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Vol. 32, No. 7

"For The Buckeye Fan Who Needs To Know More"

Oct. 20, 2012

Substance Over Style



*Buckeyes Sputter,
Remain Unbeaten*

SONNY BROCKWAY

GETTING OUT OF DODGE – Thanks in part to the efforts of sophomore quarterback Braxton Miller (5), who is shown here nearing the end zone during his 67-yard third-quarter touchdown run, Ohio State earned a 52-49 win at Indiana.

By **JEFF SVOBODA**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When Urban Meyer walked into the postgame press conference after his team's 52-49 victory Oct. 13 at Indiana, the coach wasn't exactly in a celebratory mood.

His body language and many of his quotes – especially when it came to the struggles of a defense looking more like it's getting worse than better – gave the vibe of a man not exactly pleased with what he had just witnessed as No. 8 Ohio State escaped with a victory in the prime-time contest.

Yet one slip of the tongue late during Meyer's short, post-midnight game discussion laid bare an essential truth of his first Ohio State squad

"We win as a team and we ... win as a team," he said, seemingly remembering halfway through his line that the team is 7-0. "At the end of the day, we're going to find a way to win No. 8 as a team."

For all of their warts, many of which were on full display as Indiana nearly pulled off a miracle comeback deep into the Bloomington night, the Buckeyes have managed to get through their first seven games with seven victories while coming together as a team.

When Meyer was hired by Ohio State to take over its storied but troubled football program, fans expected his teams to look something like a Ferrari speeding down the highway. The coach became a rock star in college football circles at his previ-

ous stops, playing inspired, exciting football while turning around Bowling Green, busting the BCS with a perfect season at Utah and winning a pair of national championships in six seasons at Florida.

Instead, the team has more resembled an old but faithful jalopy puttering down the road. There might be parts flying off, and it might not be the prettiest thing in the world, but the thing just keeps on running.

In the world of college football, that gets the job done. After all, 7-0 is 7-0.

"That was the vibe at the end of the game in the locker room," senior offensive lineman Reid Fragel said. "Everybody was kind of hanging their head, but everyone was saying, 'You know what? It's better than a loss.' It's close, but at the end of the day, our record is still 7-0, so that's nice."

In truth, the game wasn't quite as close as the final score might indicate. Ohio State led by double digits for nearly the entire second half and held a 52-34 lead with two minutes to play before Indiana scored a pair of quick touchdowns, the second aided by an onside kick as Memorial Stadium emptied and the game stretched toward the four-hour mark.

Those final two touchdowns dulled what had been up to that point a typical performance by the Ohio State defense this season, especially when facing a spread team. The Buckeyes had given up a few big plays but started off defending the best passing offense in the Big Ten fairly well, especially

since Indiana had to punt away seven of its first 10 possessions.

Suddenly, though, the attrition that has dogged the OSU defense all season kicked in and the Indiana drives started to mount. At one point in the game, the Buckeyes were missing four defensive starters, with defensive end Nathan Williams out with a concussion, linebacker Etienne Sabino on the shelf for up to a month with a broken leg, cornerback Travis Howard nursing a stinger and safety Christian Bryant dealing with a leg bruise.

Howard and Bryant returned for the Buckeyes in the second half, but the injury news simply left the Buckeyes in a bind. Linebackers Ryan Shazier, Camren Williams and Joshua Perry were banged up during the week in addition to Sabino, resulting in an impromptu move of senior fullback Zach Boren to a linebacker position, where he split time with senior Storm Klein.

There were other injuries suffered during the week by freshman defensive backs Najee Murray and Armani Reeves. When combined with recent season-ending shoulder surgery for junior safety Jamie Wood, that left the secondary battered just about all the way around, especially when one considers the season-long shoulder problems incurred by cornerback Bradley Roby.

That was one reason the offensive players weren't too upset when asked about their thoughts

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OPINION

Plenty Of Good, Bad From Saga In Bloomington

Rarely have I witnessed an Ohio State football game that produced more agony and ecstasy than the four-hour marathon the Buckeyes staged with Indiana on Oct. 13 in Bloomington.

Agony: The defense not only bent against the Hoosiers, it broke several times. A two-win team that struggled against FCS member Indiana State and lost to Ball State gashed Ohio State for 481 total yards, 352 of it through the air. Not that we should have been surprised. Cal piled up 512 yards and the Bears are below .500 at 3-4.

Ecstasy: Braxton Miller continued to state his case for why he should be in the Heisman Trophy conversation, even though head coach Urban Meyer says his sophomore QB isn't ready for that kind of hype. Miller piled up 360 yards of total offense, including 67 on a rushing touchdown that couldn't have been drawn up any better on a chalkboard.

Agony: Indiana attempted 54 passes in the game and the Ohio State pass rush generated no sacks. None. Not one against a team that had surrendered eight in its previous five games.

Ecstasy: The Buckeyes actually had a pretty decent performance against the Indiana running game. The Hoosiers managed only 129 yards on the ground, 59 of which came on one play late in the first quarter. Take out that gain and IU averaged a mere 3.0 yards on its other 23 carries.

Agony: That 59-yard run was a touchdown burst by junior running back Stephen Houston, who took a simple handoff up the middle and raced virtually untouched to the end zone. Linebacker Ryan Shazier was late to the hole, and cornerback Bradley Roby made a diving midfield wave at Houston as the Indiana running back sped by. The next time the Hoosiers got the ball, Houston broke off another touchdown run. This one went only 17 yards, but again the IU back exploded up the middle and scored virtually untouched.

Ecstasy: Devin Smith had a pair of touchdown receptions, one of beauty and the other of brawn. Smith raced past IU cornerback Antonio Marshall on a sideline fly pattern for a 60-yard touchdown catch in the second quarter and then muscled his way through a trio of would-be tacklers on his way to a 46-yard score late in the final period.

Agony: Smith dropped a couple of balls vs. the Hoosiers, including what would surely have been another touchdown in the first quarter. The Buckeyes wound up settling for a field goal on that possession.

Ecstasy: Miller completed 13 of 24 passes for 211 yards, including a perfectly timed rainbow that Smith gathered in for his 60-yard touchdown. The sophomore QB connected with a variety of long, short and intermediate targets, showcasing an ever-improving arm.

Agony: Miller misfired badly on several occasions, including one attempt that sailed over the head of 6-5 Jake Stoneburner on the same possession that Smith dropped the sure touchdown. Miller also pitched an ill-advised interception on second-and-goal from the IU 4 midway through the third quarter. A touchdown there would have given the Buckeyes a 38-17 lead. Instead, the Hoosiers quickly cashed in for their own touchdown to keep things close.

Ecstasy: Ohio State blocked its second punt in three games when Travis Howard took advantage of an alignment he had seen during film study. Roby, who had blocked a punt two weeks earlier in the team's 17-16

win over Michigan State, pounced on the loose football in the end zone for a second-quarter touchdown that gave the Buckeyes a lead they would never relinquish.

Agony: For the second time this season, OSU had one of its own punts blocked, and both times the opponent has scored as a result. For those who snickered when Jim Tressel insisted the punt was the most important play in football, how's this for a stat: The Buckeyes have had four punts blocked in the 20 games since Tressel was dismissed. The team had only four punts blocked during the entire decade Tressel was head coach – none during a seven-year stretch between 2003 and 2009.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK
Mark Rea

Ecstasy: Fort Wayne native Rod Smith had a nice homecoming with 40 yards on six carries and three kickoff returns worth 85 yards.

Agony: Smith lost a fumble late in the third quarter and his night was finished. Smith simply cannot continue to fumble as he has throughout his brief career and expect to play meaningful snaps.

Ecstasy: The Ohio State secondary was credited with 15 pass breakups in the game.

Agony: Several of those deflected passes appeared to be interception-worthy late in the contest that could have nailed the coffin shut on the Hoosiers' comeback bid. Indiana attempted 54 passes, and along with no sacks, the Buckeyes recorded nary an interception.

With all due respect to the bottom line, a 52-49 victory over Indiana on the heels of a 63-38 triumph against Nebraska simply isn't Ohio State football. Neither is it championship football regardless of one's record. One day – and that day could come very soon – the offense is not going to be able to come up with video-game performances, and that is the day the Buckeyes will suddenly wake up on the wrong side of the scoreboard.

From Bad To Worse

It began with just a few whispers, but Luke Fickell is rapidly coming under full-throated criticism for the performance of his defense.

