We're back with the Buckeye Leaves after a little post-Rose Bowl revelry...grab it while you can I always say. Before it's done we'll catch up on basketball, football recruiting, college football's coaching drama, Terrelle Pryor's turnaround, and whatever loose ends we can tie up. But first, back to that postgame glow....

The solid bowl performance (4-3) by the Big Ten conference made the Buckeyes' Rose Bowl win all the more satisfying, especially since it seemed like the rest of the league was borrowing the Tresselball formula. The sharp turnaround from last year's 1-6 bowl record gives the league some much-needed breathing room after a few years of January mediocrity. Bragging rights don't last for long though...it's like when you beat your arch-rival, you can only celebrate for...uh...six yea....okay, bad example. Back to the rest of the Big Ten momentarily, after some Buckeye talk...

Pryor's Turning Point

It's hard to argue with Musburger's comment during the bowl telecast that Terrelle Pryor has been the most scrutinized player in college football for the last two seasons. Every move he has made has been chronicled, critiqued and compared to what perfection might have looked like. In hindsight now, it's a lot easier to see how Tressel has spoon-fed his young charge over two seasons, giving him only as much responsibility as he thought he could handle, often reining him in, both to protect him physically and to make him conform to the system.

That system, after all, is the reason Pryor came to Ohio State. I tire of hearing people say he is mismatched somehow, for the OSU offense. Pryor has always been clear that he wants to become an NFL quarterback. He either will or he won't, but he's not in the wrong place to find out.

To me, the palpable relief that was evident in Pryor (and the whole OSU team) after the Rose

Bowl win reflected even more clearly the tremendous pressure he has been under since he first took a snap in Columbus, as the No. 1 player in the country, starting as a freshman quarterback for the Ohio State Buckeyes. That pressure is under-appreciated by a lot of people, I think. But the good news is that Pryor now seems to be over that hump, and the 2010 football season at OSU will begin with a refreshed faith in Tresselball...and a confident and special offensive talent playing quarterback.

At least now we can all stop talking about what position he *really* ought to be playing.

Pryor went through fits and starts in his development over two years, but the value of his first two years of college football is measured in wins for the program, and by that measure, any criticism of his performance, or of his handling by Jim Tressel sort of rings hollow. Up until January 1, the consensus nationally, and in many quarters of Buckeye Nation too, was that Pryor was having a disappointing 2009 season.

And he *did* struggle, as Tressel experimented with offensive identities for his team early in the season. Pryor's 2009 progress, when it was discernible at all, was frustratingly slow considering the expectations. The Purdue game *was* a disaster, but it will forever mark the season's turning point, and the win streak since that game is at six and counting.

For Pryor, the only results that really mattered were an 11-2 season, a conference championship, and a BCS bowl game win for his team. That followed a 10-3 season and a Big Ten co-championship in his freshman year. All told , Pryor is now 19-3 as the starting quarterback at Ohio State, with 3,405 yards passing and 30 TD passes, to go with his 1,410 yards rushing with 13 rushing TD's. The total yardage figure of 4,815 yards already ranks him 11th all-time among OSU players. Disappointing?

So, two years to play...probably. Nobody is assuming any longer that Pryor will go pro early. What can we look forward to now that he has a few things figured out? We got a glimpse two weeks ago...the halfway point of his OSU career...and it was good for an MVP award. And those of us who watch him every week know full well that he had a *good* game that day in Pasadena, not a great one. The expectation that his great games are probably still in front of him is the kind of thing that keeps me riveted to this sport. I suspect there are a lot of us that feel that way.

I'm not trying to compare Pryor's productivity with some of the great sophomore seasons by quarterbacks in even the recent past...Heisman campaigns by Tebow and Bradford come to mind...but the contrast between his early struggles and the season-ending success is what's remarkable. Now is when the dividends start to be paid, according to the master plan. The benefits of having a quarterback with 22 starts under his belt are immeasurable when you're starting out a season with national title aspirations. And in 2010, these Buckeyes will be doing exactly that.

Ohio State will probably be ranked in the top three or four in the preseason polls, based partly

on 16 returning starters, but also on Pryor's Rose Bowl MVP performance. Every Buckeye fan knows that all the ups and downs of the past two seasons with Pryor have been geared toward being ready for 2010. So let the buzz begin!

Tressel has noticeably restricted media access to Pryor, and after Rose Bowl week it was easy to see why. Tressel and his staff had successfully kept under wraps the fact of Pryor's knee injury, a PCL strain, until Pryor himself mentioned it in his one media opportunity during bowl week. Later Tressel lamented the fact that there wasn't a whole lot he could do about it if the player chose to disclose an injury before a game, even if the staff had kept it completely off the media and opposition radar...for weeks.

