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That is the $41.00 question going through the minds of Buckeye fans making the trek up to Champaign-Urbana. Right now a pair of Ohio State vs. Illinois football tickets can be purchased on Ebay for that price. That is also about 2/3's the price of one ticket to see the Buckeyes play in the 'Shoe. I guess that tells you a little bit about how far Ron Zook has to go to get that program turned around.

It is hard to imagine that at one time Illinois was a dominant force in college football. I am not talking about the Simeon Rice days in the mid 90s; those teams could hardly be called good let alone dominant. I am talking about the devastating Illinois teams at the turn of the century, in the days long before the 'Shoe and the Ohio State vs. Michigan rivalry Illinois was a great team.

Illinois' played its first season of college football in 1889, and through the course of the last century Ohio State and Illinois have played 74 times. Ohio State leads the all time series, 52-20-2. Each time these two teams clash on the field there is much more at stake than just wins and losses.

In 1925, obviously before the days of PETA, the two teams agreed to play for a living trophy, a turtle. It was hoped that given the exceptionally long life span of turtles that this tradition could continue, with the same turtle, for a century. Unfortunately, IlliBuck, as the turtle was named did not have one of those epic life spans. He died in 1927. The two teams have exchanged a wooden turtle ever since.

Introducing the Fighting Illini:

Is there any fight in them, or have they retired to the reservation?

There is some hope in Champaign for the first time in years. It appears that the Illini finally have some of the pieces in place to reinvigorate their program in spite of the horrid 2-7 record. They were able to land Ron Zook, former coach of the Gators, and in his second year he has restored this team to some level of respectability, but he has not done it alone.

The Illini received a huge shot in the arm from true freshman Juice Williams. Williams is the prototypical run-pass quarterback, cut from the same cloth as Troy Smith, Drew Tate, and Drew Stanton. The difference is that Williams is just a freshman and has a lot to learn, but his upside is tremendous. He seems to affect his teammates in much the same way as Troy Smith; he makes everyone play better and harder. It appears that they are having fun and their confidence is growing every week.

Now the downside, Williams has completed less than 50% of his passes this season and has a miserable touchdown to interception ration (9TDs, 8ints). The passing game is just not very good. Additionally, the Fighting Illini rely on Williams to tote the ball nearly 17-19 times per game. While he is an exceptional athlete, he is not a running back.

Illinois does run the ball reasonably well (about 180 ypg), but they have struggled against good defenses and they have not played anyone with a defense as athletic or quick as Ohio State's to date.

Senior running back Pierre Thomas leads the team with 545 yards rushing (5.2 yards per carry). Thomas is a load at 5-11 210lbs, but he is being challenged for carries by sophomore running back Rashard Mendenhall. Mendenhall is much more of a home run threat and averages nearly 8 yards per carry. He is exactly the type of back that the Buckeyes struggle with.

Defensively the Illini are fairly good in the NCAA rankings because they do not give up a lot of yardage, about 300 yards per game. Unfortunately for the Illini, yardage is not how games are won and lost. The Illini are giving up just over 26 points per game. That is astonishing when you consider that the Buckeyes give up just 39 less yards per game, 261 yards per game, but they only allow 7.3 points per game.

The Matchups:

Ohio State Offense vs. Illinois Defense: The Illini are pretty good up front and they have done a reasonably good job against the run. Their chances are bolstered because LT Alex Boone will not play this week after having an undisclosed medical procedure. Don't let all this fool you, Ohio State will create the match ups it wants to run the ball and will succeed in doing so. The Illini allow 124 yards per game on the ground. Look for the Buckeyes to put up close to 200.

The Illini feature a veteran secondary, but don't let that fool you either. It is not a stretch to say that although they are good, they are not good enough (just like every other secondary in the nation). Ginn, Gonzalez, and Robiskie are too much for any defense in the NCAA. As a matter of fact, I would be interested to see how they would fare against some NFL secondaries.

Ohio State Defense vs. Illinois Offense: Juice Williams can move and that will help aid his "survivability" and will help him to buy more time. Unfortunately, Williams is not much of a throwing quarterback right now, so I am not sure how much good that will do. This Ohio State defense is a bit too athletic for him to really burn them up by running down the field.

All American candidate (and semifinalist for just about every post-season award) Quinn Pitcock sat out last week and is questionable this week. How nice it must be to be Coach Tressel because he can just reach back and grab Joel Penton and toss him in. Is he a game-breaker like Pitcock? No, but he is better than just about everyone's first string defensive tackle. Red shirt freshman Doug Worthington has also stepped up and is now commanding some playing time. Hmmm… next year's defense is starting to look pretty damn good, but that is a story for another article.

Illinois is going to try to run the ball, and Ohio State will respond by bringing everyone into the box. Juice Williams is not a threat to beat you with his arm, and the Illini lack a big play threat at wide receiver, so Malcolm Jenkins and Antonio Smith should do just fine defending on an island.

Don't Be Surprised If….

This game is every bit as boring as the last few. How many times can you watch Mike Tyson beat up fourth grade girls before it loses its morbid "traincrash" interest?

Another huge day on the ground for the Buckeyes, 250 on the ground, nearly doubling Illinois' average.

The Buckeyes are up by at least 14 going into the second quarter. It has been Tressel's obvious goal to score quick and take the crowd out early. Based on the 41.00 price it appears as if the Illinois crowd is opting to just not show up.

The defense records a four interception game. I have been calling for lots of ints all year, and Juice Williams inaccuracy coupled with good corners and lots of pressure will = lots of ints.

If I were a betting man…

I would take the Buckeyes –24. Yep, the game is on the road, but Champaign-Urbana is basically going to be a western suburb of Columbus for the game. The Buckeyes defense prides itself on not allowing the opposition to score, and that has resulted in the Buckeyes easily covering almost all of their spreads this year, the one exception? Bowling Green.

I am leaning toward the under also. I do not think that Illinois will score more than 10 and I think it is very possible that they will actually be shut out. Jim Tressel also tends to be a bit more conservative on the road and tends to shut down the offense earlier.

Final Score: Ohio State 38 Illinois 0

Hurry up and get your score submitted here and you could be the PROGNOSTICATOR OF THE WEEK. I am just waiting for someone to unseat me.