense off the field. Jim Tressel experimented for the better part of two seasons to find a consistent winning formula for Pryor and the OSU offense, and in the finishing five-game win streak to close out the 2009 season, he settled on a power running game with Brandon Saine, Dan Herron and Jordan Hall at tailback, with the occasional rushing attempt and a controlled, short to intermediate passing scheme with Pryor.

The result was a clock-eating, defense-punishing ground attack that averaged over 225 yards rushing during the five game stretch, with a less turnover-prone Pryor as a bonus. The much-maligned offensive line started to play with more confidence and precision, and Pryor seemed to do things better when he was asked to do fewer things. The passing game became less aggressive and more unpredictable at the same time. We began to see throws to the tight

end, and a few to the fullback (Boren) and to the tailback (Saine)... at least more than we did earlier in the season. A few longtime Tressel-watchers were said to have fainted dead away when the Buckeyes scored on a perfectly-executed screen pass against Michigan. Old dog...new tricks?

In the season's second half, Pryor's rushing attempts were more likely to come as he scrambled out of called pass play situations, as the coaches were hesitant to call his number on rushing plays while he nursed a painfully sprained ankle that bothered him most in the Iowa and Penn State games. Despite his admission this week that he has played a good portion of the season with a slightly torn posterior cruciate ligament in his knee, the coaching staff says Pryor is finally at 100% health, and has looked very mobile and fast in practices.

I look for more option runs for Pryor in the bowl game, as the coaches want to get him to the edge and take advantage of his physical mismatch with...well, with just about anybody on the Ducks defense. It will be important to establish some kind of passing threat early in the game as well, to make the dual-threat aspect of Pryor's game something to really worry about, and to loosen things up for Saine and Herron in the running attack.

Ducks on D

Most OSU opponents this year stacked the box with eight defenders and dared the Buckeyes to beat them throwing the ball, and I suspect Oregon will do the same. The Oregon defense isn't as bad against the run as a few teams like Stanford make them look. The Cardinal's Toby Gerhart ran for 223 yards and 3 TD's against them, but the Ducks are third in the Pac-10 in total defense, and a middle of the pack unit (5th) against the rush, giving up 126 yards per game on the ground.

As they do on offense, Oregon stresses speed over size on their defense. They come at you with great height at the defensive tackle positions with a pair of solid performers in Brandon Bair (6'7") and Blake Feras (6'6"). Defensive end Kenny Rowe is the Ducks' sack leader with 8.5 on the season among his 11 tackles for loss. And senior captain Will Tukuafu is a second team all-Pac-10 player who has started 33 consecutive games at defensive end for Oregon.

At middle linebacker, keep an eye on Casey Matthews, another son of former Brown Clay Matthews, who made second team all-Pac-10 in his junior season for the Ducks with 72 tackles, four tackles for loss and 2.5 sacks. Weakside backer Spencer Paysinger matched the 72 tackles of Matthews and made 6.5 tackles for loss.

Injuries have hurt the Ducks in the defensive secondary and they were especially vulnerable to the pass in the second half, giving up 11 touchdown passes in their last five games. Free safety John Boyett led the team in tackles with 78, but it's usually not a good sign when a safety is your leading tackler.

The Buckeyes seem like the wrong team to take advantage of the Ducks' susceptibility to the

pass, but I look for the overall size and strength of the OSU offense to wear down the smaller Ducks over the course of the game, and eventually expose Oregon's weakness in the secondary with a couple of big plays.

OSU Slightly Shorthanded

OSU will be playing without freshman wide receiver Duron Carter, the starting #3 receiver with DeVier Posey and Dane Sanzenbacher. His snaps could be taken by any one of a number of guys in the Rose Bowl, as Taurian Washington, Lamaar Thomas, and Jake Stoneburner have all been getting reps in practice in the 3 and 4-wide sets.

The young Carter can learn from his mistakes, get his academic house in order, and return to play another year, but Ray Small's checkered career at Ohio State has come to an end on a sour note. It almost had to be this way for the kid from Glenville. His suspension from playing in the Rose Bowl for unspecified reasons ends a five-year roller coaster ride in Columbus, during which his productivity never rose to the level of his talent. One hopes he gets his act together in life after college, instead of simply moving from Jim Tressel's perpetual doghouse into someone else's.

Small will be missed most in his role as punt returner for the Bucks. Tressel will put the most reliable set of hands he can find back there on Friday, which means we're likely to see either Posey or Sanzenbacher returning punts. Backup defensive lineman Rob Rose, another senior out of Glenville whose promise was never fully realized at OSU, will also miss his last game as a result of a suspension.

Why I Think Oregon Could Win

- *superior special teams* - for some reason, Tressel's special units have not been up to his own high standards for a couple of years. Oregon has a very solid kicker, and excellent return teams with dangerous speed. For OSU, the starting placekicker is hurt, the punter is mediocre, and the starting punt returner is history.

- *more big play potential on offense* - there's speed to burn on this team, and while the OSU defense is designed to prevent the big play, a few of them are bound to happen, and the Buckeyes will find it hard to overcome more than one quick-strike score.

- *less pressure, more imagination* - two reasons in one, really. The Ducks are bound to be looser than OSU...for obvious reasons. They are more likely, by design and by inclination, to let it all hang out on offense and keep the OSU defense off balance.

Why I Think the Buckeyes Will Win

- *In a close game, I'll take the team with the superior defense* - basically, the essence of Tresselball. Wisconsin just showed Miami how
defense beats speed
.

- *OSU's turnover creation vs. a fumble-prone team in Oregon* - the Buckeyes can beat an opponent up with physical play and brutal hitting. It has a cumulative effect over the course of the game.

- *Pryor at 100%* - OSU coaches masked Pryor's ankle injury through the two toughest games of the Big Ten schedule, then babied him through the Michigan game without a problem. Now fully healthy, he has something to prove, and I think he'll do it.

- *not having to play an L.A. team in L.A.* - Oregon plays UCLA in this stadium every other year, but it'll help not to have to play a bowl game in the opponent's home town.

- *Better players* - Let's face it. There's just simply more talent on the Ohio State roster. That has to count for something over the long haul of the football game. I think Ohio State wears down the smaller Ducks as the game goes along, and prevails in the end...

....I see it 27-20 Ohio State.

Links

OSU Athletic Communications - Game Notes (pdf)

2009 OSU Roster

2009 Oregon Roster