In what will be a weekly feature here on The Blurbs, Furls breaks down the Buckeyes upcoming opponent. We open the season at home versus the Northern Illinois Huskies, one of the better teams from the MAC this year. The Huskies have one of the best running backs in all of Division I in Garrett Wolfe, and have a solid head coach in Joe Novak, who has local roots, and has done a masterful job rebuilding this program.

Long gone are the days when unlimited or high numbers of scholarships kept the MAC as a conference of whipping boys for the Big Ten. Years ago, players like those on the current Northern Illinois roster would have come to a Big Ten school and competed for a starting position and some would have won while others would have provided depth. Heck, it is a well known fact that Woody Hayes used to offer scholarships to kids that he had no intention of using simply to deny his competition the talent.

In short, the parity caused by scholarship reductions has caused conferences like the MAC and teams like Northern Illinois to draw ever closer to the bullies that used to kick them around. MAC teams are dangerous teams. They are used to playing tough games on the road against stiff competition. The big boys are never going to agree to give these teams a “home and home,” so they are used to playing elite teams in big venues in front of a hostile crowd. These are the games that make (and fund) their entire season. MAC teams typically accept these games not only for the national exposure, but because the pay out from these games can make them as profitable for their athletic department as their entire home season.

It is against this backdrop that Northern Illinois enters Ohio Stadium to face the “Preseason #1” Buckeyes.

Introducing The Huskies!

The Huskies are historically a running team. They run an offensive set that would make Woody Hayes proud and they feature a very good, Archie Griffin-like, running back. I am not say that Garrett Wolfe is as good as the two-time Heisman Trophy recipient, just that the two are similar. Wolfe, at 5’7” 180, resembles Griffin not only in stature but in style. He is just elusive enough, just fast enough, and just strong enough to give teams headaches. There are plenty of guys who are stronger, faster, and quicker, but there are not many who are characterized by all three.

What has Wolfe done to deserve such praise? Well, he has rushed for about 3300 yards in the last two seasons, and last year he put up almost 400 yards rushing against his two Big Ten foes, Northwestern and Michigan.

While the run is Northern Illinois first option, they do have two very accomplished passers on their roster. The Huskies announced Phil Horvath as their starter for the Ohio State game. Last year Horvath led the nation in completion percentage and was among the top ten in passing efficiency.

Defensively, Coach Novak has accepted the lot that MAC teams have drawn in the world of recruiting. Guys who run 4.5 forties at 6'2" 240 are exceptionally rare and frankly, schools like NIU have very little chance of landing them. What coach Novak has done is accepted the fact that he will not generally have size and speed at the linebacker position and has opted instead to emphasize speed at this spot at the expense of size. The average NIU linebacker this year is about 5'11" 220lbs, and this linebacking corps is young, starting two sophomores. It is almost as though this Huskies team is playing with four safeties.

They are much more experienced and traditional upfront, yet last year this team ranked around 58th against the run, giving up about 150 yards per game. I would expect them to be better this year with the added experience of another year.

The secondary is young and vulnerable. They do return a very solid safety, Dustin Utschig, who won first team All-MAC honors last year, but their corners were vulnerable and the Huskies were forced to replace all conference safety.

The Match Ups:

Ohio State Defense vs. NIU Offense: The Huskies want to run the ball and Garrett Wolfe is a valuable weapon, but I do not think that they will be able to get to the second level of the Ohio State Defense with any regularity. Look for the Huskies to try to keep the Buckeyes defense honest with underneath passing that will probably be more effective against the young Ohio State defense, which will probably play more zone defense than usual because of this year's defensive losses.

Ohio State Offense vs. NIU Defense: I am not really sure if this is a match up. The Buckeyes offensive line is very good and experienced, so that should at the very least nullify the Huskies defensive line, freeing the running backs to the linebackers. The Huskies are small and quick at the linebacker position and this should help keep the running backs from breaking huge plays, but I do not think that this linebacking corps will be able to stop the run without putting 8 or 9 players in the box.

Unfortunately, for NIU their secondary cannot handle single coverage on either Ginn or Gonzalez, so that leaves the Huskies sitting on the horns of a dilemma. Do they sell out to try to keep the running game under control and leave Ginn, Gonzalez, or both in single coverage or do they play zone with safety help over the top and let the Buckeyes steam roll them?

Don't Be Surprised if…

1 Garrett Wolfe runs for 150 yards. He is a good running back and this is a team that is very good offensively.

2 Garrett Wolfe runs for 50 yards. If the Husky defense gives up some big plays early, they could start relying on the throw and Wolfe could be nullified.

3 Tedd Ginn has 4 catches for 3 touchdowns. The Huskies have no one that can cover him deep and I doubt they will be able to provide much help from the safeties, whom they will need to slow the run.

4 Chris "Beanie" Wells has 15 carries. Pittman is the starter and he deserves to be, but Wells is big and against these small linebackers, he will be devastating. Should the Buckeyes take a big lead early, Wells (both of them) should get plenty of carries in the second half.

5 The Buckeyes offense looks extremely conservative. There is a big game coming next week, and I don't think Coach Tressel wants to reveal more than he is required to.

6 NIU is able to stay in the game longer than I expect. This game is their bowl game. This has been circled on their calendar long before the Buckeyes were given preseason #1 bullseye.

If I Were a Betting Man…

I would not bet on this one. Most lines show the Buckeyes as a 17 point favorite in this game and that sounds about right to me. If someone held a gun to my head and told me to bet it, I would probably take the points because Jim Tressel does not run scores up and generally will try to get his second string players in early if possible. The over under is about 50 (48-51) and I would be more likely to bet that than the game outcome. I think the game will probably go over the 48. I like the Buckeye's to win, 37-20, with most of the starters out of the game by the middle of the third quarter, much like last year's Miami game.