Saturday, September 11, 2010

Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio

University of Miami at Ohio State

3:40 p.m. (ET)

TV: ESPN

The 12th-ranked Miami Hurricanes roll into Columbus Saturday on a mission to show the nation they're back as an elite college football program...and oh, by the way, word is they're still smarting a bit from the way Ohio State brought their 34-game winning streak to a sudden, screeching halt after the 2002 season...you know, by outplaying them .

For their part, the 2nd-ranked Buckeyes have their own 2010 mission to attend to, and these OSU players are not about to let an eight year-old grudge from their junior high school years divert them from it. Emotions on both sides are at a very high pitch for an early September date. But then, OSU fans are becoming accustomed to this kind of early season drama here in the Tressel years.

BCS berths and national championship hopes on the line...national tube...105,000 noisy partisans on hand...two supremely gifted athletes competing at the quarterback position...of such things are great college football matchups made. The hope now is that the game itself matches the hype.

(For more on this week's OSU-Miami matchup, see our previous article on the game from this May)

Let it Go

There's no need to rehash any much further "The Call", or the eight years of whining emanating from Miami and elsewhere about it. It has been vindicated as correct for all but the most stubbornly unpersuadable. (Late, yes. Wrong, no.)

That the Miami coaches might use the lingering resentment at having been somehow done wrong in that game to help motivate their players this Saturday is to be expected. It might even work.

What is less noticed or appreciated, when you talk about lingering resentment, is just how much the endless carping about how they didn't deserve the national championship of the 2002 season gets under the skin of the Ohio State Buckeyes, motivating them to make a statement of their own this Saturday...to wit: "Just shut the hell up already!"

It will be good to have all the commentary and the resentment and the nostalgia and the hype set aside at 3:40 p.m. on Saturday, and have the outcome decided by today's players and coaches, and perhaps assisted by today's fans. With any luck, the controversy goes away after this weekend.

Sure.

The 2010 Canes

Miami was 9-4 in 2009, and much like the Buckeyes, they view 2010 as the season they've been gearing up for, in Miami's case since 2007, when Head Coach Randy Shannon took over the program. They return 13 starters from a 2009 team that got off to a fast start with wins over FSU, Georgia Tech and Oklahoma, but then fell to Clemson and North Carolina later in the season to take a little bit of luster off of their regular season campaign.

Then they got manhandled by Wisconsin in the Champs Sports Bowl , scoring in the game's first minute, and then again with just 1:22 left in the game, making the 20-14 final appear closer than the game really was, as the Badgers dominated them 20-0 during the intervening 57 minutes.

Miami under Shannon has been recruiting extremely well in talent-rich south Florida, and they have upgraded the roster considerably in the last three recruiting classes. There are potential All-American candidates at defensive end, cornerback and several offensive skill positions. The Hurricanes have good reason to feel confident about the state of their football program relative to where they were three or four years ago.

Gale Warnings

The Hurricanes are loaded at the skill positions, and they'll provide a stern test for the OSU defense. Leading the Canes on offense is their version of the dynamic junior quarterback, Jacory Harris , a 6' 4", 200 lb. dropback passer who threw for 3352 yards, with 24 TD's and 17 interceptions and a 59.6% completion percentage a year ago. He is not the threat to run with the ball that Pryor is, but his receiving corps and a deep group of running backs have made that unnecessary.

Playing just half the game in Miami's 45-0 rout of Florida A&M last week, Harris was 12 of 15 for 210 yards and three TD's. He is very quick and elusive in the pocket, and although he's not asked to run much, he is quite capable of hurting a defense by scrambling. He'll spread the ball around to the backs out of the backfield as the receivers stretch the defense downfield, and his throwing arm is strong and accurate. Here's a video to give you a look at Harris in a big game performance last year.

There's a ton of depth at both running back and wide receiver on the 2010 Canes, giving Harris lots of options on offense. Damien Berry (2009 - 661 yds, 8 TD, 6.6 ypc) leads a strong group of returning ball carriers, and he's backed by redshirt freshman Lamar Miller, who led Miami in rushing last week with 65 yards on 11 carries with a touchdown. Sophomore Mike James had just 15 carries in 2009, but had six for 36 yards with a TD against FAMU last week.

The talented Miami receiving corps is headlined by Leonard Hankerson , a 6' 3", 205 lb. senior who piled up 68 receptions for 1,119 yards and 11 TD's in 2009, and came out of the gate quickly in the opener, with six catches for 115 yards and two TD's in the FAMU game.

Hankerson is capably backed by Travis Benjamin (29 rec, 501 yds, 5 TD in '09), Aldarius Johnson (16 rec, 275 yds, 1 TD) and LaRon Byrd (33 rec, 460, 1 TD). Hankerson, Benjamin and Johnson all averaged over 17 yards per catch, so you know these guys are getting open down the field and making big plays. The Canes also sport a couple of big, athletic tight ends in starter Richard Gordon and Chase Ford, and they'll be looking to get those guys involved in the passing game as well.

The question marks for the 2010 Hurricanes offense are on the offensive line, where they lost three starters from last season, and can't match the experience they have at the skill positions. Starting left tackle Orlando Franklin is the veteran on that line, and he's been moved over from guard where he had been a two-year starter. Left guard Harland Gunn had five starts a year ago, but center Tyler Horn and right tackle Ben Jones both got their first collegiate starts last week against FAMU. Returning starter Joel Figueroa (at guard in 2009) could line up at the RT spot, but he was held out last week with an injury.

