

11/15/2010: Ohio State "Film Study" (premium)

Every Monday throughout the course of the 2010 Iowa football season, we will have a weekly series titled "Film Study." In this series, we go back and watch the previous game of Iowa's upcoming opponent and put together a list of observations. This week, we examine the No. 8 Ohio State Buckeyes, who will visit Kinnick Stadium to play the 21st-ranked Hawkeyes on Nov. 20.

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Last weekend, after covering Iowa's 21-17 loss to Northwestern, I went back and watched Ohio State's 38-14 victory over Penn State on Nov. 13 for the first time in its entirety.

Below is a list of observations I made of the Buckeyes from examining the game real closely:

Offense

Continuing the pattern of solid quarterback play in this conference, Ohio State has probably the most talked-about quarterback of the past few years in the Big Ten with junior signal-caller Terrelle Pryor.

His stats against Penn State weren't earth-shattering by any means. Pryor completed 8-of-13 passes for 139 yards, had two touchdowns and one interception. He also ran for a mere 49 yards on nine carries, although to be fair, he did have a 40-yard run negated by a penalty.

What I really like about Pryor, and about Ohio State's offense for that matter, is how it is able to execute regardless of

whether Pryor is lined up in a shotgun set or under center. The Buckeyes showed that they have a balance with their formations.

Now one thing to note here is that whenever Ohio State wasn't running shotgun, it ran plays using an I-formation. Any time I did see Pryor under center, he had a blocking fullback and a running back lined up directly behind him. When the Buckeyes did use shotgun, they obviously gave a plethora of looks.

While Pryor has very solid mobility for a quarterback, I truly think he has become a better overall quarterback. Even when the Buckeyes looked stagnant offensively in the first half of their game against Penn State, I saw Pryor making good decisions. He knew when to check down, he knew when to run with the football, he knew when to throw the football away (this was a big observation I noticed on Ohio State's opening drive when the Buckeyes got down into the red zone and there was a play they ran where there was absolutely nothing there).

Simply put, he is a smarter quarterback now than he was at this time a year ago. To me, that makes Pryor more dangerous now.

His one major mistake (the interception) actually came in the fourth quarter, and this was at a point in the game where Ohio State had finally gotten ahead after trailing most of the first half. It was simply a poor decision to throw the football where he did, when he did. Outside of that, however, I could clearly see improvement in his game.

Now I mentioned how Pryor only had 49 yards on the ground against the Nittany Lions. Well, as an offense, the Buckeyes had over 300 yards rushing. For as mobile as Pryor is, the most important component of Ohio State's offense that needs to be contained in order to have any chance of beating the Buckeyes is their running game.

Iowa fans know all too well the success that both Dan "Boom"

Herron and Brandon Saine had on the Hawkeyes a year ago. Both running backs have had big roles this year, especially Herron as of late. Against the Nittany Lions, Herron rushed for a career-high 190 yards and one touchdown. This was two weeks after having his first 100-yard rushing game of the season against Minnesota. Right now, I would say Herron has evolved into the focal point of this Buckeye offense, and the statistics from the past two games would support this claim.

What I like about Herron as a running back is that he has great vision. He knows where the hole needs to be and runs right through it. Once he runs through the hole, he'll gladly cut to the outside and run down the sidelines as often as he can because this is when his speed can best be on display. Herron is not afraid to use the stiff arm, and actually, neither are Saine or Pryor for that matter. Tacklers need to be aware of this when getting ready to hit these guys.

When Ohio State runs the football out of the shotgun, it is going to be a zone-read. This is something Iowa just saw last week against Northwestern and has seen a few times already this season. Pryor will give the football to either Herron or Saine (and there will be some times when both are in the backfield with Pryor) or he'll keep it himself. The backs are best when they have holes up the middle, whereas Pryor does better when he is able to get out of the pocket.

Now as for the passing game, Pryor doesn't have the best arm by any stretch, but he is more than capable of making plays. The Buckeyes have two receivers that need to be accounted for at all times – DeVier Posey and Dane Sanzenbacher. I would argue based on what I saw against Penn State that Posey is the more dangerous of the two. Posey caught a nicely thrown football by Pryor on the Buckeyes' opening drive, and one thing that stood out to me about him was his ability to know where Pryor is going to throw the football and be able to come back for it if he ends up over-running his route. If Pryor looks his way, there might be times where you're thinking he's

throwing it away, only to see Posey come back for the football and make the catch.

As for Sanzenbacher, he wasn't much of a factor in this game against the Nittany Lions until the fourth quarter. He caught one pass from Pryor, but it was a play intended for Posey down field where the ball was hit in the air and Sanzenbacher (who continued running his route) came pretty much out of nowhere to catch the football in mid-air and walk into the end zone. But don't let his numbers against Penn State fool you. He is a guy Pryor will be looking to get the football to.

Defense

What really intrigues me about Ohio State's defense is that while the primary scheme includes a 4-3 look, the Buckeyes run a lot of nickel defense, or at least they did in this win over the Nittany Lions.