Fans became accustomed to rock-solid units churned out year after year under Jim Heacock, but the truth is that Ohio State has more often than not boasted stellar defenses. Since 1970, the Buckeyes have been honored with 88 first-team All-Americans, and 49 of those have played defense.

Ohio State remains a hard-hitting unit which seems to have a penchant for coming up with a big play at just the right time. But this year's defense also leads the league in its maddening number of missed tackles, blown assignments and personal-foul penalties.

During my years covering Ohio State, I have seen some struggling defenses. The 1980 unit was so porous in pass coverage that Illinois quarterback Dave Wilson established an NCAA single-game record by throwing for 621 yards against the Buckeyes. In 1988, when the Buckeyes stumbled to a 4-6-1 record, the defense surrendered a program-record 283 points. The following year, it re-established that mark when it gave up 297.

This year's team is on pace to challenge that record, currently giving up an average of 24.6 points per game. In terms of total defense, the Buckeyes are surrendering 400.0 yards per game on average. To put those numbers in some sort of free-falling context, just two years ago during the 2010 season, Ohio State ranked among the top five defenses in the nation, giving up averages of 14.3 points and 262.2 yards per game. This year's unit doesn't rank among the nation's top 50 in either category.

Yes, the defense is being decimated by injuries. Yes, the team is being asked to learn a new scheme under Fickell and first-year co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers. But Ohio State has signed 19 four- or five-star rated defensive players in its two most recent recruiting classes. Are they not being developed properly or did the Buckeyes whiff on those prospects?

Then there is the matter of two defensive starters basically admitting they took their foot off the gas pedal late in the game against Indiana. When you have so many problems with fundamentals and execution, you can't afford to think all you have to do is show up with a shiny silver helmet in hand and the opposing team will simply shrink away.

On top of all that, when your offensive-minded head coach says he is "going to increase (his) involvement with the defense," you know you've got trouble.

The good news for Fickell and his defensive staff is that there are still five games to be played – five games in which improvements can still be made. But the bad news is the next two games are against Purdue and Penn State, teams committed to spreading out and exposing a defense like Ohio State.

Stay tuned. This could get very interesting.

Some Final Thoughts

- Miller remains far from a finished product, but despite his head coach's stipulations to the contrary, the Ohio State sophomore is a bona fide Heisman Trophy candidate. Through Oct. 13, Miller is the nation's seventh leading rusher, ranks No. 17 in total offense and No. 34 in pass efficiency. In terms of raw numbers, he has rushed for 912 yards and nine TDs while throwing for 1,271 yards and 11 scores. Plus Miller is the heart and soul of one of only 12 undefeated teams left in college football. Sorry, Coach, but that's Heisman material.

- Ohio State is the only undefeated team remaining in the Big Ten, and the Buckeyes have already exceeded last year's victory total. But while Meyer will undoubtedly get some votes for Big Ten Coach of the Year, the current front-runner has to be Bill O'Brien of Penn State. Facing unbelievable scrutiny and unprecedented sanctions, O'Brien has somehow rallied his team to four straight victories. The Nittany Lions had the Oct. 13 weekend off before traveling to Iowa on Oct. 20. Penn State has lost eight of 10 vs. the Hawkeyes since 2000, including all four of its most recent trips to Iowa City.

- One of the oldest traditions in college football has Big Ten roots. On Oct. 15, 1910, officials at the University of Illinois decided it would be a good idea to invite alumni back to the campus for a football game. More than 1,500 returned to Champaign and watched as the Fighting Illini beat Chicago, 3-0, in what is recognized as the first official homecoming game in college football history.

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PUBLISHER
Frank MoskowitzASSISTANT PUBLISHER EMERITUS
Karen Wachsman 1944-1999MANAGING EDITOR
Mark ReaASSISTANT PUBLISHER
Becky Roberts

PHOTOGRAPHY

Sonny Brockway Terry Gilliam
Kevin Dye Josh Winslow

CONTRIBUTORS

Bill Armstrong Bob Roehm
David Breithaupt Julie Roy
Rich Exner Mark Schmetzer
Matthew Hager Steve Siegfried
Marcus Hartman Stacey Stathulis
Rich Leonardo Jeff Svoboda
Craig Merz Mike Wachsman
Eric Loughry Ari WassermanADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVES
Peggy Beathard Ron Friedman
Jack Woodward

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Charter Member

COVER STORY

OSU Fails To Shine Under Bloomington Lights

Continued From Page 1

on how the defense played as it gave up its most points since the infamous 63-14 loss to Penn State in 1994.

"I know that the crazy thing is everybody's asking how did the defense do that, but if you look over on that side of the ball, I can't pick out one guy where I would be like, 'I wouldn't put everything on that guy,'" center Corey Linsley said. "They've just got to get some things figured out."

Added senior wideout Jake Stoneburner, "I have no problem with our defense. They'll be back."

That belief is boosted by the fact the defense has helped pick up the offense a number of times this year when needed. Ohio State's defense has allowed only 10 points on nine turnovers this season, and the stop troops buckled down when necessary in early-season wins against Central Florida, UAB and Michigan State. Even in the Nebraska game, Roby returned an interception for a touchdown and got another pick in good field position to set up another score.

That teamwork is what has Meyer confident about his squad even though the road hasn't always been smooth.

"I'm all in," the head coach said. "I'm supporting our coaches, supporting our players. We have to find a way to make a stop and win a game. There have been times that the offense has been in reverse

and the defense steps up, so we're a team. That's the cool thing about this is that's a team, and there were some nice things said in (the locker room) from the heart."

Sleepwalk In The Park?

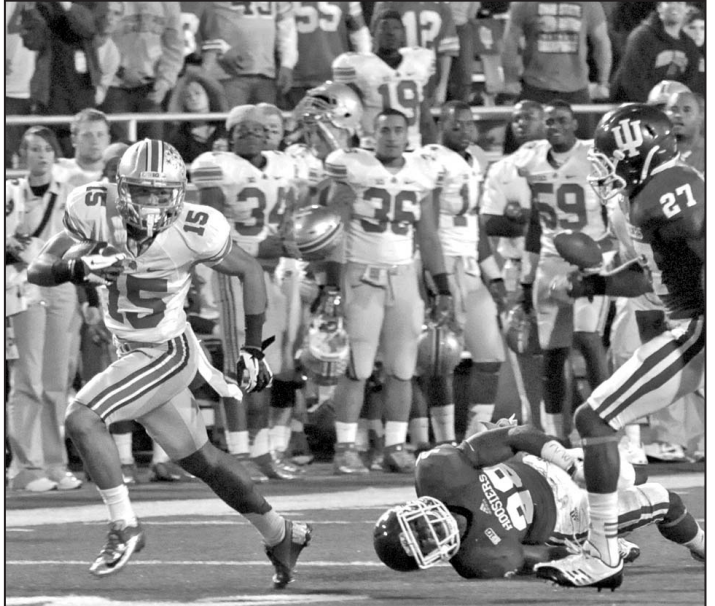
Challenges come in all shapes and sizes for college football teams, and Ohio State faced a big one when it traveled southwest to take on the Hoosiers.

Meyer knew Ohio State was walking into a trap in game No. 7. Not only were the injury concerns building, the Buckeyes were coming off two satisfying but draining wins against ranked teams to start Big Ten play, making the contest against the Hoosiers – who entered at 2-3 overall and winless in two league games – a classic trap game.

While the players swore they wouldn't take anything about the Hoosiers lightly, human nature cannot be overlooked. Ohio State entered the game a 17½-point favorite and hadn't lost to the Hoosiers in 24 years, facts that were hard to ignore even as the Buckeyes did their best to do so.

"It's very alarming," Meyer said. "We're not at the point that we can start overlooking anybody because we certainly don't have the answers. But it is a concern."

Ohio State did open a 10-0 lead but didn't necessarily look convincing doing so, as the Buckeyes needed some penalties by the Indiana defense and a handful



SONNY BROCKWAY

GONE – Ohio State sophomore Devin Smith (15) looks back at a pair of Indiana defenders en route to a 46-yard touchdown reception in the fourth quarter. Despite the big play, the Buckeyes struggled at times with the Hoosiers.

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COVER STORY

of dropped passes by the IU offense to get to that lead.

The Hoosiers even came roaring back, getting a long touchdown run by Stephen Houston and another scoring jaunt by the junior tailback after a blocked punt to take the lead. Suddenly, it looked like Meyer's pregame worries had plenty of merit.

