- Saturday, October 16, 2010

- Camp Randall Stadium, Madison, Wisconsin

- Ohio State at Wisconsin

- 7:00 p.m. (ET)

- TV: ESPN

Ohio State will put their brand new No. 1 ranking on the line for the first time Saturday as they travel to Madison, Wisconsin to face the 18th-ranked Badgers in a night game at Camp Randall Stadium. This one has been circled on the calendar since summertime as perhaps the season's

toughest test for an OSU team that began the year with national championship aspirations, and got through the first half of the season 6-0 and 2-0 in conference play.

The battle of unbeatens envisioned by many pundits before the season started won't come about, since Wisconsin (5-1, 1-1) dropped a 34-24 decision to Michigan State two weeks ago. But the combination of the night game environment, the raucous Camp Randall venue, and the big bullseye on OSU's back due to their elevation to No. 1 this week, will make it tough for the Buckeyes to preserve their spot atop the polls.

Fifth year Wisconsin head coach Bret Bielema is looking for his first career win over Tressel's Buckeyes, and he could be forgiven for feeling slightly snakebit when it comes to facing OSU. Two years ago, freshman Terrelle Pryor led a go-ahead touchdown drive in the final 90 seconds of the game to edge Wisconsin 20-17 in Madison. Then last year, Bielema's Badgers doubled Ohio State's total yardage 368-184 in Columbus, but gave up two interception returns for TD's and another touchdown on a kickoff return in a 31-13 loss that wasn't nearly that lopsided.

In the series between the two schools, Ohio State has an all-time mark of 53-17-5, and they are 24-10-2 in Madison. The Buckeyes have won three in a row since the Badgers won consecutive meetings in 2003 and 2004. Ohio State is 6-4 in the last ten contests.

You, and the rest of the conference

"I hate losing to these guys," Bielema said after last year's disappointment. "Absolutely, it's something I can't stand for whatever reason." This time around Bielema might have his best shot yet at a win over OSU, with 10 starters back on an offense that led the Big Ten in scoring a year ago at 29.1 points per game, and featured the second best rushing attack in the conference at 198 ypg (OSU-199 ypg).

This year, Bielema's got the customary huge Wisconsin offensive line, the conference's top running back in John Clay, and an efficient and smart veteran quarterback in Scott Tolzien. His defense is pretty stingy against the run, this year holding opponents to 108.2 yards per game, and he always fields a tough, hard-hitting secondary. (Here's some video of Bielema answering questions from SI.com)

Bielema will have to figure out a way to duplicate last year's success on offense against the Buckeyes if he wants to upset OSU. The Buckeye defense held the Badgers to 118 yards on the ground, just a 2.7 yard average, but Tolzien hurt them through the air with 250 yards on 27 of 45 passing. It would help Wisconsin a lot this year if the TD's scored on Tolzien's passes counted for his own team.

It's good to be King

As for the Buckeyes, the players seem to be accepting the ascension to No. 1 this week with a level of calm and humility reflecting that of their head coach. A few of the guys have been here before, as young players in 2006 and 2007, when playing as No. 1 at Ohio State was the rule, not the exception. While they may have preferred to stay under the radar, and avoid the excess of attention showered on the nation's top-ranked team, for the most part the Buckeye players welcome the challenge to keep improving and not get big heads.

As you might expect, Ohio State sits on top of many of the Big Ten statistical rankings at the halfway mark of the season in addition to leading in the polls and the conference standings. The Buckeyes are 1st in the conference in scoring offense (47.2 ppg), total defense (237.0 ypg), pass defense (158.3 ypg) and turnover margin (1.67 per game). They trail only Iowa (10.5 ppg) in scoring defense in the conference, giving up 13.5 points per game. Iowa leads the nation in that category, and OSU ranks 6th.

The Badgers trail only Michigan in the conference rushing stats, with 240.8 rushing yards per game, and they're 3rd in the league in scoring offense at 37.2 ppg. Most of the defensive numbers for Wisconsin have them residing in the middle of the conference pack, as they've given up 19.0 points per game and over 200 yards per game through the air.

On Wisconsin

If you just looked at the offensive and defensive numbers for last year's OSU-Wisconsin game, you'd think the Badgers had won it. As noted earlier, they outgained OSU by a 2 to 1 ratio, and posted 22 first downs to 8 for Ohio State. Terrelle Pryor completed just 5 of 13 passes for a scant 87 yards. The OSU rushing attack was held under 100 yards by the Wisconsin defense, and the possession time was an astounding 42:47 to 17:13 in favor of the Badgers. And they did all that on the road.

It wasn't exactly a mystery how the Bucks came out on top...they did have three returns for

touchdowns after all, but it was still bizarre how a game so dominated at the line of scrimmage by one team could have resulted in a 31-13 win for the other guys. One indication that the 2010 Badgers have a similar game plan this year is the fact that they lead the Big Ten in first downs. These guys are grinders, making a living running the football.

Of course that means something's got to give this weekend, because nobody has run the ball successfully against Ohio State this season. The Buckeyes are second in the Big Ten (to Iowa) and 4th nationally in rushing defense, surrendering just 78.7 yards per game. That number collides with the Badgers' 240 yard rushing average at Camp Randall on Saturday. As far as I can see, that matchup will be the key to deciding the game's outcome.

Veteran Offense

The Wisconsin running game still relies on John Clay , the bruising 6' 1", 248 lb. running back who was everybody's All-Big Ten pick coming into the season. Clay is off to a solid start with 692 yards, averaging a lofty 6.0 yards per carry. He leads the Big Ten with nine touchdowns in six games. But this year, there's also a Mr. Outside to contend with in the Wisconsin backfield.