The Big Ten's Comeback...and 2010 Outlook

The top four teams in the Big Ten all won their bowl games, (with Northwestern a kicker short of making it five) and they all did it with physical, relentless defense. The speed games of Miami, Oregon and LSU looked downright ordinary against the Big Ten's best, and Georgia Tech's triple-option rushing attack didn't prove complicated enough to confuse the Iowa Hawkeyes for long either. Jesse's bowl season wrap up is a must, by the way, if you missed it on the front page.

It looks from here like Wisconsin and Iowa will be the stiffest Big Ten competition for the Buckeyes next year, especially since they're both road games for OSU.

The Badgers have their entire offense back except for tight end Garrett Graham, and Scott Tolzien was playing as well as any quarterback in the conference in the second half of 2009. Granted, that may say more about the degraded state of quarterback play in the Big Ten than it does about Tolzien's brilliance, but he's solid....and it helps a lot to have John Clay lining up behind him. They could win it if the defense gels...and if they beat the Bucks in Madison on October 16. Barring a big early upset, the Buckeyes should be 6-0 going in.

(Quick, name a Big Ten quarterback, including the graduating Clark, Williams, Elliott and Kafka, that you think is a good bet to be an NFL QB within 3-5 years....on my list I'm not getting much past maybe Pryor and maybe Vandenberg)

Iowa loses a lot...like four of five O-line starters and their two best linebackers, but Ricky Stanzi and James Vandenberg are both back at QB, and the running back situation is good, with Jewel Hampton back to join Robinson and Wehger. Coach Ferentz will be sure to have a solid offensive line assembled by the time the Bucks visit on November 20, but it's tough to envision them getting to November unbeaten again with a group that green up front. DE Adrian Clayborn is the real deal on the Hawkeye defense and he'll have eight other starters back with him. They'll be the sexy pick in August for all the perennial Buckeye-doubters around the country.

After those two challengers, Penn State, Northwestern and Michigan State are all capable of making a move, but I think all three are just as likely to run in place as they are to step up. Penn State goes to Alabama in September, so we'll find out early what they're made of. Tony Gerdeman has a look ahead to 2010 in the Big Ten at the O-Zone if you want to go deeper than that.

Postseason Honors

OSU seniors defensive tackle Doug Worthington and offensive lineman Jim Cordle will be playing in the East-West Shrine Game on Jan. 23 at the Citrus Bowl in Orlando. (3 pm, ESPN2) *(Hope they have a new playing surface down there. That field for PSU-LSU was a disgrace.)*

Safety Kurt Coleman has accepted an invitation to play in the Under Armour Senior Bowl, on Jan. 30 in Mobile AL. (4 pm, NFL Network)

OSU kicker Aaron Pettrey has been invited to the Texas vs the Nation All Star Game, to be played Feb. 6, at the Sun Bowl in El Paso. (2 pm, CBS College Sports)

Coaches Behaving Badly

I'm not going to get into a long diatribe (at least not right at the moment) about coaches bailing on contracts, abandoning recruiting classes, or leaving town just ahead of NCAA sanctions. But when you see coaches bolting for huge dollars after good seasons (Brian Kelly) or bad ones (Pete Carroll)...and you watch the opportunist programs swooping down to pick over those schools' disappointed recruits...and you see great universities scrambling to hire coaches in under a week to save face with boosters and recruits....well...

...doesn't it make you appreciate Ohio State having Jim Tressel? Staid, serious, calm, quiet, reliable, loyal, stable, 10-wins-a-year Jim Tressel? It does for me.

What are you doing to my Opener?

OSU has announced that the 2010 season opener against Marshall has been moved up two days, and will be played on Thursday night, Sept. 2nd, instead of Saturday Sept. 4th.

If you ask me (and I somehow missed Gene Smith's call to ask my opinion) it's not a good thing.

The OSU opener is supposed to kick off at noon on a sunny, hot September Saturday in Columbus, and I resent the intrusion of new realities on my honored Fall traditions.

My first reaction on hearing the news was to blame the usual suspects...the growing crass commercialization of college sport...the sellout to TV and the big money that comes with it...you know...*et tu, JT?*

So I was a little surprised, if not completely satisfied, to learn that it's really not about money after all. At least that's what OSU Athletic Director Gene Smith and Tressel are saying by way of explanation for the decision. As Rob Oller of the *Dispatch* reports in his column Friday, the OSU braintrust has given this a lot of thought. This excerpt from the column starts with a quote from Smith...

"Jim (Tressel) and I chatted ... and we wanted to do this to help the team get off to a good start," Smith said, adding that the Sept. 2 kickoff gives OSU an extra two days to prepare for its Sept. 11 game against the University of Miami....But Smith also said that other positives included cooler game-time temperatures and a freed up Labor Day Saturday for fans and game-day operation workers.

On the matter of TV money, Smith added..

"Our real focus had nothing to do with TV," Smith said, explaining that OSU will not benefit financially from the move because the Big Ten, which has yet to choose a network carrier, receives no additional money from a night game.

I had not known that. Not sure I like the decision any better now that I do, but at least I understand the thinking.