Ohio State used its own blocked punt to shift into gear, at one point going on a 42-20 run, but the players admitted afterward that they knew they weren't supposed to be in for a dogfight in front of a split crowd that also featured thousands of empty seats.

"It's obviously not a good feeling when you're expected to win by a lot more," Fragel said.

That's a battle the Buckeyes will have to continue to fight. On Oct. 20, Ohio State hosts a Purdue team on a two-game Big Ten losing streak before going to take on surprising but unranked Penn State a week later. Lastly, a contest against a free-falling Illinois team is on the docket before the open week leads into games with rapidly improving Wisconsin and archrival Michigan.

While the arc of the season – including whether the Buckeyes will be able to earn the Big Ten Leaders Division championship – figures to be determined by the last two games, Ohio State cannot sleep on the challenge of the next three foes.

The Buckeyes will likely be favored to win each of those contests, so the lessons learned from the Indiana game could come in handy. On the other end of the spectrum, Ohio State now knows that squeaking out a win against a perceived lesser foe doesn't provide the greatest feeling.

"We were supposed to win the game, so a win doesn't really feel too good," Roby said. "It feels better than us losing the game, but I don't feel too good right now. I feel like I left some plays on the field along with everybody else. It's just back to practice and back to the film and continuing to

get better so we can have a better showing next week vs. Purdue."

Needing Work

That feeling was also summed up by the general body language of Meyer, who wasn't in the mood to do backflips following the victory against the Hoosiers.

The head coach looked exasperated after the game, mixing his quotes about being happy to be 7-0 with the observation that, "We're not really good in certain areas right now. I'm not sure what my feeling is right now, other than I'm anxious to get back home and get to work. I wish we were in the office right now because we have to get some things right."

The issues facing the Buckeyes didn't exactly come out of nowhere. When it comes to the defense, the injuries have come at some key positions already hurting thanks to players who have left school over the past few years for one reason or another.

The depth issue is one facing the entire team, as Ohio State is still searching for capable reserves at wide receiver and on the offensive line. The count of scholarship players on the roster is down to 76 after a number of recent defections, and some of those players are facing injury troubles that dull depth even more.

Even the Ohio State offense, which has rolled up 115 points in two games, isn't immune to some issues. Quarterback Braxton Miller continues to get dinged in each game, the Buckeyes seem prone to slow starts and Meyer often talks about how his team's passing game isn't close to where it needs to be.

But that kind of adversity doesn't seem like the thing that will bother Ohio State at the moment. After a nearly yearlong walk through the wilderness that included the departure of one of the most successful coaches in school history as well as one of the worst single-season records for the program and ended with a surprising post-season ban, the Buckeyes are used to taking shots and bouncing back in stride.

That might be one reason the things

that have gone right for this team have outweighed anything that has gone wrong when it comes to the scoreboard.

"There are some real strong positives in there right now, and the most important

positive right now is you have a group of players getting on a plane heading back to Columbus, Ohio, 7-0 with an opportunity to go 8-0," Meyer said.

"We have to get to 8-0 somehow."

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OHIO STATE VS. INDIANA

Ohio State Sweats Out Win At Indiana

By **MARK REA**
 Buckeye Sports Bulletin Managing Editor

Ohio State on Oct. 13 watched an 18-point deficit nearly evaporate in the final 6½ minutes at Indiana, but the eighth-ranked Buckeyes managed to hold on for a 52-49 victory over the upstart Hoosiers in front of 48,880 fans at Memorial Stadium in Bloomington.

Sophomore wide receiver Devin Smith gathered in a 46-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Braxton Miller to give the Buckeyes a seemingly safe 52-34 lead with 6:47 remaining in the game. But Indiana true freshman quarterback Nate Sudfeld came off the bench to rally his team for a pair of touchdowns and a two-point conversion inside the final two minutes to make things almost too close for comfort for OSU.

The Hoosiers accounted for 481 total yards and the highest point total for an Ohio State opponent since a 63-14 loss at top-ranked Penn State in 1994.

That statistic showed on the face of head coach Urban Meyer after the game, who looked anything but like a coach whose team had just improved to 7-0 for the season.

"We're not good in certain areas and we were exposed," said Meyer of his defense, which ranks 10th in the Big Ten in total defense, allowing exactly 400.0 yards per game. "Spread offenses are really exposing us right now. We have got to get something fixed."

Injuries took their toll on the defense with several players sidelined, including a pair of fifth-year senior starters – linebacker Etienne Sabino (broken leg) and defensive end Nathan Williams (concussion). The stop troops were so depleted that senior fullback Zach Boren was pressed into duty at linebacker and wound up the team's leading tackler with eight stops.

While the defense was hanging on by its fingernails, the Buckeyes were punishing the Indiana defense with a season-high 578 total yards in the contest, their highest total since piling up 645 during a 73-20 victory over Eastern Michigan in 2010. It was also

the highest total yardage figure against a Big Ten opponent since OSU gained 603 yards on Indiana during a 35-6 win at Bloomington in 2003.

Coupled with the 63-38 win over Nebraska on Oct. 6, it marked the first time since November 1984 that the Buckeyes had topped the 50-point mark against back-to-back Big Ten opponents. That season, Ohio State took a 50-7 win over Indiana in Columbus one week before rolling to a 52-3 victory at Northwestern.

Miller was once again at the forefront of the Ohio State offense, accounting for 360 yards of total offense. He completed 13 of 24 passes for 211 yards and two touchdowns and added 23 carries for 149 yards and another score.

Junior running back Carlos Hyde followed his career performance against Nebraska with another one, carrying 22 times for a personal-best 156 yards and one touchdown vs. the Hoosiers.

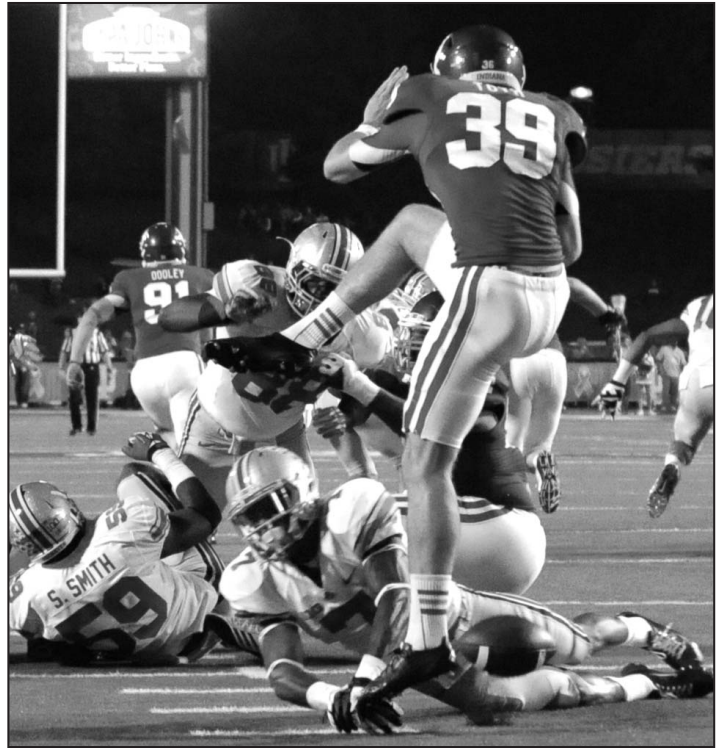
Miller and Hyde became the first OSU players to combine for back-to-back 100-yard games since Archie Griffin and Pete Johnson did it vs. Purdue and Indiana in 1975.

Junior wide receiver Corey "Philly" Brown led the Buckeyes with six receptions for 51 yards while senior receiver/tight end Jake Stoneburner – who had been shut out in the passing game the previous three games – had a season-high four catches for 41 yards.

Smith had just two catches, but they were worth 106 yards and both went for touchdowns. Hyde also had a pair of receptions for 27 yards and a touchdown.

Indiana did most of its damage through the air, getting 352 yards from Sudfeld and starting QB Cameron Coffman, who went most of the way for the Hoosiers and wound up completing 22 of 44 passes for 275 yards and a touchdown. Sudfeld came on at the end and connected on 6 of 10 throws for 77 yards and a pair of scores.

The IU quarterbacks also benefited from the lack of a pass rush generated by the Buckeyes. Ohio State had four sacks the week before against Nebraska, but had none vs. Indiana.