James White has burst onto the scene as one of the nation's top freshmen in 2010, rushing for 485 yards on 63 carries, for a 7.7 yard average, with 8 touchdowns. That has been enough to generate discussion in Madison about who is the legitimate starter at running back for the Badgers. All teams should have such dilemmas.

The Badgers have a steady hand at the offensive controls with senior quarterback Scott Tolzien , a

second-year starter who seems to make up in poise and confidence what he may lack in pure athletic ability. Tolzien has passed for 1201 yards and seven TD's in the first half of the season, and now has over 4000 career passing yards and 23 career TD passes. He's a good ball handler and has become very adept at the play action passing game, owing to the ever-present threat from the grinding running game of the Badgers.

Speaking of play action passing, Wisconsin always seems to have a strong receiving threat at tight end, and in Lance Kendricks , the Badgers have one of the best tight ends in the nation. Kendricks has 25 catches for 391 yards this year with three TD's, and he has already posted two 100-yard receiving games, against Arizona St. and Austin Peay.

At the wideouts, the big name is Nick Toon , the 6' 3", 218 lb. junior with the NFL bloodlines, but Toon has missed time with a foot injury, and has just 11 catches so far for 134 yards. Speedy senior David Gilreath has been a thorn in OSU's side every time the two teams have met in his career it seems, but Gilreath too has missed games with injuries, and has been limited to eight receptions for 148 yards in three games.

Picking up the slack at receiver this year has been redshirt freshman Jared Abbrederis, who leads the team with 15 receptions for 172 yards and one score. Issac Anderson has chipped in with 12 grabs for 117 yards.

On the offensive line for Wisconsin, 6' 7", 327 lb. senior Gabe Carimi is the player eveyone talks about as a top ten NFL draft choice at the premium left tackle spot. The four-year starter lines up with two-year starter John Moffit at guard on the left side to give the Badgers a powerful and experienced 1-2 punch to drive the rushing attack. Carimi has had some trouble with the speed rushers this year, so it will be interesting to see how he fares against the OSU front, especially in pass protection.

Wisconsin's other bookend at tackle, Josh Oglesby on the right side, has been bothered by a knee injury and has missed some time. The Badgers have also done some shuffling of players at center and right guard due to injuries, with Hudson's Bill Nagy, a 6' 3", 318 lb. senior a part of that mix.

Repeat Performance on Defense?

Whatever Bret Bielema dialed up for the Badger defense a year ago, he's got to be hoping he can do it again. Wisconsin gave the OSU offense fits in last year's game with penetration and harassment of Terrelle Pryor with their defensive ends and blitzing linebackers and defensive backs. The Badgers' all-conference end O'Brien Schofield is gone this year, but his running mate J.J. Watt is back, and as a junior, the 6' 6", 292 lb. Watt has registered 30 tackles and 8 TFL, including two sacks. Watt is joined on the defensive line by junior end Louis Nzegwu and tackles Patrick Butrym and Jordan Kohout.

The Badgers have really missed Chris Borland at linebacker this year after the 2009 Big Ten

Defensive Freshman of the Year was lost for the season with a shoulder injury. But they have a another standout in sophomore Mike Taylor coming back from a missed 2009 season to help solidify their linebacker corps. Taylor has 26 tackles including six TFL from his OLB spot. Culmer St. Jean mans the middle for the Badgers, and he leads the team in tackles with 33.

The Wisconsin secondary has been inconsistent this year, but they have experience and some good talent back there with Antonio Fenelus the most productive cornerback, with senior Niles Brinkley playing the other side. At safety, they have a physical pair in junior Aaron Henry (6' 0", 205) and Jay Valai, a second team All-Big Ten selection a year ago. OSU fans may remember Valai as the guy who momentarily turned out the lights for Dane Sanzenbacher two years ago in Madison with a big hit.

The Badger defense is the big question mark for them going into the OSU contest. They gave up 444 yards to Michigan State two weeks ago, and have not looked dominating against some of their weaker non-conference opponents. Watt is the most disruptive force they have on that side of the ball, and they look a little thin both at linebacker and on the corners.

How I see it...

Wisconsin is good against the run, and the Buckeyes haven't run the ball with any degree of consistency except when Pryor takes off with it, planned or unplanned. I don't really expect any of that to change, because Ohio State will continue to be a pass-first offense, using the running game to keep the defense honest. If the Buckeye offensive line and backs can keep J.J. Watt off of Pryor, I'm thinking he'll be able to throw the ball effectively and move the team.

As I said earlier, the key to the game will be how well Ohio State can stuff the Badgers' rushing attack. I don't believe that Tolzien and the Wisconsin receivers and tight ends have enough game to beat OSU if they are put in 3rd and long situations repeatedly throughout the evening. On the other hand, if the Badgers are consistently able to get themselves in 3rd and 1, Ohio State will be in trouble.

I trust that the OSU defense will continue to do what they always seem to do...dominate the line of scrimmage, and get pressure and penetration with their front four, allowing the back seven to roam and hit and tackle. As usual, they will wear down the opposition over four quarters and generate offensive mistakes by the Badgers late in the game.

In short, I think the better defense will win the game, and we know which defense that is.

Buckeyes....let's say 26-17.

Links:

OSU Athletics Communications - Game Notes (pdf)

2010 OSU Roster

2010 Wisconsin Roster

ESPN Home - Wisconsin