(This is the last in a series of previews of the key matchups on the 2010 OSU football schedule. Today: Ohio State at Iowa, Nov. 20, 2010. See the rest of the series linked below)

It's only June, but the anticipation is already building for the 2010 Ohio State football season. The Buckeyes are sure to be ranked in the top five coming out of the gate, and as high as No. 2 in the eyes of some of the pundits. As meaningless as those opinions seem in advance of any actual football, they do carry *some* weight.

If you start out assuming (as Jesse does in his 2010 schedule preview) that OSU will have to win all 12 games to get an invitation to play for the BCS championship, then it's clearly preferable to start out at No. 2 than, say...No. 6. That way you can take care of your own business without as much concern for what the other teams are doing. In other words, a lot of things have to go your way over 13 weeks for the preseason rankings to become meaningful...but it *can* work out that way.

Yes...heady talk, I know. But as I say repeatedly...these are the good old days for Ohio State football. The measure of success, this year at least, is *going undefeated*. We could be up north wagering on the day our coach gets fired. This is more fun...as idle speculation goes.

Four games jumped out at us from the 2010 OSU schedule for this series of previews...the Sept. 11 visit to Columbus by the University of Miami , the Oct 16 date in Madison against Wisconsin , the November 13 home date with Penn State , and the trip to Iowa City on November 20.

The November schedule for Ohio State in 2010 is identical to last year's slate, with Penn State, Iowa and Michigan closing out the regular season. And with the Wolverines doing their level best to prepare us for the post-expansion era in the Big Ten...when OSU-Michigan will be anti-climactic *every* year...Iowa is once again asserting itself as a legitimate challenger for the conference title.

You can be sure the Hawkeyes will remember that empty feeling in their guts as they watched Devin Barclay's overtime field goal sail through the uprights last year as the Buckeyes' clinched their fifth straight Big Ten title in heart-stopping fashion at the Horseshoe. If you'll recall, the chances of Ohio State repeating as conference champs had seemed pretty slim just a week before that game.

Iowa had staged a number of fantastic fourth quarter finishes over the course of the season, and entered November with a 9-0 record and a No. 4 national ranking. The conference favorite Ohio State had already stumbled at Purdue, and the Hawkeyes were sitting in the proverbial catbird's seat, with a full game lead over the Buckeyes. They were about to find out what it's like when you're on top, and everybody is gunning for you.

The week before the anticipated OSU matchup, the Northwestern Wildcats came into Iowa City and stunned the Hawkeyes 17-10, as the Wildcats' Corey Wootten knocked Iowa QB Ricky Stanzi out of the game in the second quarter with an ankle injury on a sack for a defensive touchdown. The catbird's seat had proven too hot to handle.

The Hawkeyes then came into Columbus and played Ohio State tough , with redshirt freshman quarterback James Vandenberg playing like a veteran in place of the injured Stanzi, but in the end they didn't have enough to knock off the Buckeyes. (ESPN Game Wrap)

They'll have several holes to fill this year from that 2009 team that finished 11-2 and beat Georgia Tech in the Orange Bowl , but the Hawkeyes have plenty of cause for optimism as they look ahead to 2010.

The Iowa offense returns most of their key skill position performers from last year with the exception of tight end Tony Moeaki. Stanzi is back for his senior year at quarterback, with Vandenberg more than capable as his backup. It wouldn't surprise me a bit to see Vandenberg getting lots of playing time come November.

At running back, Iowa had two kids come on strong as freshmen in 2009, after Shonn Greene graduated and presumed starter Jewel Hampton went down with a knee injury and missed the season. Adam Robinson (834 yd, 5 TD in '09) and Brandon Wehger (641 yds, 8 TD) are both smaller backs, but very quick...and still learning. Hampton, now a junior, will deal with consequences of a recent DUI arrest before he gets back on the field this fall.

At wide receiver, both Derrell Johnson-Koulianos and Marvin McNutt are back for 2010, and both gave the Buckeyes fits in last year's game. In fact, the two accounted for all three Iowa touchdowns, as Johnson-Koulianos ran a 4th quarter kickoff back 99 yards for a TD to get the Hawkeyes back within seven points, and McNutt caught two game-tying touchdowns, the last with 2:42 remaining in regulation. Iowa was really the only team all year to expose the OSU

cornerbacks down the field in the passing game.

In fact it's fair to say that overall, no offense executed as well against Ohio State as Iowa did in 2009. The Hawkeyes offensive line pretty much handled the celebrated Buckeye defensive front all game long, allowing Vandenberg (20 of 33, 233 yds, 2 TD) plenty of time to throw. He was sacked just once in the game...(the one by Cam Heyward in OT that essentially sealed the win). Whatever Kirk Ferentz did with his offensive line that day, it worked. But that line is 80% gone.

Both standout offensive tackles, Brian Bulaga and Kyle Calloway have moved on, and just one starter returns on the offensive front. So they'll be young on that line, but you know they'll be well-coached. It's a Kirk Ferentz specialty.

There will be green spots on the Iowa defense as well. Leading tacklers Pat Angerer and A.J. Edds are gone from the linebacking corps, and they'll miss Amari Spievey, who went pro early, at cornerback. But a very strong defensive line returns intact, with preseason All-American Adrian Clayborn at defensive end, and Karl Klug, a potential all-conference player at tackle, leading the way.

Depending on which experts you're reading, Iowa's defensive front is rated as high as No. 1 in college football for 2010, and they're in everyone's top five. DT Christian Ballard and DE Broderick Binns round out the starters for the Hawkeyes, but Clayborn is the force to be really concerned about. Right now he's NFL Top 5 pick material.

For sure we'll be watching the best two defensive lines in the Big Ten on November 20 in Iowa City. Probably the two best individual defensive linemen in the conference as well, in Clayborn and Playboy All-American Cam Heyward. Without even pretending to be impartial, I'll say I give the edge to Heyward based on his versatility to play anywhere on the defensive front and be effective. Heyward is probably NFL Top 10 pick material right now too. This will be fun to watch.

The Iowa secondary will be very good again, with Brett Greenwood and All-Big Ten Tyler Sash returning at the safeties. Again, they'll be young in spots, but they'll also have ten games behind them by the time we're carving the turkey. This defense just needs to find a couple of linebackers in order to become very good. Jeff Tarpinian might be one of those linebackers. He was absolutely killing people on special teams last year.

This figures to be a very tough game for the Buckeyes to win, even if Iowa comes in at 8-2 or 7-3. The Hawkeyes have an early test at Arizona in September, but the schedule shapes up very nicely for them after that, with their three toughest conference opponents (OSU, PSU, Wisconsin) coming to Iowa City.

Opinions vary widely on how good Iowa will be in 2010. I've seen them rated in the Top 10, and

then not even in the Top 20. Some say they weren't as good as their record last year, and that their losses on the offensive line and at linebacker weaken them considerably in 2010. That's not the way I see it.

Whatever inexperience Ferentz has on the offensive line should be coached up by Game 11, and the defense should keep them in every game. I see them as one of the top three teams in the Big Ten, along with OSU and Wisconsin. And I don't see another game on the Buckeyes' schedule that looks more like a potential "L" than this one.