

Key Matchup: Ohio State QB Dwayne Haskins vs. Northwestern's Zone Defense



Dwayne Haskins had arguably his best game at Ohio State against the top defense in the country in Michigan. When he steps on the field in Indianapolis, he will see a completely different look as the Buckeyes try to capture a Big Ten title.

Northwestern plays primarily a zone defense and, because of that, doesn't give up many pass plays down the field. The Wildcats will try to force the Buckeyes to march the ball downfield with extended drives, and if they can do that, they give themselves a chance to win.

Ohio State took advantage of Michigan's man-to-man defense a week ago, which opened up crossing routes and vertical routes down the field. The Wildcats won't be able to play much, if any, man-to-man coverage because they simply don't have the athletes to hang with Ohio State's skill on the perimeter.

Because Pat Fitzgerald's defense likes to play different zone coverages, Haskins said he and the Buckeyes will have to sustain drives in order to knock off the Wildcats in Indianapolis.

"They are very fundamentally sound," Haskins said. "They do a lot of things together as a defense that you have to be able to pick apart and drive down the field on them. They don't give you too many big plays - a lot of base coverages and not too much pressure so we have to play really great football against them."

On the season, Northwestern ranks 11th in the Big Ten in pass defense, surrendering an average of 238 yards per game through the air. Twice this season, opponents have thrown for more than 300 yards (Notre Dame, Michigan State) and opponents threw for 14 touchdowns to nine interceptions against the Wildcat defense.

The Wildcats have also been bitten by the injury bug this season, and three of their four defensive backs did not play a week ago against Illinois. Cornerbacks Montre Hartage and Trae Williams were held out against the Illini, as was safety Jared McGee. Hartage, who is widely considered one of the best corners in the Big Ten, has not played the last two weeks but is expected to start against Ohio State. Both Williams and McGee are also expected to play.

Unlike Northwestern, Ohio State's receivers are relatively healthy and go two deep at each position,

despite the injury to Austin Mack. Chris Olave has stepped up in his place and performed above and beyond what many expected of him, and the rest of the Buckeyes have met the high expectations of the unit. The Buckeyes, playing with a Heisman-caliber quarterback and a deep receiver unit, should be able to win this matchup. However if Northwestern's zone defense can force a few turnovers or simply play a bend-but-don't-break style of play, the Wildcats give themselves a chance to pull the upset and get to the Rose Bowl for the first time since the 1995 season.

Kickoff at Lucas Oil Stadium is scheduled for 8 p.m. and the game will be broadcast on FOX.