SONNY BROCKWAY

MOMENTUM CHANGER – Senior cornerback Travis Howard (7) made a big play in the second quarter when he blocked a punt by IU's Erich Toth (39). The ball was recovered in the end zone by OSU's Bradley Roby for a touchdown.

Junior running back Stephen Houston was a workhorse for the Hoosiers, rushing 11 times for 91 yards and two touchdowns while catching two balls for 37 yards and another score. IU's leading receivers were sophomore wideout Cody Latimer, who had a game-high seven receptions for 68 yards, and junior tight end Ted Bolser, who added six catches for 42 yards.

Defensively, Indiana was led by junior cornerback Greg Heban and junior linebacker Jacarri Alexander, who shared game-high honors with nine tackles each. Heban also had the game's only interception while Alexander forced a fumble.

The Hoosiers also recorded 10 tackles for loss in the contest, including three sacks. Meanwhile, they were credited with only one pass breakup in the game. Ohio State had 15, five by sophomore linebacker Ryan Shazier.

Wild Scoring Affair

With many of the announced Memorial Stadium crowd of 48,880 disguised as empty seats, the Buckeyes drew first blood by taking the opening kickoff and marching 75 yards in nine plays for a touchdown.

Along the way, OSU converted a second-and-20 when Miller scrambled for 17 yards and Indiana was whistled for pass interference on third down. That put the ball at the IU 27, after which Miller rushed for a 15-yard gain and Brown weaved his way through the defense for a 12-yard touchdown run.

Junior kicker Drew Basil came on to add the extra point, and the Buckeyes were off and running with a 7-0 lead at the 10:52 mark of the first quarter.

OSU made it 10-0 later in the opening period thanks to a 35-yard field goal from Basil with 3:06 remaining, but it easily could have been more. Smith dropped a sure touchdown early in the possession and Miller overthrew Stoneburner in the deep right flat on a play

that could have put the Buckeyes inside the Indiana 10.

Miller was then sacked for a 2-yard loss on third-and-1. Still, Ohio State seemed to be firmly in control with a 10-point lead and a 105-6 advantage in total yardage.

It didn't take the Hoosiers long to recover, though, when Houston capped a five-play, 87-yard drive by exploding up the middle for a 59-yard touchdown sprint. Indiana junior kicker Mitch Ewald added the PAT to make it 10-7 with 2:00 remaining in the first quarter.

IU really turned the tide on Ohio State's next possession, forcing a three-and-out before sophomore Isaiah Roundtree smothered a Ben Buchanan punt to give the Hoosiers the ball at the Ohio State 16. Three plays later, Houston blew up the middle again and raced virtually untouched into the end zone for a 7-yard touchdown run.

Eward tacked on the extra point to give the home team a 14-10 lead just 14 seconds into the second quarter.

Things appeared to get worse for the Buckeyes when their next drive stalled and Basil's 35-yard field-goal attempt sailed wide left. And the next time Ohio State got the ball, Brown seemingly made a diving catch on third down to sustain the possession, but replay showed the ball hit the ground before the catch and the Buckeyes were forced to punt again.

After holding the Indiana offense to a three-and-out, OSU got a punt block of its own. Senior Travis Howard got to IU redshirt freshman punter Erich Toth, and sophomore Bradley Roby recovered the loose ball in the end zone. That, along with Basil's extra point, put the Buckeyes back into the driver's seat at 17-14 with 5:19 remaining until the break.

Following another Indiana three-and-out series – its fourth of eight first-half possessions – Ohio State tacked on another score when Smith beat IU junior cornerback Antonio Marshall on a sideline fly pattern,



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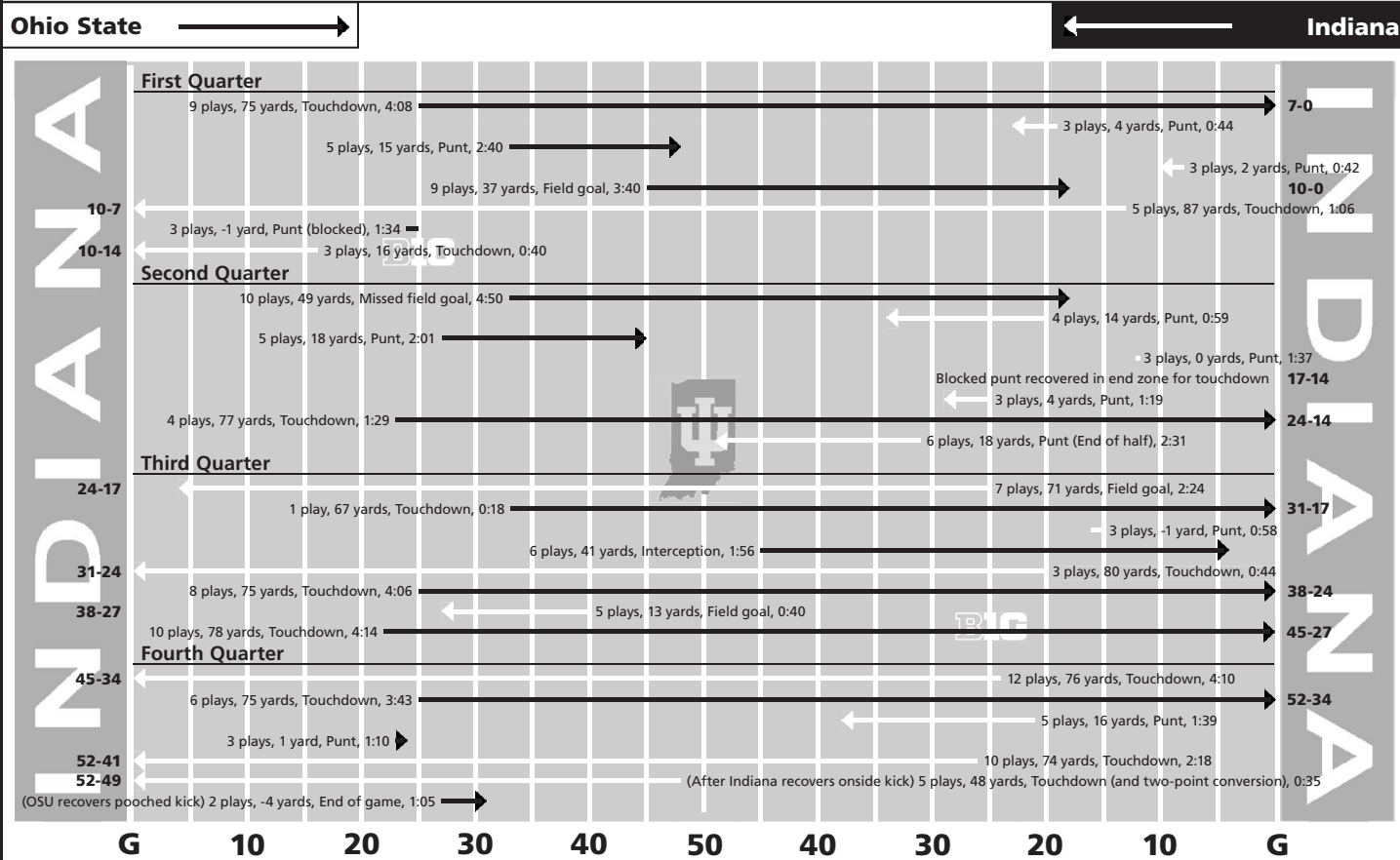
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OHIO STATE VS. INDIANA

Drive Chart



gathering in a 60-yard bomb from Miller. Another PAT from Basil gave the Buckeyes a 24-14 edge at the 2:31 mark of the second quarter, and that was the way the teams headed to the locker room at halftime.

Indiana's punt block helped keep close what could have been a burgeoning blowout. Ohio State held healthy first-half advantages in first downs (14-7), total yards (260-150) and time of possession (20:22 to 9:38).

But the Hoosiers simply wouldn't go away.

They managed to inch closer early in the third quarter thanks to a 22-yard field goal from Ewald, making it 24-17 with 12:36 remaining. But the Buckeyes got a nice 32-yard return from sophomore Rod Smith on the ensuing kickoff, and Miller took a read-option keeper 67 yards for a touchdown on the next play.

