Saturday, September 18, 2010

Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio

Ohio University at Ohio State

12:00 p.m. (ET)

TV: Big Ten Network (BTN)

The 2nd-ranked Ohio State Buckeyes host the Bobcats of Ohio University Saturday at the Horseshoe, and unless their collective memory is very short, there's no chance they'll be

overconfident. How could they be?

A mere two Septembers ago, Ohio State was ranked No. 3 in the country, and came into their Week Two matchup with the visiting Bobcats as a 33-point favorite. Three quarters into that game Ohio U. led the lifeless Buckeyes 14-12, before an interception and a couple of special teams plays bailed out the home team in the final period.

If ever a victory can be said to be humbling, that comeback 26-14 win over a bad Ohio University team in 2008 was a textbook example. It exposed some of the weaknesses of that Buckeye squad, notably the previously overrated offensive line, and it may have contributed to a crisis of confidence going forward from that point.

The week prior they had lost Beanie Wells to injury in their opener against YSU, and then a week after the Ohio U. squeaker, they were humiliated by the USC Trojans in what may have been the low point of the Jim Tressel decade. Their sky-high preseason hopes shattered, the coaching staff turned to freshman quarterback Terrelle Pryor the following week, and the teenager started his first game in Scarlet and Gray in Week Four as the Buckeyes set about trying to salvage the season.

All was not lost of course, as Ohio State did turn things around, winning a share of the Big Ten championship and landing a BCS bowl berth against Texas, but the lessons of the 2008 Ohio U. game were not lost on the talented group of freshmen that today forms the core of the 2010 Buckeyes. They were not mentally, physically or emotionally ready to play that sunny September day(*), and it almost cost them a game that should never have been close. I suspect they'll take the field Saturday with a much sharper "edge" to their game. If they don't...well, shame on the coaching staff.

Postponing No. 500

Ohio State (2-0) is undefeated in six contests against Ohio U., and they'll have to make it seven straight if they are to prevent the Bobcats from celebrating the 500th win in Ohio University football history.
Hopes were high in Athens for the 2010 season as sixth-year head coach Frank Solich and his Bobcats were coming off a 9-5 season, a MAC East Division championship and a bowl bid. They downed Wofford, an FCS program, 33-10 in their opener, but dropped their first conference game last week to Toledo by a 20-13 count.

Not much went right for the Bobcats offensively in the Toledo game, as they turned the ball over

four times, three on interceptions by quarterback Boo Jackson, and struggled mightily to run the football. A game this week against a Buckeye defense leading the nation in turnover margin, and specializing in stuffing the run cannot bode well for this O.U. offense.

Jackson played in the 2008 game with OSU, coming off the bench in relief of the injured Theo Scott that day, and he rushed for 55 yards on seven carries for the Bobcats, and completed 9 of 25 passes for 86 yards as well. But he also threw three interceptions in that game, which helped the Buckeyes pull it out late.

Bringing A Knife to a Gun Fight?

Both Jackson and Bobcat backup Phil Bates are dual threat type QB's with quickness and scrambling ability. Against Toledo last week Jackson went 17 for 27, for 137 yards passing with one TD and those three picks. He'll have to get some major help in the running game if the Bobcats are going to stay in the game beyond halftime on Saturday, and the prospects for that happening aren't too good.

Ohio U. was one of the worst teams in the FBS at running the football in 2009, and their top running back graduated. This year, senior Vince Davidson and redshirt freshman Ryan Boykin will be getting the carries for the Bobcats. Davidson had 260 rushing yards a year ago, but he managed just 22 yards on 12 carries against Toledo last week.

The passing game for Solich and his Bobcats is more potent, and could give OSU some trouble with three talented receivers to go with the mobility at quarterback. They'll play a standard three-wide receiver set, and they have three solid, experienced wideouts to rely on. LaVon Brazill has 109 career receptions and over 1300 receiving yards, and made 2nd team All-MAC in 2009. He and Terrence McCrae (2009: 35 rec, 545 yds, 9 TD) are the one-two punch for the O.U. receiving corps, and they are complemented by junior Riley Dunlop, the leading receiver so far this year with five catches for 57 yards and one TD.

Solich has three starters returning on the offensive line, with both tackles and one guard back from a year ago. How this group performs against the OSU front seven in protecting Jackson may be the key to the Bobcats' chances Saturday. The Buckeyes knocked the Ohio U. starting quarterback Theo Scott out of the game two years ago, and they put the limp on Miami's Jacory Harris last week. Jackson needs to avoid repeated contact with John Simon, Nate Williams and Cam Heyward Saturday, or throwing interceptions will be the least of his worries.

