Saturday, September 25 2010

Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio

Eastern Michigan at Ohio State

3:30 p.m. (ET)

TV: ABC (Regional)

The Buckeyes are hosting the Eagles of Eastern Michigan University on Saturday at the Horseshoe...and some people are asking why. It really doesn't seem sporting. Ohio State (3-0, 0-0) is ranked 2nd in the nation, and EMU is winless in three 2010 games, and 0-15 since the beginning of last season under former Michigan assistant Ron English.

Of course the game has been on the schedule for a few years, since before the current streak of haplessness began in Ypsilanti. Jim Tressel tries to keep the paydays close to home with a non-conference schedule heavy with MAC opponents, and he has two MAC teams on the slate this year, as OSU does most years. A big chunk of the MAC is in Michigan....Ohio State has never played the Eagles before....and it's just EMU's turn to pick up a paycheck in Columbus. So that's *why*.

But if you like competitive football, you might want to clean out the gutters Saturday afternoon...or, rather than do anything that rash, just switch to Alabama-Arkansas.

Tressel will be walking the line between trying to keep his team improving and moving toward their goal each week, and humiliating a severely over-matched visitor. He'll be trying to rest and rehab a slightly banged-up Buckeye team, while still needing to craft a solid, methodical, thorough victory.

It's really a no-win situation for the OSU coach. EMU is so bad, Tressel will get criticized for stomping them 50-3, and they're so bad that he'll get criticized if he *doesn't* stomp them 50-3. He has to keep his Buckeye starters sharp, but coming out of a game like this healthy is probably his greatest concern. But before you feel sorry for Tressel, consider Ron English.

This is a Turnaround?

Eastern Michigan (0-3, 0-2) was a losing football program when Ron English arrived last year. They are 41-122 since their last winning season in 1995. That's a *15-year*, not a 15-game run of futility. It would be laughable to say that before he wins his first game, English has the team "headed in the right direction". But there are at least signs of life in this year's Eagles.

They lost 31-27 to Army in their opener, and played competitively against Miami (OH) before falling 28-21. But then last week, Central Michigan reminded them how far they have to come with a 52-14 beatdown, and this week they get the Buckeyes. English expressed concerns this week about how his kids would respond after the big CMU loss, then having to come into Columbus off of a bad performance.

Just as Tressel has concerns about sustaining injuries as his team heads into the conference schedule, English's Eagles have eight more games to play after this one, and these Buckeyes have a habit of leaving their opponents the worse for wear after their dates with OSU.

Both Tressel and English have little to gain from this contest...other than the high six-figure

number the EMU football program takes home from the game. Both men are probably anxious to put this rather awkward matchup behind them.

English is hoping the Buckeyes don't physically ruin his team for the next month. Tressel wants to get his starters two quarters at the most of football, and get them all into October and the Big Ten schedule in one piece. They're both looking forward to that warm handshake at midfield when it's all over.

Knowing Their Names is Overrated

Trust me when I tell you that you don't need the usual rundown of the opponents starters in this preview. Suffice to say, the EMU Eagles will be fielding 22 players that are slightly smaller and less talented than the players in the scarlet jerseys.

They do have a pretty good running back in Dwayne Priest (5' 9", 192) at EMU, and their best player is probably their punter Jay Karutz, which could come in very handy this weekend. They will run a three-wide spread offense, with a big-play receiver in sophomore Kinsman Thomas, but through three games, their tight end Ben Thayer leads the team in receptions with ten. You'll also see some option looks with a lot of pre-snap motion.

The persistent problems for Eastern have been on defense. For example, they scored 27 points on Arkansas last year...but gave up 63. The Eagles have simply been unable to stop the run, finishing dead last in the FBS in rushing defense in 2009. In something of a statistical anomaly, (but one that makes a certain amount of sense), EMU also finished first among FBS schools in pass defense.

You'd think the school that leads the nation statistically in pass defense wouldn't be a team that goes 0-12, but you'd be wrong. When you're giving up 276 yards a game on the ground, your opponents don't even bother trying to throw the football. Forget the adage about passing the ball that "three things can happen and two of them are bad". More importantly, it makes the

game longer, and nobody wants that against Eastern Michigan.