The secondary is an enormous part of what Ohio State wants to accomplish defensively. One player from this group of defensive backs that really stood out to me watching this game against Penn State was Jermale Hines. He made a huge play on a 4th-and-1 from Penn State that the Buckeyes held their ground and prevented the Nittany Lions from picking up the first down. I think he's a good tackler, even when an opposing back or receiver has space to work with.

Before I get into the rest of the secondary, I want to stress something important I picked up from watching this Buckeye defense at work – they love to blitz. Don't let them lining up in the nickel fool you. Ohio State is not afraid to load up the box to stop the run, and the Buckeyes will definitely dial up some corner and safety blitzes. In fact, the first touchdown Penn State scored on, Ohio State did send corner Devon Torrence on a blitz and he just missed sacking Penn State QB Matt McGloin by about half a second.

The Buckeyes' aggressive play-calling might have been part of

the reason why the Nittany Lions were able to run a screen pass and a couple of draws successfully in this game before momentum completely shifted in Ohio State's direction.

I mentioned Torrence. He actually gave the Buckeyes the lead in the second half when he returned an interception back 34 yards for a score. On the play, Torrence made a great read on the football, and once he finally had possession of it, there was nothing but green in front of him. Thomas Howard also returned a pick-six in this game against Penn State late in the fourth quarter to really put it out of reach. Like Torrence, Howard made a great read on the football and once he caught it, he had a convoy of blockers in front of him to help pave the way for an Ohio State touchdown.

The other cornerback that needs to be accounted for is Chimdi Chekwa, who is probably the best defensive back in this Buckeye secondary. He will go up against an opposing team's top wide receiver and more often than not, he'll fare well. He did get beat on the second touchdown Penn State scored, which was an inside slant near the goal-line, but Chekwa played a lot better as this game progressed, and as a result, you saw those other defensive backs making plays for Ohio State.

As for the rest of the Buckeye defense, Ohio State ought to feel fortunate with having linebacker Ross Homan back in the mix after missing some time due to injury. You can tell this is a different defense with him out there because he really does take command, and the other guys feed off of what he provides.

Up front, defensive end Cameron Heyward is the guy to focus on. He'll usually line up on the right side, meaning you better have a good left side of the offensive line, otherwise he can absolutely wreak havoc on opposing quarterbacks.

Again, the key to beating this defense is countering its aggressiveness. Penn State did a good job of doing this in the

first half, but a lousy job of reacting to the Buckeyes' defensive adjustments in the second half.

Special Teams

I didn't really take away a whole lot from watching Ohio State's special teams in this contest, which might be a good thing from the Buckeyes' perspective considering some of the struggles Ohio State has had in football's third phase this season against teams such as Miami (Fla.) and Wisconsin. The Buckeyes run the same punt formation every other team Iowa has played this season runs, so there won't be any surprises there when the Hawkeyes do get a chance this weekend to return some punts.

Devin Barclay (another name Iowa fans probably don't want to be reminded of) is back as Ohio State's place-kicker, but he only handles extra points and field goals. Drew Basil is the Buckeyes' kickoff specialist. Penn State didn't obviously do this last weekend, but big plays can be had on this team, especially in the kickoff return area. In fact, Iowa scored on a kickoff return in last year's game at The Horseshoe.

This is going to be an area to keep an eye on this week, without question.

Coaching

Well first of all, whatever Jim Tressel told his team at halftime last weekend when Ohio State was down 14-3, it worked.

The man nicknamed "Sweater Vest" did a decent job I thought. From an offensive perspective, the coaching staff never allowed the offense to become one-dimensional and you still saw a nice balance of running and passing, even when the Buckeyes were trailing. They just simply let Pryor play, and they didn't get away from the ground game, which really proved beneficial for Ohio State in this 24-point victory.

Defensively, good adjustments were made, and the secondary especially looked awfully better in the second half against the Nittany Lions. Obviously getting two pick-sixes in the second half would suggest that to be the case. This coaching staff does a good job of knowing what works and what doesn't, and remaining patient with things that don't seem to work early on in games but maybe do later.

Strengths

- Excellent ground game*
- Strong secondary*
- Pryor better QB mentally now as well as physically*

Weaknesses

- Falling behind early*
- Special teams play*
- Penalties*

Final Thoughts

Here it is. The game pretty much everyone in Iowa City has been waiting for all year is finally approaching. Except unlike last season, this isn't a de facto Big Ten championship game with the winner automatically clinching the Big Ten's spot in the Rose Bowl.

There are two things I think that benefit Iowa immensely in this year's match-up. For one, it's at Kinnick Stadium. Having to play this game at "The Horseshoe" would set up a much bigger set of challenges for this year's group of Hawkeyes. Having this game at home I think gives Iowa a boost it really might need if this game doesn't get completely out of hand.