The run was vintage Miller, who played off seal blocks at the line of scrimmage from junior left guard Andrew Norwell and sophomore tight end Jeff Heurman and then got help from the umpire, who effectively blocked Alexander's path to the quarterback. Once Miller hit the second level, it was a footrace to the end zone ahead of Heban and sophomore safety Mark Murphy.

Basil booted the extra point following the Miller touchdown to make it 31-17 in favor of the Buckeyes at the 12:18 mark of the third period.

Following yet another three-and-out series by the IU offense, Ohio State tried to take advantage of a short punt and a short field. But on second-and-goal at the Indiana 4, Miller made an ill-advised pass that was picked off by Heban in the end zone.

Things quickly went the other way when

on the third play of Indiana's ensuing drive, Coffman connected with sophomore wide-out Shane Wynn over the middle and the Cleveland Glenville product turned the short pitch into a 76-yard touchdown sprint. Ewald added the extra point, and the Hoosiers had drawn back within seven at 31-24 with 8:40 remaining in the third quarter.

Back came Ohio State with an eight-play, 75-yard scoring drive that was aided by a pair of major penalties by Indiana. First, the Hoosiers committed pass interference on a third-and-6 attempt that fell incomplete, and then they were flagged for a personal foul penalty when fifth-year senior safety Alexander Webb hit Miller out of bounds following a 5-yard gain.

Although Miller was briefly shaken up on the play, it gave the Buckeyes a first down at the IU 15, and two plays later backup quarterback Kenny Guiton flipped a shovel pass to Hyde that the junior tailback took 14 yards for a touchdown.

Basil tacked on another PAT and the Buckeyes had a 14-point cushion again at 38-24 with 4:34 remaining in the third quarter.

Indiana responded with a 44-yard field goal from Ewald to make it 38-27 at the 3:54 mark, but Ohio State answered that with a 10-play, 78-yard drive that Hyde capped with a 1-yard touchdown run on the second play of the fourth quarter.

Basil's extra-point kick pushed the Buckeyes into a 45-27 lead with 14:40 left to play and triggered a wild final period that featured the teams combining for 36 points and 286 total yards.

Despite facing an 18-point deficit early in the fourth quarter, the Hoosiers refused to go away. They came back with a 76-yard drive

The Bottom Line

The game was over when ... Corey "Philly" Brown did his best impression of a baseball center fielder by flagging down Indiana's last-gasp pooch kick with 1:05 remaining. The Buckeyes probably thought the game was over when Devin Smith scored on a 46-yard touchdown reception to make it 52-34 with only 6:47 remaining, but the resilient Hoosiers made a game of it with two late touchdowns.

Game ball goes to ... Braxton Miller. One shudders to wonder where Ohio State would be without their dynamic sophomore quarterback. Miller ran for 149 yards and a touchdown and threw for 211 yards and two scores, generating 360 yards of total offense. It was his fifth 100-yard rushing performance in seven games this season as well as his fifth with 300 or more yards of total offense.

Stat of the game ... 4. Since joining the Big Ten in 1913, Ohio State had surrendered 45 or more points to a conference opponent only four previous times in 662 league games and all four of those games were losses - 45-7 to Michigan in 1943, 58-6 to Michigan in 1946, 63-14 to Penn State in 1994 and 46-20 to Illinois in 1999.

- Mark Rea

that covered 12 plays and culminated in a 1-yard touchdown dive by sophomore tailback D'Angelo Roberts, and after Ewald's extra point, IU had trimmed its deficit to 45-34 with 10:30 to go in the game.

Then the Buckeyes delivered what they thought was the dagger. Devin Smith took an over-the-middle flip from Miller and broke three tackles on his way to a 46-yard touchdown. When Basil's PAT split the uprights, Ohio State had a seemingly comfortable 52-34 lead with 6:47 to play.

But the Hoosiers made things interesting

in the final minutes when they tacked on a pair of final touchdowns.

After Coffman failed to get anything going on Indiana's next possession, second-year head coach Kevin Wilson decided to put Sudfeld into the game for a drive that began at the 3:58 mark. The freshman immediately responded, marching the Hoosiers 74 yards in 10 plays for another touchdown.

In all fairness, the Buckeyes helped along the way with a pair of personal foul penalties

Continued On Page 12

OHIO STATE VS. INDIANA

Recovered Pooch Kick Finally Seals OSU Victory

Continued From Page 11

that were marked off concurrently, pushing IU from the OSU 39-yard line to the 12. From there, Sudfeld found senior wide receiver Duwycy Wilson for the touchdown, and Ewald's extra point made it 52-41 at the 1:40 mark.

Then after Indiana recovered the ensuing onside kick, Sudfeld found Houston five plays later for a 25-yard TD pass. Latimer took a reverse around right end and squeezed into the end zone at the pylon for the two-point conversion to make it 52-49 with 1:05 remaining, and Indiana had visions of an epic comeback.

But rather than go for another short onside kick, Wilson tried to cross up the Ohio State return team with a pooch kick behind the first wall of defense. But the idea backfired when Brown backpedaled to recover the ball, and then two kneel-downs finally preserved the Buckeyes' victory.

Game Notes

- With the victory, Ohio State upped its advantage to a lopsided 69-12-5 in the series. That includes a 25-2-1 record at Memorial Stadium, including wins in each of the last nine games played in Bloomington.
- The Buckeyes increased their series winning streak to 18 games. The last time Ohio State failed to come away with a victory over Indiana was a 27-27 tie in 1990. The Hoosiers' most recent win in the series was a 41-7 decision in Bloomington in 1988.
- The 18-game win streak is the second longest in the series for OSU. The Buckeyes

won 23 consecutive games against Indiana between 1960 and 1986. The Hoosiers' longest win streak in the series is four in a row between 1903 and 1914.

- Ohio State in its history has more victories over Indiana than any other team. The Buckeyes now have 69 wins vs. the Hoosiers, 65 over Illinois, 59 over Northwestern, 55 over Wisconsin and 45 over Iowa.

- Meyer was facing Indiana for the first time as a head coach, but he was on the sideline in 1986 and '87 as a member of Earle Bruce's staff when the Buckeyes played the Hoosiers. OSU took a 24-22 win in Bloomington in 1986, but IU scored a 31-10 upset win the following year at Ohio Stadium, an afternoon Bruce later described as "the darkest day in Ohio State history."

- Despite its recent problems in the series, Indiana has historically made life difficult for Ohio State head coaches in their first season. Dating back to 1913, first-year OSU head coaches are now only 6-4-1 against the Hoosiers. That includes losses by John W. Wilce (7-6 in 1913), Wes Fesler (7-0 in 1947), Woody Hayes (32-10 in 1951) and John Cooper (41-7 in 1988). Ohio State head coaches who beat Indiana in their inaugural seasons were Francis Schmidt (33-0 in 1934), Carroll Widdoes (21-7 in 1944), Bruce (47-6 in 1979), Jim Tressel (27-14 in 2001) and Luke Fickell (34-20 in 2011). Sam Willaman's first team in 1929 played the Hoosiers to a 0-0 tie, and in case you're wondering about Paul Brown in 1941 and Paul Bixler in 1946, the Buckeyes and IU did not play in those seasons.

- Had his team completed its late comeback, Wilson would have become only the

second IU coach in the past 61 years to claim a victory over Ohio State. Bill Mallory, who coached the Hoosiers from 1984-96, claimed back-to-back wins over the Buckeyes in 1987 and '88. Before that, you have to go back to Clyde Smith, whose Indiana team took a 32-10 win over Ohio State in 1951.

- Wilson was offensive coordinator on the late Randy Walker's staff at Northwestern from 1999-2001 and was 0-1 vs. Ohio State during that time. The Buckeyes took a 38-20 win over the Wildcats in 2001.

- While Ohio State played its second night game in a row, Indiana played its third night game of 2012. The Hoosiers took a 24-17 victory over I-AA Indiana State under the Memorial Stadium lights on Sept. 1 and lost a 41-39 heartbreaker two weeks later at home to Ball State.

- Basil's missed field goal in the second quarter ended a streak of 22 consecutive scores in the red zone for Ohio State. The Buckeyes were only 4 for 6 in red-zone trips against the Hoosiers, who entered the game 11th in the Big Ten and tied for 94th nationally in red-zone defense.

- The fact that the Hoosiers could move the ball through the air against Ohio State really shouldn't have been much of a surprise. IU entered the game as the Big Ten leader and ranked 19th nationally in passing offense, averaging 305.2 yards per game. Meanwhile, the Buckeyes were 11th in the conference and 96th in the nation in pass defense.

