- Saturday, November 26, 2011

- Michigan Stadium - Ann Arbor, Michigan

- 12:00 p.m. (ET)

- TV: ABC -

Ohio State-Michigan...The Game...will be contested for the 108th time Saturday in Ann Arbor, and the Wolverines are a touchdown favorite to end their seven-game losing streak to the Buckeyes. The Michigan drought against OSU is at 2,924 days and counting , and they have won just once in the series since 2000.

The attention of Buckeye fans has been distracted during Michigan Week by widely-published reports
of an agreement with Urban Meyer to be the next Ohio State head coach. So the disappointment of the 2011 season for the OSU faithful is tempered by the anticipation of a quick return to the sport's elite, with a proven winner at the helm. Time will tell. Expect a formal announcement by the university as soon as Sunday or Monday.

The leaking of the Meyer story is another in a long list of lousy hands dealt to Luke Fickell, who will be dealing with the Wolverines on Saturday as the lamest of lame ducks. Asked about reports of a coaching change early this week, Fickell said "I know there is a game at noon on

Saturday and my ass will be there." So we'll see if he gets it handed to him by Brady Hoke and the Wolverines.

In recent years, The Game has been meaningful to Ohio State in part because of what was to come after it....a BCS bowl appearance...a shot at the national championship...a Big Ten title. For Michigan, with the notable exception of 2006 , it has mostly meant a chance to salvage their season with a win against their arch-rival. To say the least, the tables have been turned this year, and it's Ohio State (6-5, 3-4) looking to finish well after a hellish season, and the Wolverines (9-2, 5-2) looking ahead to a potential bowl date in January.

It's tough to sustain a healthy rivalry if one team wins all the time *(see: Browns-Steelers)*, and lately, certain Michigan folks have been downplaying what others call "the greatest rivalry in sports" as not even the biggest game they play every year. But if Brady Hoke's first season as the new coach at Michigan is any indication, this great rivalry is about to get the shot of competitiveness it has lacked. So what if it took a bizarre and unprecedented series of events at Ohio State to help bring that about?

Brady Hoke and Luke Fickell are both in their first seasons, the first time since 1929 that both teams in this game had first-year head coaches, and just the third time in history (1897). Michigan leads the all-time series between the schools 57-44, with six ties, but since the start of the Woody Hayes era 60 years ago, Ohio State leads 32-26-2. *(As is my customary practice, those stats do not pretend last year's games didn't happen.)*

Michigan comes in ranked 15th in the BCS, 17th in the AP poll, and 16th in the coaches poll. Ohio State remains unranked.

The State of the Bucks

There aren't a lot of changes to the depth chart for the Bucks this week. Andrew Sweat sat out the Penn State game a week ago, allowing Ryan Shazier to dazzle in his first career start at the Will backer, winning the Big Ten Freshman of the Week award with a 15-tackle performance.

Shazier is listed first on the depth chart this week, and the coaches were unsure as of Tuesday's press conference whether or not Sweat would be able to go. They may feel like Sweat is their best linebacker...and they may be right, but it has become clear that Ryan Shazier is in the top two, and he should be on the field a lot, Sweat or no Sweat.

DeVier Posey made an immediate impact in his first game back last week, and you'd have to think the Buckeyes are building their passing game plan around him again for Michigan. Boom Herron, Posey, Sweat, Tyler Moeller and offensive linemen Mike Adams, Mike Brewster and J.B. Shugarts will be playing their final Big Ten games, and depending on the NCAA sanctions, possibly their last games in Scarlet and Gray.

Speaking of the seniors...it's remarkable to think about how far removed any of these Buckeye players are from a loss to Michigan. When this year's three 5th-year seniors were freshmen in 2007, only their 5th-year senior teammates that season had ever experienced a loss to the Wolverines (2003). Uncharted waters.

Key Personnel - Michigan

Offense -

Quarterback Denard Robinson has not been quite the same force he was last season in tearing up the conference rushing records for quarterbacks, but he remains a dangerous player with the ball in his hands. Robinson has completed 110 of 207 passes, for 1791 yards, with 15 TD's and 14 interceptions. After rushing for 1702 yards in 2010, he has 993 yards and 14 touchdowns through 11 games, on many fewer attempts this season.

A lot of that has to do with the emergence of Fitzgerald Toussaint as a reliable running back for the Wolverines of the sort they were lacking in 2010. Toussaint has 891 yards and 9 TD's, to rank 6th in the Big Ten in rushing at 89.1 yards per game (Robinson is 5th at 90.3 ypg)

Junior Hemingway leads an upgraded receiver corps for Robinson with 30 receptions on the season for 591 yards and one TD. Jeremy Gallon is next in receptions with 26, for 425 yards and 3 TD's. Ray Roundtree and tight end Kevin Koger have 15 catches each.

Robinson has been running less and generally staying on the field as a result. He is keeping the ball less on the read options and scrambling less out of passing formations. We can assume the Wolverines will try to do what they have done well so far...and also what they have seen other teams have success with against the Buckeyes...quick outs and slants...inside screens and a lot of zone run plays and read option.

Defense -

Coordinator Greg Mattison deserves a lion's share of the credit for Michigan's turnaround this season. He has put together a respectable defense with essentially the same talent that his predecessors struggled with. Defensive tackle Mike Martin is arguably their best defensive player, but they are getting surprisingly solid play from their secondary, with
Jordan Kovacs
at safety and especially from their starting corners
J.T. Floyd
and
Blake Countess
.

On the defensive line, ends Craig Roh and Ryan Van Bergen have given them some pass rush on the outside and senior
Will Heininger
has paired with Martin at tackle to round out a decent front. Middle backer
Kenny Demens
leads them in tackles with 78, including 4.5 TFL and 2.5 sacks.

Idle Speculation

Let's face it. It doesn't look good.

Michigan is unbeaten at home at 7-0. Ohio State hasn't played well, even in victory, since the Wisconsin game, and they are 1-3 on the road. The Wolverines have a lot to play for, including a 10-win season and possibly an at-large BCS berth and a New Years Day bowl game. They are peaking at the right time and playing with a lot of confidence. And you know they're sick and tired of hearing about the streak against OSU. The Wolverines would seem to have a decided motivational edge. Then there's the 110,000 people in the Big House.

Denard Robinson is a feast or famine type player. He leads the conference in interceptions

with 14, but he also makes big plays in the passing game, averaging 15.9 yards per completion when he hits the right-colored jersey, leading the nation in that category. The OSU pass rush has been nearly invisible in recent weeks as opponents have doubled John Simon, trying to make someone else beat them...and it has been working. The Buckeyes' tackling has been getting worse instead of better as the season has progressed.

Michigan is scoring over 33 points per game. If they come anywhere near that on Saturday, this one is over.

Anyone who has been following this series for more than a few years knows what happens historically. It is usually a lower-scoring and closer game than the season records indicate it ought to be. The Buckeyes beat up on some bad UM defenses in recent years, skewing those results somewhat, but even those games were often close for a half or more. I really do expect another close, hard-fought game...more like the traditional Ohio State-Michigan contest, but I don't see the Buckeyes overcoming all the odds and leaving Ann Arbor victorious.

I think the streak ends this Saturday. Reset the counter and start over.

I see it Michigan 27 , Ohio State 20.

Links:

OSU Atletics Communications - Game Notes (pdf)

2011 Ohio State Roster

2011 Michigan Roster

Courtesy of Bucknuts.com, here's a nice history of the Ohio State - Michigan series:

The Game: A Colorful History

---

on Twitter at @dwismar

(photo credits: Jim Davidson - The-Ozone.net)