- Saturday, October 1, 2011

- Ohio Stadium - Columbus, Ohio

- 3:30 p.m. (ET)

- TV: ABC -

Conference play begins in the Big Ten this Saturday with two of the preseason favorites to win their respective divisions squaring off in a marquee matchup in the league opener. Oh yeah, there's a game in Columbus too.

Ohio State (3-1, 0-0) is not accustomed to playing second fiddle to anyone in the Big Ten, and they hold at least a share of the last six conference championships to prove it. So it must pain them to admit that this week's clash with one of their co-champions of 2010, the Michigan State Spartans (3-1, 0-0) , will be

the other
big conference lid-lifter this weekend.

The best the unranked Buckeyes can hope for is that the Big Ten's power shift, which reduces their game with MSU to the undercard for Nebraska-Wisconsin , is a temporary and short-lived one. The Spartans come into Columbus unranked in the AP (media) poll, and No. 25 in the USA Today (coaches) ranking. Both teams have lost their one big non-conference game, while getting past the teams they were supposed to beat anyway, so this contest will be about setting a positive tone for the rest of the season and trying to get an early divisional leg up on the Badgers-Cornhuskers loser.

Connections

Spartan head coach Mark Dantonio was on the OSU sidelines as defensive coordinator when the Buckeyes won the national championship in the 2002 season, so he has always been something of a sympathetic figure for Ohio State fans. Until last year his Spartans hadn't threatened the Ohio State grip on league supremacy, and he had the good manners to lose to his former boss Jim Tressel the only two times (2007 and 2008) he has played Ohio State as the head man in East Lansing. (He is 0-4 overall as a head coach against OSU, having lost two games in Columbus as head coach at Cincinnati, in
2004
and
2006
)

In fact, the warm feelings toward the Spartans in Columbus predate Dantonio's tenure. The Spartans have dropped their last seven straight to Ohio State, and most of those games have not been close...the average margin of OSU victory has been 18 points, with only one of those games ('07) decided by single digits. This will be the 40th meeting between the two teams, with OSU leading the all time series 27-12.

Dantonio is once again working the sidelines alongside a coach named Tressel, employing Mike Tressel, nephew of Jim, and son of current OSU running backs coach Dick, as his linebackers and special teams coach. And there is a very genuine bond of friendship between

the two head coaches in this game. Luke Fickell credits much of what he has learned about coaching defense to his time working with Dantonio, and says the two have remained in close contact through the years.

Michigan State has not won in Columbus since the infamous 1998 upset of the then-No. 1 Buckeyes. In a game that may have cost John Cooper a national championship, OSU led 24-9 in the third quarter before Plaxico Burress (125 rec. yds) helped lead Nick Saban's Spartans on a stunning late charge to put the sole blemish on Cooper's 11-1 season.

State of the Bucks

Maybe you've heard...the Buckeyes have a new quarterback....and when you have a true freshman starting at quarterback, every game can be like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates - you never know what you'll get. Braxton Miller showed off his elusiveness, his calm demeanor under pressure, and frankly...his guts *(see photo)* last week in his first ever starting assignment against Colorado (highlights). The coaches will have to strike a balance this week between a plan to assure Miller's physical preservation and a plan to let him free-lance and make plays with his legs....not an easy thing to pull off.

I figure the best way to do that is to get him established as a credible passing threat with some early successes, both on some high-percentage short and intermediate completions, and also showing some kind of downfield passing capability. Michigan State has been playing great defense (I know, that sounds crazy...but it's true) and they are quite capable of squashing the

OSU rushing attack if they're not at all worried about the pass.

Jordan Hall has quickly established himself as a true all-purpose offensive weapon, and it would help the kid QB immensely if Hall can come up with a big game against the Spartans. It will be interesting to see if the budding freshman duo of Miller and WR Devin Smith will take another step forward this week in the development of what looks like an exciting passing combination for the Buckeyes.

On the injury front, WR Philly Brown (ankle) is probably still out for this one, and DE Nathan Williams is still at least one more week away from returning after a knee scope procedure. Linebacker Jordan Whiting will miss the game with an undisclosed injury. The coaches say that LB Andrew Sweat has played through nagging knee and back problems in the early part of the season, and is now probably as healthy as he has been all year.

Jim Heacock said Wednesday that freshman DE Steve Miller has had a good week and will probably see more playing time, as will freshman linebacker Ryan Shazier. And RB Jaamal Berry was involved in an on-campus incident of some sort that involved an altercation with another person, and resulted in his medical condition being evaluated at the OSU Medical Center. His status for Saturday is unclear.

Key Personnel - MSU

The Spartans' offense is as balanced as any the Buckeyes will see this year. QB Kirk Cousins is a 3-year starter with the second highest completion percentage (65%) in Big Ten history. So far this year he's completing at a 69.2% clip, with 947 yards, 5 TD's and 2 INT's. Cousins is smart and accurate, and he has a wealth of other skill position talent to work with.

Cousins first option in the passing game is his excellent wide receiver B.J. Cunningham, who has already caught 29 passes this season for 428 yards. He is joined by Keshawn Martin (14 rec, 132 yds), Keith Nichol (7 for 117 yds), plus three very capable tight ends in Brian Linthicum, Garrett Celek and Dion Sims.

[redacted] Trenton Robinson [redacted] Johnny Adams

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