- Indiana scored its most points ever against Ohio State. The Hoosiers' previous high game in 1987 during that 41-7 victory over the Buckeyes in Bloomington.

- OSU's scoring outburst was its highest total vs. Indiana since a 56-16 win in Bloomington in 1983.

- Miller established a new school record for quarterbacks with his eighth career game of 100 or more yards rushing. His 149 yards vs. Indiana pushed his career total to 1,627, good enough for fourth all-time among Ohio State quarterbacks behind Terrelle Pryor (2,164, 2008-10), Cornelius Greene (2,080, 1972-75) and Rex Kern (1,714, 1968-70).

- Miller moved into 34th place on Ohio State's all-time rushing list. He needs 121 more to move into the top 30 past Butler By'not'e (1,644, 1990-93), John Brockington (1,663, 1968-70), Kern and John Wooldridge (1,747, 1983-86).

- Hyde had his fourth career 100-yard game and upped his career total to 1,161. He needs eight more yards to pass Troy Smith (1,168, 2003-06) and move into the top 50 on Ohio State's all-time rushing list.

- Ewald was a perfect 5 for 5 in PATs, keeping him perfect in 87 career extra-point tries. The IU school record of 107 extra points in a row is held by Pete Stoyanovich (1986-88), who never missed a PAT during his college career.

- The 52-49 final score marked the second straight game in which the combined total in an Ohio State game topped 100. That had happened only twice before in program history – an 83-21 win over Iowa in 1950 and a school-record 128-0 win over Oberlin in 1916.

- The Buckeyes moved their all-time record in night games to 36-18. That includes a 19-8 prime-time record away from home.

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OHIO STATE VS. INDIANA

BSB Quotebook: Ohio State 52, Indiana 49

Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer's opening statement: "I thought Indiana was markedly improved. They played their you-know-whats off and played really hard, and so did we. We're not really good in certain areas right now and we're exposed. We have to get something fixed, but I don't want to take away from the fact we're 7-0. We ran the ball for 353 yards. We had two guys really haul it running the ball and had to make a stop – or had to recover an onside kick. We didn't make a stop but recovered an onside kick. We're going to get back to work, go back home 7-0 and find a way to get better as Purdue rolls into Ohio Stadium next week."

Indiana head coach Kevin Wilson's opening statement: "It was a real exciting game. It was a little tough. We just came up short there. They have a really good team. The way they practice and play is tough to do. They made a bunch of plays on us. They had some points, but we battled. Offensively, we were a little off, but close. We're getting there. We made another play on special teams. I have a lot of respect for our kids. We kept fighting. It's just disappointing to be short again. That is a good football team we played. I think they do things in great ways. I appreciate our kids fighting and competing with them, we just have to find ways to get it done. We're close. We'll keep plugging at it, working at it as we keep moving forward. Being close isn't good enough though."

Sophomore quarterback Braxton Miller's reaction to the game: "They came out ready, they were grinding. I think they did what they had to do and things like that. We just had to overcome the mistakes and keep moving the ball."

Meyer on Miller and the OSU offense: "He started off slow. He started off a little slow but they came back and came in a flurry. So the good thing I saw possession time was (36:54 to 23:06 in favor of OSU). There are some real strong positives in there right now."

Miller on his 67-yard touchdown run early in the third quarter, which answered an Indiana field goal: "You know, big plays like that loosen things up. The opponent scores points and you have to come back with an answer for our defense."

Indiana defensive back Greg Heban on the play of Miller: "He's a great quarterback, great athlete. All week we talked about how we needed to treat him as a running back and not much of a quarterback. When he gets the ball outside the perimeter, even inside the line, he breaks free and he runs. He's a great running quarterback, and we just didn't do a great job stopping him tonight."

Senior right tackle Reid Fragel on the offense producing its second straight 300-yard rushing game: "I think up front the offensive line has been getting it done. The backs are doing a great job reading the holes that we're giving them, and Braxton is doing a hell of a job with his reads. We're just coming together, and it's a good feeling."

Junior tailback Carlos Hyde on taking advantage of his opportunity with Jordan Hall sidelined: "Right now, I feel like I'm doing pretty good on the rushing side. I had 22 carries today, and that's pretty cool. As the game goes on, I just get stronger and stronger. I run harder from the beginning to the end. I just run harder as the game goes on."

Senior wide receiver Jake Stoneburner on his four-catch performance: "It felt good. I love getting the ball. Just the way they were playing us midrange, I seemed to be pretty open with the



SONNY BROCKWAY

NEW SPOT – Senior co-captain Zach Boren (44) made his first appearance at linebacker for Ohio State during the win at Indiana.

hitches and the slants and we were able to take advantage of that. It's not that I haven't been in the plans. It's just we run the ball 40 times or I get double-covered or they look the other way. It's not that I wasn't in the plans. They just happened to see me this week."

Miller on the play of backup Kenny Guiton: "When I go out, I know I have confidence in him to take care of the offense."

Senior cornerback Travis Howard on the OSU defense: "We know the type of players we have and the type of credentials we have. That was a terrible job by us not closing the game. It felt like guys got too comfortable and they made a run."

Meyer on what he can do about a defense that has given up 87 points in its last two games: "I wish I had the answer. If I had the answer then you'd know. That's not very good."

Howard on whether that was a performance worthy of the Ohio State defense: "Not at all. We came in here and we told ourselves that we were going to hold this team to maybe a touchdown. Coming out, they put up that many points – that was horrendous. I feel like we worked in practice on some different schemes. They came out and gave us some different looks. We just have to make adjustments and work on the little things we have to do to make our defense execute."

Senior fullback-turned-linebacker Zach Boren on playing defense: "It's been a long week. I made some mistakes out there tonight. I had that big missed tackle at the end, but Coach (Luke) Fickell has been great with me."

Howard on whether the defensive problems are fixable: "I think it's all just based on us doing our job. We can't try to play other teams' schemes. We just have to know our positions and do what we're capable of doing."

Hyde on his recent success: "I'm having a blast being a running back in this system. It's so fun when they just give you the ball and just let you go play. I don't have to worry about anything – just do what you do best. I'm having a blast and really enjoying this."

Fragel on what he felt in the latter stages of the game: "I knew our defense and special teams would pick it up there at the end, despite how close it got. Just with the time left, I didn't think there was enough time (for the comeback)."

Miller on his reaction as Indiana mounted a late rally: "I said, 'Please, man, let's get this onside kick so we can just kneel on the ball and the game can be over.' I was nervous though."

Boren on the same subject: "We just didn't finish. That was the big thing. We got a little complacent there at the end, and we finally turned it up when it really matter when we recovered the onside kick. We'll get better."

Miller on if the Buckeyes need to finish games better: "Definitely. I think when we get up like that we can't be nonchalant about anything. We have to keep going, keep grinding through the game and play to the (final) whistle."

Howard on the postgame mood in the locker room: "It was definitely a different type of mood. The coaches were excited, but you could tell that they know we are way better than that. That there, what we just put out on the field, was just not Ohio State football. We just have to go out tomorrow and just work on the little things and get back to playing Ohio State football and not allowing that many points."

Miller on the Buckeyes not being eligible to be in listed in the first BCS standings, which were unveiled Oct. 14: "It is what it is. We keep fighting through the games and take it game by game."

Fragel on the same subject: "I think we're over that now. We're focusing on other things. Obviously, the bowl situation is a real thing, but we've kind of moved past that a while ago and set different goals to work around that and get motivated in other ways."

Hyde on whether he still feels Ohio State is a top-10 team after the narrow win: "Yeah, I feel like we're a legitimate top-10 team. We just have to get back in practice this week and fix the minor mistakes that we had. We'll be good. It's nothing major."

Smith Gets Message, Finds Way Onto Field

By **MATTHEW HAGER**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

In a game that featured 14 touchdowns, one scored by Ohio State tailback Rod Smith might have been the most memorable as the Buckeyes battered their way to a 63-38 victory Oct. 6 against Nebraska.

Smith lined up to the left of OSU quarterback Braxton Miller on a first-and-10 play at the Nebraska 33-yard line in the fourth quarter and took a handoff once the ball was snapped. Smith burst straight ahead, splitting between blocks by center Corey Linsley and right guard Marcus Hall.

