An off-season like no other for Ohio State football is finally drawing to a close, with the opener now just two weeks away. One joker suggested we get these upcoming twelve weeks of football games out of the way in a hurry, so we can get back to the excitement of the off-season. Something tells me we won't have to worry about the first game of Luke Fickell's head coaching career being an anti-climax. Ohio State is about to embark on one of the more interesting, complicated and dramatic football seasons in years.

There is no truth to the rumor that Charles Robinson is running for mayor of Columbus...but it's not because he couldn't get elected right about now. Buckeye Nation has been begging for a little perspective concerning the nature and scope of their NCAA violations, and the Miami story provides just what the doctor ordered, if nothing else, diverting the nation's attention to a more salacious scandal to the south. Tats vs. tits....no contest.

I've already heard the September 17th meeting between the Buckeyes and the Hurricanes being christened the Yahoo Bowl...or better yet...The Ineligibowl. The next four weeks will surely generate more of the same, for better or for worse.

When there's a lot of ground to cover and only a short time to get it all done, no device works like the Top Ten list. You're familiar with the Bleacher Report format...that devilishly clever tactic of presenting their top ten lists as slideshows, forcing you to rack up a dozen different page views in order to see all ten items. The flaw in this strategy is that in the long term it's more likely to annoy the reader into swearing he'll never again click on a BR link. At least it has for me.

I prefer the opposite treatment....one web page...multiple Top Ten lists. Because you probably don't want to read much more than one line about each item anyway. In most cases, I've provided links if you're looking for more detail.

We'll start with some about the 2011 Buckeyes, then move on to some Big Ten items. The pundits and prognosticators are all over the board on the topic of the 2011 Buckeyes...from a projected 7-5 record...to a Big Ten title contender and BCS Bowl participant. Both schools of thought are arguable, based on all the circumstances..

Top Ten Reasons to be Pessimistic About The 2011 Buckeyes - *(and by pessimistic, I mean projecting a record worse than 9-3)*

10. In general, "change" is trauma, and this team has had a boatload of it.
9. The Michigan win streak *will* end one of these years....just sayin'.
8. Very green WR group until Posey gets back. Other returning WR's totaled 8 rec. in 2010.
7. Uncertainty about offensive strategy and execution....play-caller(s) will be new to the job.
6. Depth on O-Line a real concern...an injury to an OT could hurt badly.
5. Schedule features several tough road venues...Miami, Nebraska, Illinois, Michigan
4. Cumulative weight of unprecedented off-season distractions could take its toll emotionally.
3. First-year head coach with no previous head coaching experience.
2. Team's best OT, WR, and RB will miss first five games.
1. Inexperience at QB often translates to 1-2 losses in conference play.

Top Ten Reasons to be Optimistic About The 2011 Buckeyes - *(...the "all is well" school of thought....that this team will go 10-2 or 11-1 and be right in the hunt for the Big Ten title and a major bowl bid)*

10. The NCAA case finalizes soon...if they're lucky, with a 2011 postseason intact.
9. Top two Leaders Div. rivals have to come to Columbus (Wisconsin, Penn State)
8. Running back depth and talent is as good as it has been in years.
7. Several defensive "stars" will be born (Sabino , Howard , Barnett , Klein , Hankins , Bennett)
6. Jim Heacock is still coordinating the defense
5. Several offensive "stars" will be born..(Hyde , Miller , R. Smith , D. Smith , Reed , J. Hall , Norwell)
4. Talent level overall is still the best in the Big Ten.
3. John Simon
2. Team is pissed off about losing their coach and playing with a huge chip on their shoulder.
1. Buckeye players appear to be very close as a team, motivated, and on a mission.

Special Category:

1. Terrelle Pryor is gone....*(couldn't decide on which of the above lists that one belonged)*

Top Ten Breakout Players for OSU in 2011 - *(no seniors or true freshmen in this group...listing guys who may have played last year, but figure to make their first significant impact in 2011)*

10. Jack Mewhort - can play all OL positions...will start at LG for now...plays nasty.
9. C.J. Barnett - no ill effects from 2010 knee injury, it appears...back as starter at safety
8. Adam Bellamy - versatility is key...first backup at three different DL spots.
7. Marcus Hall - starting at RG after sitting out 2010...a very powerful man.
6. Verlon Reed - size, hands, speed...a natural at WR...and now a starter.
5. Storm Klein - first chance to start...will be at MLB in base defense...nose for the ball
4. Carlos Hyde - really coming on in August camp...bruising runner with speed.
3. Etienne Sabino - predict something three years in a row, and eventually you can be right.
2. Travis Howard - don't be surprised to see him on all-Big Ten team in December.
1. Andrew Norwell - will start at LT till Adams returns, then find a new home...star quality.

Top Ten Newcomers Who Will Contribute to 2011 Buckeyes - *(This list limited to freshmen or redshirt freshmen, guys who have yet to see the field as Buckeyes, ranked by their anticipated impact on the team this year...all true freshmen except where otherwise noted)*

10. Ryan Shazier - speed on the outside at LB is a needed commodity on this team.
9. Doran Grant - Akron SVSM star has jumped right into CB rotation as true freshman
8. J.T. Moore - RS freshman backs up at Leo end...very strong fall camp
7. Joel Hale - enrolled early and made a splash at DT in spring
6. Devin Smith - makes a young WR rotation even younger...he's the real deal
5. Michael Bennett - rave reviews in fall camp for versatile DL...comparisons to Heyward
4. Verlon Reed - RS freshman converted QB will start at WR and make plays
3. Bradley Roby - RS freshman looks like the starter at corner opposite Howard.
2. Rod Smith - fans anxious for their first look at this fast, powerful RB.
1. Braxton Miller - Next Big Thing at QB...will be forced into action early by Pryor's exit.

Top Ten Players in the Big Ten (Offense) *(in no particular order)* - *(excluded are OSU's DeVier Posey and Mike Adams, both of whom would probably make my list if they were playing the whole season)*

Marvin McNutt - WR, Iowa
Kyler Reed - TE, Nebraska
Denard Robinson - QB, Michigan

Riley Reiff - OT, Iowa
James White - RB, Wisconsin
Mike Brewster - C, Ohio State
Jeremy Ebert - WR, Northwestern
Edwin Baker - RB, Michigan State
Derek Moye - WR, Penn State
Kirk Cousins - QB, Michigan State

Top Ten Players in the Big Ten (Defense) *(in no particular order)*

Lavonte David - LB, Nebraska
Chris Borland - LB, Wisconsin
Shaun Prater - CB, Iowa
Andrew Sweat - LB, Ohio State
Jerel Worthy - DL, Michigan State
Mike Martin - DT, Michigan
Alfonzo Dennard - CB, Nebraska
John Simon - DL, Ohio State
Jared Crick - DT, Nebraska
Brian Peters - S, Northwestern

(I am struck by how few no-brainer 1st-round NFL draft choices leap at me from those two Big Ten lists....maybe two?)

Top Ten Incoming Freshmen in the Big Ten - *(links are to various articles and profiles of incoming recruits)*

Aaron Green - RB, Nebraska
Braxton Miller - QB, Ohio State
Lawrence Thomas - LB, Michigan State
Tyler Moore - OL, Nebraska
Justice Hayes - RB, Michigan
Doran Grant - CB, Ohio State
Jordan Walsh - OL, Iowa
Melvin Gordon - RB, Wisconsin
Jamal Turner - WR/KR, Nebraska
Ryan Shazier - LB, Ohio State

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