If you're dying for more info on Eastern Michigan and Saturday's matchup, check here .

If it's OSU facts and figures you're after, this is the place (pdf)

If you can't run against these guys....

Outside of the often dreadful special teams play for OSU this season, the primary criticism of the undefeated Buckeyes is that their running game has not looked particularly sharp. It's unclear just how much you can benefit from going up against the worst rushing defense in the country, but you have to assume that Tressel will try to work on that phase of his offense against the Eagles.

The benefits of shortening the game are obvious, but this matchup may also allow the coaching staff to get their promising young tailbacks, Jaamal Berry, Jordan Hall and Carlos Hyde, some extended playing time from scrimmage to see what they can do.

OSU's first three opponents have stacked the box against the Bucks to try forcing Terrelle Pryor to beat them throwing the ball...and he has done just that. That explains *part* of their rushing attack difficulties, but there also remains a widely held belief that there are more talented running backs on this OSU roster than the two that are getting the bulk of the carries.

Brandon Saine and Dan Herron are reliable, serviceable running backs, but neither name rolls off the tongue when the subject of the top current Big Ten backs comes up in the conversation, let alone the subject of the top OSU backs of recent vintage. Saine had two long runs (40 and 45-yards) in his 103 yard performance in the opener against Marshall, but since that game he has just 55 yards on 24 carries, for a 2.3 yd average.

No OSU back is listed in the Big Ten's Top 10 rushers, but the Buckeyes are ranked 25th nationally in rushing yardage at 206.3 yards per game. There's a two-word explanation for that: Terrelle Pryor. So while the coaching staff would like to see the rushing attack by their tailbacks improve, they are not despairing over it either. The duty is being split between Herron and Saine, and even as a team they are not tasked with carrying the OSU rushing attack. They both take good care of the football, and they both block and catch the ball pretty well.

It remains to be seen how special the young OSU running backs are, but I know I'm not alone among Buckeye fans anxious to start finding out. Berry and Hall have both flashed some "specialness" in limited duty, so a longer audition for both of them is something to be anticipated. If not this week, when?

I do try to guard against my bias that "the future is brighter than the present", which tends to favor the younger, highly-recruited, but untested players on the roster over the "veteran" 22-year olds. *(I find this bias is deeply ingrained in most Indians fans)* We all know there is more to being an effective running back than all that talent stuff that can't be taught.

Blocking assignments, blitz pick-ups, playbook familiarity, ball security...all figure in the calculation for who gets the playing time in the tough games. But this isn't one of the tough games. So we'll see how they handle it.

Two other points that have been made previously, but I think bear repeating when we talk about the OSU rushing attack;

a) OSU fans are spoiled. This team's running backs can't all be Robert Smith, Eddie George, Mo Clarett, or Chris Wells.

b) It takes some getting used to, but we all need to keep in mind that this team's best running back doesn't play running back. That certainly changes everything in terms of how opponents' coaching staffs strategize to stop the OSU rushing game. But it also impacts the way the OSU coaches themselves approach the OSU rushing attack.

OSU Injury Update

Backup cornerbacks Travis Howard and Donnie Evege, injured in the Ohio U. game last week, are both out for this week. Evege dislocated his elbow, and will miss several weeks, but Howard's shoulder injury is less serious, and it's possible he could be back next week, or at worst the week after next.

Reserve linebacker Dorian Bell will also miss this week's action. All three are part of the OSU kickoff coverage unit that has struggled since late last season, so that particular special team will be one to watch this week. Starting strongside linebacker Andrew Sweat is expected to be back in the lineup Saturday.

I have no reason to think this week's game will be anything but another methodical beatdown like the Ohio U. game was. The Bucks will score until Tressel decides they shouldn't score any more. I tend to think they won't cover the 42.5 point spread, but the Buckeyes are averaging over 41 points a game, and I was wrong last week with a similar prediction.

Let's go with 45-6 Buckeyes, with the understanding that this might well be the halftime score.

Links:

OSU Athletic Communications Game Notes (pdf)

2010 OSU Roster

2010 EMU Roster

Eastern Michigan University - ESPN Home