After breaking through the line, the sophomore rusher found some open space. NU linebacker Alonzo Whaley got off a Reid Fragel block and grabbed at Smith's jersey at around the 25 but could not stay with the Buckeye. Smith then dodged the referee in the middle of the field and veered to his right.

The Fort Wayne (Ind.) Harding product showed during the rest of the play why many Buckeye fans have had high hopes for him since his arrival. Smith broke safety Daimion Stafford's tackle attempt at the 20 and another by defensive end Jason Ankrath at the 10, turned right toward the sideline and eluded yet another would-be tackler in cornerback Stanley Jean-Baptiste. With the right pylon now in his sight, Smith dived for the end zone. He reached it just before two more Cornhuskers could bring him down.

It was a big moment in a prime-time showcase, arguably the best play of Smith's collegiate career.

"It was well overdue," Smith said. "but I'm happy that it came at the right time and in a big game like that."

The fact that Smith is still a Buckeye is something that wasn't guaranteed in January. Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer was not impressed with Smith, especially when the then redshirt freshman missed the team flight for the Gator Bowl – right before Meyer took over the team.

"The conversation in January was, 'You're probably not going to make it. It's probably best you move on and play somewhere you can play because it's obvious you're not good enough to be here,'" Meyer recalled in September.



SONNY BROCKWAY

HAPPY HOMECOMING – Fort Wayne, Ind., native Rod Smith (2) finished with 125 all-purpose yards during Ohio State's 52-49 win at Indiana.

Meyer added that he had transfer papers ready for Smith to sign. But the tailback refused and stuck around.

Smith's turnaround did not start there, however.

Stuck behind upperclassmen Jordan Hall and Carlos Hyde, Smith was not on the post-spring depth chart released by Meyer. At the time, the head coach said those not on the depth chart were players unlikely to make an impact come the regular season.

"(Rod) was probably one of the guys where you'd say he hadn't bought into the system," Hyde said. "He was just like, 'I'm just not really into it yet.'"

Smith struggled through the spring and preseason, and it was not until the season began that he finally realized he needed to make a change if he ever wanted to see significant playing time.

"It took me a while," Smith said. "Overall, I started to begin to see the big picture. When you want to get on the field, you've got to buy in. I've got a lot of respect for (Meyer)."

Smith's emergence from the proverbial doghouse did not happen overnight. He started his turnaround on special teams, catching Meyer's eye in that way as well as with his efforts in practice. The latter of which provided Smith an opportunity for more playing time Sept. 22 vs. UAB.

During the 29-15 win against the Blazers, Smith was the No. 2 tailback behind Hall in place of an injured Hyde. Smith scored OSU's first touchdown on a 1-yard run and finished the game with six carries for 24 yards, most coming in red-zone situations.

"That wasn't mop-up (duty)," Meyer said. "What a great message for our entire team because he was lower (on the depth chart) than most guys on this team. To see him rebound ... and his grades are doing well. He's got a great look about him. It's called maturity and it's happening."

With Hyde returning a week later against Michigan State, Smith was back to solely special teams duty. But against Nebraska, he earned another shot. Smith's TD run came on his first play on offense when he spelled Hyde.

"They called a run play, and I was like, 'I've got to make something happen,'" Smith said. "I know Carlos. He's about to come back into the game. I just tried to make something happen, and I took it all the way."

Smith said the touchdown against Nebraska has gotten him noticed a little more at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center.

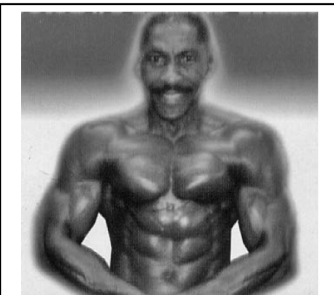
"They're starting to believe in me," he said. "They've put me on a lot of special teams, counting on me to do a lot of things. I feel like I'm definitely getting noticed around here."

Smith's emergence is coming at a good time, too, as he prepared to play in front of plenty of friends and family Oct. 13 when the Buckeyes faced host Indiana. The Fort Wayne native said he would "have the whole city there."

He added that he has plenty of friends and former teammates on the Indiana roster and looked forward to showing them – and those in the stands – how far he's come.

"I'm ready to go out there and give them a show," Smith said.

Smith didn't score against the Hoosiers, but his friends and family did get to see him carry the ball six times for 40 yards and return three kickoffs for 85 more. Unfortunately for Smith, he also fumbled once – though OSU recovered the ball.



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MIDTERM EXAMS: OFFENSE

Buckeyes Have Made Progress In New System

By **MARCUS HARTMAN**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

A fantastic finish gave the Ohio State offense more than passing grades through the first half of its first season in Urban Meyer's spread offense.

The Buckeyes endured some early growing pains, but seven touchdowns against a ranked conference foe are hard to ignore. That happened Oct. 6 during a 63-38 win over Nebraska.

True, the NU defense had struggled at times during the first half of the season after a subpar (by its standard) 2011 season, but the Cornhuskers were coming off a rousing win against Wisconsin during which the Badgers were shut down completely in the second half.

The undefeated Buckeyes hit the midway mark of the season with numbers demonstrably better than they had at the same point a year ago. That was despite reshuffling most of the offensive line, injuries to the top two tailbacks, youth at wide receiver and a drastic alteration of roles for the tight ends and fullbacks.

All told, only three players returned as starters in the same spot they finished last season – quarterback Braxton Miller, wide receiver Corey “Philly” Brown and left guard Andrew Norwell – but Ohio State checked in second in the Big Ten in scoring (38.5 points per game) and rushing (248.7 yards per game) while also improving in every other major category but one.

The passing game remained last in the conference, but the output (182.8 yards per game) was still 36.5 yards better than a year ago. Total offense jumped from 315.3 to 431.5 yards (good for fourth in the league and 44th nationally) while third-down conversion rate also improved significantly (from 10th-ranked at 37.0 to No. 5 at 43.6).

The only downside from 2011 to 2012 came with regard to giveaways, where Ohio State slipped from fourth in the league with seven to sixth with eight.

Credit for much of the progress, especially in the first four games, went to Miller and Meyer, a pair who could go down in Ohio State history as one of the best quarter-

back-coach combos to represent the Scarlet and Gray.

Though he was not happy with Miller's miscues – the sophomore threw three interceptions and lost two fumbles in the first six games – the Ohio State head coach was willing to overlook them thanks to his 25 plays (15 passes and 10 runs) of 20 yards or more.

Miller was clearly the team's top weapon in the first half, especially the first five games before some of teammates got into the scoring act against Nebraska.

Meanwhile, it was Meyer's new spread offense that most often put Miller in position to make those plays.

What follows are BSB's midterm grades for each position group on offense. All stats are through Ohio State's first six games, and all rankings are through games of Oct. 6.

Quarterbacks

Ohio State has had more than a couple of dual-threat quarterbacks through the years, but Miller has the look of one capable of besting them all.

He ranked third in the Big Ten with 127.2 rushing yards per game in the first half of the season, a figure that more than doubled his full-season 2011 average of 59.6. He also averaged 7.2 yards per carry, up from 4.5 a year ago.

With breathtaking quickness and a burlier body in year two as a Buckeye, Miller proved to be one of the nation's most dangerous runners. That, though, was not a big surprise given the flashes of such ability he showed as a freshman.

After being inserted into Meyer's quarterback run-centric offense, Miller was expected to get plenty of chances to show off his running ability.

What remained a question – to fans and the coaches alike – was how he would look throwing the ball. He has also made great strides in that department, both from an aesthetic and statistic standpoint.

Miller still misses his target at times, but less frequent are the flutterballs that plagued him last season. Quarterbacks coach Tom Herman attributed that to more consistent footwork, and Miller said staying calm has helped as well. He used to get so excited when he saw an open receiver that he would rush his throw and let his delivery get out of whack, but that was not as much of an issue the first half of this season.

As a result, Miller completed 61.5 percent of his passes (83 of 135) through Oct. 6 for

Rating The Offense

Here is where the OSU offense ranked among the Big Ten and nationally (statistics through the Nebraska game).

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Rushing Offense	248.67	10th	2nd
Passing Offense	182.83	105th	12th
Total Offense	431.50	44th	4th
Scoring Offense	38.50	22nd	2nd
Turnovers Lost	8	T38th	T6th
Third Down Con.	43.59	47th	6th

1,060 yards and nine touchdowns. He nearly equaled his passing yards for all of 2011 (1,159) and upped his completion percentage from 54.1.

