On paper, Ohio State's first true test of the 2011 season wasn't supposed to come until next Saturday when the Buckeyes visit Miami. Someone forgot to tell that to the Toledo Rockets, however. Former Ohio State assistant Tim Beckman will have his team challenge for the MAC title this season, and his skilled charges gave the Buckeyes all they could handle on Saturday afternoon before falling, 27-22. In the end Ohio State needed to stop Toledo inside its own red zone in the final seconds to avoid losing to an in-state opponent for the first time since October 8, 1921.

After marching easily to Jake Stoneburner's fourth touchdown reception of the season just three-and-a-half minutes in, it appeared that Ohio State was on its way to another mauling of the Rockets, a team they beat 38-0 two years ago in Cleveland. It didn't take long for those

notions to be disabused. Toledo blasted out to a 15-7 lead late in the first period on the strength of a blocked punt and a short passing game that put the Buckeye defense on its heels and stunned the partisan crowd at the Horseshoe.

Freshman defensive back Kishon Wilcher started the Rocket rally when he came clean off the corner and stuffed Ben Buchanan'spunt. Morgan Williams ran the block down to the Buckeye one. Two plays later Eric Page came open on a crossing route, hauled in Austin Dantin's short pass and dove into the end zone to tie the game- or so most everyone thought. Disdaining the extra point, Toledo got two when Page took a direct snap and found Hank Keighley in the back of the end zone to make it 8-7 for the visitors.

Eric Page has created a lot of problems for opponents on his way to 2,264 receiving yards in two seasons as a Rocket, and Ohio State was no exception. The junior from Toledo gathered in 12 passes for 145 yards and two touchdowns, added 73 yards on returns, threw the successful two-point pass and made several money catches on his team's last attempt to steal the game away. His biggest moment came less than five minutes after the first score and it put Toledo in firm early control. Taking a quick bubble screen, Page got a good block that wiped out Andrew Sweat and dashed 66 yards down the near sideline, giving the Rockets a 15-7 lead with 3:11 left in the first quarter.

While the Rockets soared, the Buckeye offense stayed all-too-firmly grounded under the thoroughly vanilla leadership of Joe Bauserman. Ohio State's four possessions after the opening touchdown resulted in three punts and Drew Basil's second field-goal miss of the season against zero makes. Bauserman was, to say the least, not impressive. He threw several passes far out of bounds, presumably with intention, and unintentionally missed Devin Smith on what should have a been a forty-yard touchdown bomb late in the first half. Stoneburner didn't aid the cause when he dropped a fourth-down pass that might have turned into a long play a moment later.

Braxton Miller did not play. At all. I'll talk about this in the next column.

While Miller sat and the offense sputtered, more big contributors were going down- one for what looks to be a long time. Sophomore wide receiver Corey “Philly” Brown was carted off early in the second quarter with what appeared to be a serious knee injury. Nate Williams sat out Saturday and John Simon, whose contributions were monstrous anyway, was in and out of the lineup. That made eleven Buckeye starters either limited or out altogether.

In the early going Ohio State’s running game sputtered right along with everything else, averaging 3.3 yards on its first sixteen carries. The seventeenth finally broke loose- and got the Buckeyes back in the football game. With eight minutes left in the half Carlos Hyde took an inside handoff, let a tackle in the hole slide off his hip and rumbled 36 yards to slice the deficit to 15-14. Ohio State’s defense, gashed in the first quarter, now rose up, holding the Rockets to five total yards on its four possessions following Page’s long touchdown. Toledo quarterbacks completed 7-of-8 for 134 yards and two touchdowns to start the game, but they fell under the assault of John Simon and massive tackle Jonathan Hankins as the half continued.

Ohio State’s defensive line was an issue; a bigger one was Toledo’s self-destructive tendencies in a game they perhaps should have won. The Rockets committed 14 penalties for 102 yards, missed two field-goal attempts and allowed the special-teams play that killed the momentum their own special-teams play had set into motion. After a penalty wiped out the first Toledo punt attempt, Chris Fields returned the second 69 yards for a touchdown , putting Ohio State back in the lead 21-15 with 46 seconds remaining in the half. Fields took the line-drive kick, spun off a would-be tackler and got a couple of big downfield blocks that cut him free for good. The Rockets piled up 79 yards in penalties in the first half; the seemingly innocuous illegal motion that negated the punt and set up the Fields score looms as the largest.

Tim Beckman and his staff showed its skill coming out of the halftime break, adjusting to the hard charge of the Buckeye defensive line with quick flares and screens. Toledo tailback Adonis Thomas got things going on the first pay of the second half when he took a short pass, neatly avoided Storm Klein’s tackle attempt and zipped 44 yards deep into Ohio State territory. Four plays later on fourth-and-one, Thomas took a direct snap and bolted five yards for a touchdown, putting the Rockets back in front 22-21 with barely three minutes gone in the third period.

A botched hold on a Toledo field-goal attempt led to the 55-yard drive gave the Buckeyes the lead for good late in the third. Bauserman and Devin Smith provided the big play, hooking up for a 36-yard completion that gave Ohio State a first-and-goal at the Toledo seven. After a Rocket holding penalty gave the Bucks another first down, Carlos Hyde bulled over from the three for

his second touchdown, making it 27-22. As it turned out, those were all the points Ohio State needed- but the Buckeyes would have to survive one more major scare before victory was secured.

Rod Smith set up the final Rocket thrust when he lost his second fumble of the season at the Toledo 28 with 3:08 left to play. The Rockets moved all the way into the Buckeye red zone on twelve plays, including Page's 19-yard reception that got his team out of a fourth-and-fourteen quandary. But on another fourth down, this time from the Ohio State 17, the strong rush of John Simon forced backup quarterback Terrance Owens to overshoot an open Kenny Stafford and finally, the Buckeyes were off the hook.

The final statistics were a reflection of the problems the Buckeyes had. Toledo won the yardage battle 338-301 and got big games from both Page and Adonis Thomas, who ran for 47 yards and added 111 on six receptions. Ohio State rushed for only 3.3 yards per carry, including Hyde's 36-yard touchdown run, and went 3-of-12 on third-down conversions. This game was lost by the Rockets as much as it was won by the Buckeyes. Those fourteen penalties, combined with critical breakdowns on special teams, were what proved decisive.

In a way this game was strongly reminiscent of the 2002 team's narrow escape of Cincinnati . Like that game against the Bearcats the Buckeyes fell behind early, were outplayed overall, had to hang on at the end and survived in large part because of mistakes made by the opponent. Nobody should be too surprised, though- Ohio State is almost ridiculously short-handed and Toledo is a pretty good football team. Take the win and move on.

I'll have more on this game, as well as the doings in the rest of the college football world, in my The Week That Was column.