Ohio State moved into a tie for the lead in the Big Ten race with a methodical 52-10 win over Minnesota Saturday night in Minneapolis, and they may have added some style points for the pollsters in the process. Terrelle Pryor and Dan Herron led a balanced OSU offense that toyed with the league's worst defense, running up 509 total yards, and the Buckeyes (8-1, 4-1) got second half touchdowns from their special teams and their defense to complete the rout.

Pryor completed 18 of 22 pass attempts, for 222 yards and two touchdowns, spreading the ball to seven different receivers, and connecting on touchdown passes to Brandon Saine and DeVier Posey. Pryor added 55 yards on the ground, and ran a 1-yard sneak for the first OSU touchdown. Herron jump-started the OSU rushing attack with his first career 100-yard game, running for 114 yards on 17 carries, with one touchdown, all of it in the first half, as the Buckeyes built a 31-7 lead at the break.

The Buckeyes and their quarterback didn't do quite everything right, missing an easy field goal, and throwing an ugly interception to waste a 1st-and-goal opportunity at the Minnesota 2-yard line. But the Gophers were out to prove at every turn that a shiny new stadium and some fluorescent gold uniforms weren't going to be enough to make them competitive on the football field against Ohio State. Minnesota (1-8, 0-5) dropped their eighth straight game, and their remaining schedule shows no sign of an end to the streak.

Where They Stand

A look at the remaining OSU schedule reveals good news and bad news. The good is the upcoming week off, providing a chance for a very banged up team to get healthier. The bad news is that the Big Ten patsies are in the rearview mirror, and the traditional November grind of Penn State, Iowa and Michigan looms ahead. But for the Buckeyes, the best news came before Saturday's kickoff, when the last undefeated team in the conference came back to the pack.

Iowa's convincing 37-6 win over Michigan State on Saturday creates a four-way tie atop the conference, with those two teams plus Wisconsin joining Ohio State at 4-1 in Big Ten play. The favored scenario from OSU's perspective is of course to win out themselves, and then hope Michigan State does likewise, because a three-way tie with MSU and Wisconsin is Ohio State's best bet to be eventually selected by the BCS as the Belle of the Big Ten Ball.

That only works though, if they can manage to wind up the highest ranked conference team after 12 games. The Buckeyes would lose a potential two-way tiebreaker with Wisconsin due to the head-to-head loss to the Badgers, and of course if OSU wins out, that would mean Iowa is out of it, because the Buckeyes visit Iowa City on Nov. 20.

So, as Tressel stressed after the game. "There's still a chance...and that's all you can ask for."

But back to Saturday's game...

Weber Grills OSU Defenders Early

The Gophers had made no secret of their plan to throw the ball, and throw it deep against OSU, and quarterback Alex Weber made some big plays in the passing game early in the contest. He had completions of 32 and 35 yards on the first Minnesota possession, as the Gophers quickly answered the Buckeyes first score to tie the game 7-7 halfway through the 1st quarter.

Weber would burn the Bucks twice more on completions of 30 or more yards. One of those was squandered by a missed field goal in the 2nd quarter, and the other set up their 3rd quarter field goal, but those four completions represented 84% of his passing yardage for the game. Weber finished 9 of 20 for 162 yards and an interception, with two of the long gainers going to MarQueis Gray, the leading Gopher receiver with 3 catches for 81 yards.

The Minnesota rushing attack was a rumor, and as a result the OSU defense was able to get more and more pressure on Weber as the game went along, eventually sacking him five times and forcing him into two fumbles, the second of which was returned 30 yards for a touchdown by OSU defensive tackle Johnny Simon. The Buckeye defense held Minnesota to 70 net yards rushing on just 2.3 yards per attempt, and they limited a 10,000 yard career passer to nine completions. All in a day's work for the nation's 3rd-ranked defense.

Really Special

Ohio State finally ran into a team that made them look good on special teams. Although the Buckeyes allowed a 38-yard kickoff return themselves, Minnesota may have set back the cause of special teams for a decade. The Gophers missed a short field goal, allowed OSU's Jordan Hall a 70-yard punt return, and gave up a blocked punt that went for an Ohio State touchdown.

The Buckeyes couldn't stand prosperity after Hall's dazzling return set them up at the Minnesota 2-yard line midway through the 2nd quarter. Already leading 17-7, the Bucks looked poised to pull away, but Pryor came up once again with the kind of bad judgment call that has tarnished several of his otherwise stellar games. He tried to find fullback Zach Boren at the pilon on a rollout to the right when his running lane looked to be closing down, but didn't see Gopher safety Ryan Collado, who stepped in to pick it off at the sideline.

But there was no keeping OSU out of the end zone when linebacker Jon Newsome roared in to easily block a Dan Oreske punt in the 3rd quarter. The ball was batted into the end zone by OSU's Nate Williams, where backup safety Zach Domicone fell on it for the Buckeye touchdown. That made it 38-10, and it effectively sealed the Gophers' doom.

I believe "teeing off" is the golfing metaphor used to describe what the Ohio State defense was doing in the second half, with the Gopher quarterback in must-pass mode. Weber took some vicious shots on blitzes from OSU's Brian Rolle and cornerbacks Travis Howard and Chimdi Chekwa. It was on Chekwa's 4th quarter hit that Weber gave up the football, which came up on one bounce to John Simon, and resulted in his first career touchdown 30 yards later.

A Question of Balance

Ohio State looked like they were having an offensive walk-through at times against the sorry Gopher defense, but they did a great job of balancing the offensive attack between the run and the pass. As a team, they rushed for 263 yards and threw for 244. Pryor connected with seven different receivers, as usual relying mostly on Posey and Dane Sanzenbacher.

Minnesota had nothing resembling a pass rush, and with just a couple of exceptions, Pryor was crisp and on target with his throws. Posey had a very positive game after a couple of lackluster ones, catching six passes for 115 yards, including a 38-yard TD. Sanzenbacher chipped in with five receptions for 67 yards.

Seven different Buckeyes scored the seven OSU touchdowns, with Jordan Hall and Dan Herron getting rushing TD's in addition to the three (two passing, one rushing) accounted for by Pryor, and the non-offensive scores by Domicone and Simon.

One more bright spot in the late-game garbage time was another brief but impressive showing by freshman tailback Carlos Hyde, who ripped off runs of 15 and 16 yards in the final OSU drive, and looked like a real running back doing it.

Penn State comes to Columbus on Nov. 13, but with next Saturday off, the Buckeyes have a couple days of rest and recuperation ahead. During the break, OSU fans should take heart that the next three games fall in November, and over the last five seasons, Jim Tressel is 14-1 in November.

Links:

OSU - Game Summary and Stats (pdf)

ESPN Box

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