- Saturday, September 10, 2011

- Ohio Stadium - Columbus, Ohio

- 12:00 p.m. (ET)

- TV: Big Ten Network (BTN) -

The Buckeyes host the Toledo Rockets Saturday at noon, looking to build on their opening day victory by knocking off one of the top contenders for the MAC championship. Ohio State (1-0) moved up three spots in the rankings to No. 15 on the strength of their 42-0 win over Akron, but the Rockets (1-0) pose a much stiffer challenge to this young Buckeye squad.

This will be the third meeting all-time between the schools, and the next points scored by Toledo against Ohio State will be their first ever. The Buckeyes blanked the Rockets 49-0 in Columbus in 1998, and shut them out again 38-0 at Cleveland Browns Stadium in 2009.

It's a fairly safe bet that Toledo (1-0) will not be kept off the scoreboard this time around. This is a veteran Rockets team with lots of talent at the skill positions, and they'll be a confident offense coming into Columbus, having racked up 58 points and 591 yards in an opening day win over New Hampshire.

Rocket Fuel

Rockets head coach Tim Beckman is in his third year at Toledo, having spent two years (2005-06) at Ohio State under Jim Tressel as cornerbacks coach, and then the next two seasons as defensive coordinator at Oklahoma State. His first Rockets team in 2009 went 5-7, but he improved to 8-5 a year ago, including a bowl game appearance .

Toledo has been anything but intimidated playing against the grownups of college football. They have defeated teams from BCS conferences in five consecutive seasons, the most memorable of those their shocking victory over Michigan at the Big House in 2008. That stretch also boasts wins over Kansas, Iowa State, Colorado and Purdue. They return 16 starters from last year's bowl team, several of whom are also still stinging from that 2009 beatdown in Cleveland.

Help on the Way

For Luke Fickell's Buckeyes, Game 2 marks the return of three players missing from the opener due to suspensions. Starting tailback Jordan Hall *(pictured)* and top cornerback Travis Howard
will both be back in action for Ohio State, as will
Jordan Whiting
, who was working with the second team at middle linebacker before serving his one-game suspension.

The addition of Hall is likely to make the most noticeable difference from last week's OSU effort. The junior is far and away the Buckeyes' most versatile tailback, and he'll add a dangerous receiving threat, out of the backfield or out of the slot, in addition to an element of quickness and elusiveness we didn't see out of power backs Rod Smith and Carlos Hyde against Akron.

In his first season at the helm in Columbus, Fickell has a couple of longstanding streaks to worry about keeping intact for Ohio State. The Buckeyes have won 58 straight home games against unranked non-conference opponents (Florida St., 1982), and they have not lost to another team from the state of Ohio since a 7-6 defeat to Oberlin in 1921.

Deja Vu

It should be noted that the Toledo offense looked formidable two years ago coming into the Ohio State game in the season's third week, much as it appears today. They were averaging 42.5 points and 558 yards in two games against BCS opponents Purdue and Colorado, but were thoroughly throttled by the Buckeye defense. The Rockets rushed for 13 yards on 13 carries that afternoon, and were held to 4.4 yards per attempt on 22 of 45 passing. They totaled 210 yards in the game, and as noted, failed to score.

There's little doubt the Ohio State strategy will be similar this year to what it was that day. Stuff the run game, and then try to harass and confuse the Rockets quarterback with a fierce pass rush and lots of blitzing...then get physical with the receivers after the catch, inducing drops, tipped balls or fumbles, and making them less enthusiastic about catching the ball as the game goes along.

The Rockets will show up with a stronger defensive unit this year than they had in '09, and they are a much more seasoned group overall, so the comparison is useful only to a point...but there is a point.

Key UT Personnel

Junior quarterback Austin Dantin started the first nine games a year ago but suffered a season-ending shoulder injury after compiling 1254 yards and 7 TD's passing to go with 292 yards and 8 more TD's rushing. His backup Terrance Owens is a Cleveland Glenville product who threw 12 TD passes for the Rockets as the season wound down, and both signal-callers saw action last week against New Hampshire.

Receiver/kick returner Eric Page is Toledo's best known performer coming into the season. A starter since his freshman year, the junior Page made several preseason All-American teams as a returner. He had six catches for 54 yards in the 2009 contest with OSU.
Bernard Reedy
and Glenville's
Cordale Scott
are two more talented receivers to concern the OSU defense.

Adonis Thomas is the feature running back for the Rockets. Thomas, a 5' 10", 185 lb. senior made second team all-MAC last year, and started fast in 2011 with 115 yards and a TD last week.

The Rockets offensive line features two senior tackles with 74 combined career starts. Mike VanDerMeulen and John Morookian are joined by returning starter Phillipkeith Manley at one guard and promising redshirt freshman Greg Mancz at the other.

Linebacker Dan Molls averaged 11 tackles a game for the Rockets in 2010, but it was reported Thursday that Molls will miss Saturday's game with OSU due to an undisclosed injury.

The Rockets have two capable ends to anchor their defensive front. T.J. Fatinikun (51 tackles, 5 sacks, 13 TFL in '10) and Malcolm Riley (44 tackles, 5.5 sacks, 11 TFL) will be coming after Buckeye quarterbacks on Saturday. Toledo also features a solid pair of cornerbacks in Taikwon Paige and Desmond Marrow.

OSU Outlook

With the exception of the returns of Hall and Howard, the Ohio State depth chart looks much the same as it did last week. Backup offensive tackle Antonio Underwood was the only significant injury last week for OSU, and Fickell said this week he was uncertain if the freshman would be ready to play against Toledo. If his availability matters Saturday, it's because of an injury on the offensive line, a prospect no one wants to even think about.

Expect quarterbacking duties to again be split between Joe Bauserman and Braxton Miller , with the senior getting the start once again. As noted above, Jordan Hall will add a speed and receiving dimension to the offense, and he will also probably return to his role as the principal punt returner for the Buckeyes.

The return of tailback Jaamal Berry from a hamstring injury could provide even more of that speed dimension. Berry has missed a good deal of fall camp, but he could be a factor on kickoff returns and might get some work from scrimmage as well.

Idle Speculation

The Toledo defensive scheme will resemble their scarlet and gray counterparts fairly closely, as you might expect from a coach who cut his teeth under Jim Tressel. They focus on creating turnovers, succeeding in 2010 with 34 of them, to rank 5th in the nation in that category. (OSU

tied for 12th with 30).

The Rockets appear to have the offensive firepower to give the Buckeyes some problems for at least part of the game. We know they'll throw the ball all over the yard, but it remains to be seen if they can run the ball effectively enough to keep OSU defenders concerned with the rushing attack. Till they prove it, I'm going to doubt it.

I think the tried and true Jim Heacock defensive strategy of beating up and wearing down the offensive skill position talent of the opponent should work once again. OSU defenders will make the quarterbacks and receivers pay for every short completion out of the spread offense, and the rushing attack will struggle to balance things out.

It's cliche to say that the turnover battle will be key to the outcome. It always is. But for the Rockets to stay in this one, they'll have to win that battle decisively. Unless the Buckeyes beat themselves by putting the ball on the ground or throwing interceptions, they will prevail.

I think this one is slightly closer than the spot (I did last week too, and I was wrong). I see the Rockets keeping it close till halftime before succumbing to the Buckeyes. Let's say 34-16.

Links:

OSU Athletics Communications Game Notes (pdf)

Ohio State Roster

Toledo Roster

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