2010 Football Recruiting Update

We're in the home stretch for 2010 football recruiting ...two weeks from signing day, and the

drama is not yet over for the Coach Tressel and the OSU program. The Buckeyes remain in the hunt for at least two players ranked as the best at their positions in the country. If it ended right now, the OSU class would probably be rated in the top 20, but probably not in the top 10. That could all change with the addition of a couple more big names.

Jordan Hicks , from West Chester Lakota West, the nation's #1-ranked outside linebacker, is a guy that had been pretty much written off months ago by OSU recruiting experts, because his long-standing interest in Texas (and USC?) was well known, and having recently moved to the Cincinnati area, he had never shown a particularly strong interest in Ohio State.

But Tressel has been persistent, and two very credible recruiting experts this week leaked word that Hicks had made the decision to stay close to home, and would commit to, and enroll early at OSU this March. Reportedly, Hicks was upset when this report went public on several OSU Internet forums, and all has been quiet since then. He could still end up in Austin, but if Tressel pulls this one off, it's a major coup, and would be sort of like found money for the program.

Top-ranked offensive tackle Seantrel Henderson of St. Paul, MN has been watching the coaching drama unfold at a few of his final college options, as Urban Meyer is up in the air at Florida and Pete Carroll has flown the coop at USC. All that movement and uncertainty is doing nothing but helping Ohio State land the 6' 8", 338 lb. blue-chipper. Right now, the Buckeyes look like the odds-on favorites be the last team standing.

Glenville cornerback Christian Bryant (Scout #7 CB, Rivals #6 DB) will become a Buckeye by signing day, or every single OSU recruiting junkie will eat his hat.

Matt James , the 4-star offensive lineman from Cincinnati St. Xavier, is reportedly down to OSU and Notre Dame, with the Buckeyes maintaining a slight edge in advance of his visit to South Bend this weekend. With just one offensive lineman in the class so far (Andrew Norwell), OSU is hoping to land both Henderson and James to get their ideal number of OL's.

The 2010 recruiting class reached 17 this week with the addition of cornerback Bradley Roby , from Peachtree, GA, who had previously verbaled to Vanderbilt, but recently opened things back up. At 6' 1", 170 lbs, he has the requisite height for OSU corners, but has limited experience at the position, having spent most of his prep years as a receiver. He's got very good straight-line speed (4.34) and excellent ball skills. He's probably a developmental corner at OSU.

The other recent commit for the 2010 class was Jonathan Hankins , a 6' 3", 310 lb. defensive tackle from Detroit, who verbaled to the Buckeyes on Jan. 5. Hankins shot up the recruiting rankings late, and the Buckeyes were in a battle with Michigan, Oklahoma and Florida to land the lineman.

Hankins' verbal eases somewhat the pain of losing Sharrif Floyd to the Florida Gators. Floyd, the #1 defensive tackle in the country was rumored for weeks to have decided on OSU when Urban Meyer turned his head in a phone conversation the day after Meyer announced his resignation. Meyer reportedly told the kid he had a vision in a dream the night before *(I am not*

making this up)
that he was on the sidelines coaching Floyd. There's more, but you get the idea. The flattered Floyd committed to the Gators at the Army All-Star game last weekend.

Can you imagine in your wildest dreams Jim Tressel engaging in this kind of flim-flammery with an 18-year old kid? Thought not.

A Season Saver

The Ohio State basketball team went into West Lafayette Tuesday night to face 6th-ranked Purdue, with a 1-3 Big Ten record, and in danger of falling out of the conference race almost before it got going. When Boilermakers' star Robbie Hummel threw in eight 3-pointers for 29 first half points, matching the Buckeyes' team total for the half, it looked like...well, like the other three conference road losses for Ohio State. The Boilermakers (14-2, 2-2) had a 62-52 lead with 4:07 to play, plus the advantage of a raucous home crowd intent on burying the Buckeyes.

That's when Evan Turner just took over the game. Turner scored all ten points in the ensuing 10-0 Buckeye run that tied the game, and Thad Matta's press forced several Purdue turnovers down the stretch, as the Buckeyes held on for a 70-66 win . Turner finished with a career high 32 points, 23 in the second half, as Ohio State (12-5, 2-3) overcame a 13-point deficit to at least temporarily salvage their Big Ten chances.

The good news for Ohio State is that they have four conference road games out of the way, leaving eight home games left on the Big Ten slate, with just five more on the road. And Turner, whose season, if not his career, was in doubt when he fractured two vertebrae on Dec. 5, is back healthy, and once again being touted as a Top 3 pick in the NBA draft.

It took Matta more than half the game to get out of the 1-3-1 zone that Hummel was shredding from long range, but once he put David Lighty on Hummel man-to-man, the Boilermaker sharpshooter was held to six second half points as the Buckeyes climbed back into the game. William Buford, who thus far this season has been campaigning to have his picture in the dictionary under "sophomore slump", finally found his shooting stroke, (7 of 10 FG) and chipped in with 19 points and 7 boards.

Till next time folks....Go Bucks!