Bobcat Defense Their Best Unit

Not unlike both Marshall and Miami, the Ohio U. defensive line is probably the strength of their team. It begins with senior defensive ends Dak Notestine (6' 3", 261) and Stafford Gatling (6'4, 249). Notestine had 65 tackles and 6.5 sacks a year ago, while Gatling contributed 45 tackles and 7.5 TFL.

Two seniors start at the tackles as well, with Marcellis Williamson and Ernie Hodge lining up in the middle of the line. There is plenty of depth along the front four at both tackle and end, and that group has been effective enough to make a solid group of Bobcat linebackers look even better.

Senior middle backer Noah Keller is the best of the linebacker group, a 2nd team All-MAC player in 2009 who racked up 155 tackles a year ago. First-time starters will be manning the outside linebacker spots, with Eric Benjamin and Alphonso Lewis drawing those assignments.

For the Ohio U. defensive secondary, Saturday game will offer a family affair matchup as the Posey brothers square off against each other. Senior Bobcat cornerback Julian Posey will have to cover his younger brother, OSU wide receiver DeVier, making for the kind of human interest story sideline reporters like Charissa Thompson can usually only dream about.

The defensive backfield for the Bobcats will feature several first-time starters, including Posey and the other corner, sophomore Travis Carrie. Safety Gerald Moore led the team with six interceptions a year ago, but he missed last week's game with an injury. Two more senior safeties, Steven Jackson and Donovan Fletcher have stepped in for the Bobcats, giving the entire O.U. defense a veteran look.

Two Buckeye Starters Out

Ohio State will be without two defensive starters from the Miami game, as sophomore safety C.J. Barnett's knee injury necessitated surgery, and in all probability he has been lost for the season. Redshirt freshman Orhian Johnson will get the start in place of Barnett. Johnson had been the presumed starter at safety coming into summer camp before he went down with a minor calf injury, and Barnett played so well in his place that he remained the starter for the 2010 opener.

Starting strongside linebacker Andrew Sweat will probably also be held out of Saturday's game due to an unspecified injury suffered in the Miami game. Jim Tressel said this week that Sweat's injury is unrelated to the offseason knee surgery that kept him out of spring football. Jonathan Newsome, a sophomore from Glenville, will take over the Sam linebacker duties when the OSU defense is in their base 4-3 look, but will come off the field when they go to five DB's in the nickel package.

Special Teams Test

The OSU kick coverage units will be getting some well-deserved scrutiny this week after giving up two long touchdowns in what has become something of a trend over their last four or five games. OSU coaches hinted at some possible personnel changes on those teams for this week, suggesting that Jordan Hall and/or Dan Herron might make appearances on coverage teams, *(although adding two running backs probably wouldn't have been the type of additions I envisioned, but incredibly, they didn't call me for input....)* .

Ohio U. has a good punt returner in LaVon Brazill, who had three returns for TD's in 2009, and a 13.5 yd return average. Julian Posey is a capable returner on kickoffs for the Bobcats as well, so we'll see if, or how much the Buckeyes have improved in those areas. I think it's a good bet they'll be kicking off more than they're punting on Saturday.

Prognosticating....

I'm not anticipating an emotional letdown for the Buckeyes, even after the hype and intensity that surrounded the Miami matchup last week. For all the aforementioned reasons, I just can't see the OSU coaches allowing the team to look past this, or any of the next four games (Ohio U., E. Michigan, Illinois, Indiana) in which the Bucks will be heavy favorites. I expect a businesslike approach and a methodical thumping of the outmanned Bobcats.

The mobility of the O.U. quarterbacks and the experience at receiver may be enough to generate one touchdown against the OSU defense, but probably no more than that. The Silver Bullets have given up one touchdown in two full games. A shutout here wouldn't surprise me a bit.

Ohio State is one of just four FBS teams to have played two games without suffering a turnover. If Ohio U. can't break that streak, their longshot gets even longer.

I expect Pryor to run considerably less than the 20 carries (a career high) he had against Miami. I think the offensive staff will concentrate on refining and executing the short to intermediate passing game, and will try to get several running backs some work on the ground.

My crystal ball is telling me it'll be something like 37-6 Buckeyes. I'm not even going back to see what it was telling me two years ago.

(*) I remember that sunny September day in 2008 like it was yesterday, as it was one of the rare occasions on which the Ohio State game is not the focus of my September Saturday. That happened to be the day my darling daughter got married...in Columbus no less...causing many of my friends to ask just what in the world they could have been thinking about when they set the date. (see also: Swerbinsky, Rich) Clearly my priorities are not shared by my entire family. This is a good and healthy thing.

Links:

OSU Athletic Communications - Game Notes (pdf)

2010 Ohio State Roster

2010 Ohio University Roster