Bottom line: lots of inexperience on the line for the Canes as they try to hold back a very good Buckeye defensive front, and establish a running attack to keep Ohio State honest. As usual, the game will be decided in the trenches, and in this matchup you have to give the Buckeyes defensive line an edge going in.

Playmakers on Defense

Miami will reportedly be trying to force Terrelle Pryor to beat them with his passing instead of his running. Time will tell if that is a sound plan, but they have plenty of defensive line and secondary talent to try to implement it. Preseason All-American defensive end Allen Bailey is the best-known name in the front seven for the Canes, but his running mate, sophomore Olivier Vernon made a big splash in the opener with seven tackles and 3.5 sacks, so he's a guy to keep an eye on too.

Senior Josh Holmes is a returning starter at defensive tackle, and the other inside spot is held down by sophomore Marcus Fortson, a blue-chip recruit from 2008 who missed most of 2009 with an injury. This D-line unit is rated as one of the best in the nation, so the OSU offensive linemen will have to take it up a notch or two, even as they come off a very good showing against Marshall.

At linebacker, Colin McCarthy had 95 tackles a year ago, and he'll man the middle, while Sean Spence (36 tackles, 3 sacks) returns on the weak side. Ramon Buchanan looks like the probable starter on the strong side.

In the secondary, cornerback Brandon Harris is a big time player, and the safeties, returning starter Vaughn Telemaque and converted corner Ray-Ray Armstrong are another strength of the defense.

This is a fairly experienced and talented group overall on defense for Miami, and at least one-deep, they're strong enough to give the Buckeyes some trouble moving the ball. They'll play a standard 4-3 set, with seven starters returning on that side of the ball.

Bucks Are Healthy

The best news out of Columbus this week was that defensive end Nate Williams is back practicing and looks like he's ready to go on Saturday. The coaches may limit the number of plays he's in there, but he appears to be close to 100%. They'll need him too. Facing the powerful vertical passing attack of Miami, the Buckeyes must put heat on Harris or he'll hurt them.

The only injury to report is a relatively minor one, as backup center Corey Linsley has an ankle sprain, and will probably not be playing this week.

What I think we'll see Saturday.....

- More blitzing by the Buckeyes than we saw against Marshall. Tyler Moeller harassed the Herd quarterback with several blitzes, but for the most part, Jim Heacock kept it simple, and tried to pressure the QB with his front four. OSU had just the one sack (by Moeller) in the game against the quick 3-step dropping spread attack of the Herd, but I expect Heacock to unleash a variety of blitzes this week to keep the heat on Jacory Harris. I expect to see Brian Rolle, Ross Homan, Moeller and an occasional corner or safety coming at the Miami QB, with someone coming on almost every play.

- The key matchup I'll be watching, and one that could decide the game, is the Miami wide

receivers against the OSU cornerbacks. It pits the strength of the Miami offense against the most vulnerable and, so far, most inconsistent area of the Buckeyes' defense. If Cam Heyward and Nate Williams aren't up in the face of Harris all night exploiting the Miami inexperience at offensive tackle, then OSU corners Chekwa and Torrence could have a long and frustrating night.

- Miami will try to run the football, but they have not proven to be a very proficient rushing team, even with some very talented tailbacks on the roster. They won't have much success rushing against the Buckeyes either, but I do think their running backs could hurt the Bucks in the passing game. Miami likes to hit their backs on quick releases, short crossing patterns and screens, and they are very good after they get the ball in space.

- If Miami's top cornerback Brandon Harris is able to somewhat neutralize DeVier Posey in coverage, Pryor will have to find and connect with other targets. Wisconsin tight ends had a field day in the bowl game against these Canes in January, so you might look for a big day from Jake Stoneburner as a primary target down the middle for Pryor.

- More read-option by Pryor, including calling his own number in the rushing attack. Pryor had only 17 rushing yards against Marshall. He could have several times that many on Saturday.

- I expect the Buckeyes to struggle early running the ball, but the offensive line has shown so much more cohesion and precision in their blocking this year and late last year, that I think they'll start to break off some successful running plays as the O-line gets the feel for what Miami is doing defensively, and Saine and Boom get warmed up.

- As Ross Fulton has pointed out in a game preview post at the OSU blog Along the Olentangy , the Canes are primarily a play-action passing team. They got about 60% of their passing yardage in 2009 on *first down* , much of it on play action plays out of tight, run-look formations. The Bucks may be forced to "play the run on the way to the quarterback". Again, the OSU cornerbacks and safeties will be under a lot of pressure, and Heacock's ability to adjust and stop the dangerous downfield passing attack of Miami will be a key storyline in this contest.

I expect the Buckeyes to be better at running the ball than Miami, and the OSU defense should be able to take advantage of the Canes' youth on the O-line enough to make the difference. Harris will make some big plays in the passing game, but I like the Buckeyes to come out on top with a strong game from Terrelle Pryor showing off a balanced run-pass mix.

I've got it OSU 30, Miami 17

Like the man said...nostalgia's not what it used to be....but...

Links:

OSU Game Notes (pdf)

2010 OSU Roster

2010 Miami Roster

SI interviews Jim Tressel

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