To go with this game being at Kinnick Stadium is the fact that it is Senior Day, so you know there will be plenty of emotion.

Two players that immediately come to mind are wide receiver Derrell Johnson-Koulianos (who returned that kickoff for a touchdown last year) and quarterback Ricky Stanzi, both of whom are Ohio natives. Not to mention that Stanzi didn't even play against the Buckeyes last season due to the ankle injury he suffered in that game against Northwestern. I mention those two and I didn't even get to players like Adrian Clayborn, Christian Ballard, Julian Vandervelde, Brett Greenwood, Allen Reisner, etc., all of whom will be playing their final games at Kinnick Stadium as Hawkeyes. Emotions will run high.

The first big challenge for this team, which I think it will do a decent job of handling, is keeping these emotions in check. Again, I don't foresee it being a problem given the specific players we're talking about as well as the guys that are coaching them. But at the same time, you don't want emotions to get in the way, especially in a game of this magnitude where it can get out of hand if the focus isn't there from the onset.

Which leads to my next point, and this is something (at least as of late), the Hawkeyes have had issues with – fast starts. I look at this Ohio State team, and one chink in the armor I see (which I just addressed earlier) is getting off to slow starts. Against Wisconsin, this team allowed the Badgers to score a touchdown on the opening kickoff and got behind 21-0 before making it interesting. Just last week against Penn State, the Buckeyes were down double-digits at halftime, only to score in bunches in that second half.

Iowa has gotten off to some fast starts this season, but if the Hawkeyes are going to win this particular game, getting into a slugfest early isn't the answer. It just isn't going to work. This team needs to start fast like it did against Michigan State three weeks ago, and not play like the team that only mustered 35 total points against the likes of Indiana and Northwestern.

I have an interesting statistic to share here before I address what I think the Hawkeye offense can and should try doing this week. The last time Iowa had a running back rush for over 100 yards in a game against Ohio State was back in 1995, when Sedrick Shaw did so in a game that I believe every Hawkeye fan wants to completely erase from their memories. Since that game, Iowa and Ohio State have played each other 10 times. Not once has a back gone over 100 yards rushing against a Buckeye defense. We're talking guys like Tavian Banks, Ladell Betts, Fred Russell, and Albert Young here.

I bring this statistic up because I think Adam Robinson has as good of an opportunity to crack the century mark on this particular Ohio State defense as any of those other guys did. It obviously won't be an easy task, but the Hawkeyes are going to need him in both the running and passing games in order to beat the Buckeyes. He is that important to this offense.

One thing I believe Stanzi might be able to benefit from is the same thing James Vandenberg benefited from playing in Stanzi's place a season ago: Passing deep down field. Not having a guy like Colin Sandeman available hurts, but if you recall last year's game in Columbus, Marvin McNutt absolutely torched Chekwa on two separate occasions. I think McNutt can have another big day, and obviously, we know how much winning this game would mean to Johnson-Koulianos.

Up front, Vandervelde and Riley Reiff need to shore up that left side and not allow Heyward to dominate them, otherwise Iowa is really going to struggle moving the football on this defense.

Defensively, I think this is the game Clayborn breaks out of whatever funk he seems to have been in. If you recall last year's game, Clayborn had 12 solo tackles, and there was one play in particular where I felt Pryor completely underestimated Clayborn's speed as a defensive end. Given the zone-read look Ohio State likes to use when it does run the

football out of shotgun, I think Clayborn will put up some nice numbers.

Now with that being said, the rest of the defensive line (and really, the entire front seven for that matter) needs to be alert and do its best to contain this Buckeye ground game. I say this because there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Ohio State will want to establish the run against this defense that Herron and Saine absolutely gashed apart last year.

The secondary better be ready, however, when the Buckeyes do look to throw, especially when the passing game gets vertical. Posey is the better of the two receivers, but much like Ginn/Gonzalez back in 2006, the bigger concern might be if Sanzenbacher is able to have a big day catching passes from Pryor. If both receivers are able to get it going, Iowa's defense is going to be in a lot of trouble.

Then of course, special teams. I mentioned Ohio State's woes in this area, but I'd be remiss if I didn't also make mention of some of the miscues Iowa has had on special teams this year. Bottom line here is that neither team really can allow this to be one-sided. Assuming Sandeman can't go and Paul Chaney, Jr. is back there fielding punts, he has to know when to call fair catch. There were a couple of times against Northwestern last week when he didn't do this and got blown up by a Wildcat gunner almost immediately. This cannot happen against Ohio State, because if there are any turnovers here (whether they be muffed punts or fumbles as the return guy gets hit), the Buckeyes have enough firepower offensively to make Iowa pay for mistakes.

Everyone knows the importance with this game for both sides. As long as the Hawkeyes don't allow this game to mentally become bigger than it already is, then they might have a better shot at winning than some nationally will give them credit for. But I do know this: If Iowa plays like it did in either of the last two games, Ohio State will roll. The

Hawkeyes better be careful.