“If you notice, his fundamentals are much improved from where it was from day one to day whatever it is,” said Meyer, who pointed out his quarterback has gotten better at controlling the defensive backs with his eyes rather than telegraphing where he intends to throw. “Is he perfect? No, he's so far from perfect. But so are we.”

“He makes you go hard. He's only a sophomore. He's won every game he's started (this season). He's getting so much better than he's been.”

While Miller was the star of the show, Kenny Guiton proved to be a capable replacement for him on more than one occasion in the first half.

He stepped in at a moment's notice to finish touchdown drives against Michigan State and Nebraska, although he never really got to show what he can do as a passer.

Guiton was 5 for 9 for 37 yards while running for 14 yards on five carries.

“That was the same guy that I've mentioned since January probably from here to there in the biggest turnaround,” Meyer said. “First in life – his demeanor and his representation is impeccable. If you watch practice film, every snap Braxton takes, you see a man right behind with the helmet going through the same. Only he's not under center. (Kenny's) right behind him doing the same stuff.”

“I don't think Kenny is as good as Braxton. If he was, he'd be playing, but I think he's a very functional quarterback. And if Braxton had to go down, how do you win? Somebody else has to pick up that slack.”

Third-stringer Cardale Jones, a true freshman from Cleveland Glenville, made headlines only off the field as an unfortunate message on his Twitter page earned him a one-game suspension for the Nebraska game. (See related story in Ohio State Insider on page 4.) However, the staff had earlier praised Jones for making progress in his development after a discouraging spring.

Overall, the group got high enough marks for production to overlook the occasional mistake. There is no telling where the Buckeyes would have been in the first half without the explosiveness of Miller, but it is safe to say 6-0 would not be their record.

BSB Midterm Grade: A-

Running Backs

The position group was in flux since before the season began, but overall production was solid throughout the first half.

Senior Jordan Hall played only three games but offered a glimpse of what he can do by averaging 5.4 yards per carry. He missed the first two games while recovering from offseason foot surgery and then looked rusty in his debut against California on Sept. 15. He contributed a career-high 105 yards on 17 carries a week later against UAB, but a knee injury suffered Sept. 29 against Michigan State prevented him from building any momentum.

Hall's initial return was timely as it coincided with the exit of Carlos Hyde, a 232-pound junior with great speed who left the Sept. 8 win over Central Florida with his own knee injury after rushing for 27 yards on seven carries.

Hyde also missed two games, but he finished the first half with the best game of his career, a 140-yard effort that included four touchdown runs. That came one week after Hyde came up large in the fourth quarter against Michigan State. With Hall sidelined and the Spartans keying on Miller, Hyde churned out 18 yards on three carries as the Buckeyes ran out the clock to end the game.

“A big guy like that, you get him started (and) it's hard to bring him down,” Meyer said.

The coach ideally would like to see the quickness of the 194-pound Hall complement the power of Hyde by using the two together, but so far the two have both been healthy at the same time for only roughly one-half of one game this season.

On the bright side, third-stringer Rod Smith showed some signs of delivering on his promise as a four-star recruit three years ago by ripping off a

33-yard touchdown run in week six against Nebraska.

Smith, a sophomore who redshirted in 2010 before playing sparingly last season, began the season behind Hall, Hyde and true freshman Br'onte Dunn but impressed the coaches with a change in attitude sometime after the season opener.

That left Dunn without a carry in the last four games of the first half. He reached the end zone late in the opener against Miami (Ohio) and carried five times for 29 yards in a week-two win against UCF, but the five-star recruit also struggled with the playbook. He appeared to miss an assignment more than once against the Knights, leading to broken plays and extra hits on Miller.

The fifth scholarship back on the roster, true freshman Warren Ball, is out for the season because of a foot injury.

BSB Midterm Grade: B

Offensive Line

This group went from potential liability to team strength by the middle of the season.

Meyer raved about the work of his starters with growing volume from one game to the next. The performance of tackles Jack Mewhort and Reid Fragel, guards Norwell and Marcus Hall and center Corey Linsley was particularly praised after it cleared the way for 204 yards rushing against a talented and deep Michigan State front seven.

The left side with Mewhort and Norwell was particularly strong as it became the go-



Jordan Hall

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MIDTERM EXAMS: OFFENSE

to side in the running game and remained solid in pass protection. Mewhort, a starting guard last season, held up well in a new role on the outside, and Norwell grew into the type of player he was expected to be as a five-star recruit.

Things did not go as swimmingly on the right side as Hall was plagued by the occasional missed assignment or blown protections, and Fragel showed some definite signs of being a former tight end in his first year as an offensive lineman.

Linsley, who admitted in the offseason he had to change his attitude or find a new team, held everything together in the middle both mentally and physically. With the junior center making the line calls, the line rarely looked to be caught off-guard by a blitz or stunt. Linsley also displayed good power and mobility in run blocking with the quickness to keep up with rushers in the passing game.

"If you could use the word dynamic with an offensive line, right now this is as good as I've thought about an offensive line in a while," Meyer said Oct. 8. "They're playing really well, and they're just fantastic human beings. I mean, last night I go to victory meal and they're all eating together.

"The offensive line, they're my dudes now. The good ones, the good offensive lines are always together. They always do things together, and their coach has done a very good job. Coach (Ed) Warinner has done a very good job with them."

Health remains a concern with the group as the coaching staff has not expressed much confidence in the readiness of any reserves to step in and play for an extended period of time, but the starting unit put together six of the best games an offensive line has produced in recent memory at Ohio State.

"Taylor Decker has all the talent in the world, he should be rotating in there, and Chase Farris and Tony Underwood are the next three that have to be ready to go – and they're not," Meyer said. "They're good guys and they have talent."

BSB Midterm Grade: A-

Tight Ends/Fullbacks

Former members of each position – tight end and fullback – had bright moments in their first season since the groups were combined in Meyer's offense.

Senior Zach Boren, a three-year starter at the traditional fullback spot in Ohio State's former I-formation based attack, endured a significant change in role but passed with flying colors.

He remained one of the team's best blockers, often helping seal the edge or getting downfield to pick off a linebacker or defensive back in the running game as he frequently lined up in a wing or H-back position. Boren also added ball carrier to his title, picking up 33 yards on 11 rushes that included the first two rushing touchdowns of his career, while continuing to be a solid receiving option with five grabs for 42 yards.

More than that, Boren became a favorite of Meyer for his leadership on and off the field. Meyer in particular praised the Pickerington, Ohio, native for firing up the troops prior to the game-clinching drive at Michigan State.

With Jake Stoneburner having moved to wide receiver, the more traditional tight end role fell to youngsters Jeff Heuerman and Nick Vannett.

Their improvement was cited as a

reason the staff felt comfortable moving Stoneburner, and they showed why once the season got under way.

Heuerman caught five passes for 81 yards and a touchdown while Vannett had five catches for 51, and both proved to be better-than-average blockers.

"I see really improved players," Meyer said. "I see Heuerman and Nick Vannett have earned that right to (play more)."

Adam Homan, Boren's fellow senior fullback, was a corps member of the special teams unit after returning from an undisclosed injury.

BSB Midterm Grade: B+

Wide Receivers

The group improved by leaps and bounds both from the beginning of the spring to the start of the regular season and from game one to game six.

Depth remained an issue going into the second half of the season, but two players stepped to the forefront as Brown became something of a safety valve for Miller while sophomore Devin Smith was his go-to guy for a big play.

Brown caught 35 passes for 352 yards and a touchdown in the first half of the season, more than doubling his team-leading total of 14 catches last season.

Known previously for his straight-line speed, Brown showed an ability to get open underneath often in the revamped passing game. Miller found him repeatedly on short and intermediate routes to take some pressure off the running game, and Brown was the main target when Meyer and Herman called for screen passes to try to spread out

opposing defenses. The head coach ribbed Brown for not racking up many yards after the catch, however.

On the other side there was Smith, a burner who caught 19 passes for 351 yards and four touchdowns. Two of those were game-breakers. Smith went 72 yards for a tie-breaking touchdown in the fourth quarter against California and then 63 more two weeks later at Michigan State.

Smith can scare a defense, but he can also disappear as he was held without a catch by Nebraska and made only two in the opener. His game winner against the Spartans was one of only two that day.

Still, the contributions of Smith and Brown in the first half mark a major improvement from the previous season and have been key in the overall development of the offense.

Everyone else in the wide receiver room is still looking for a role.

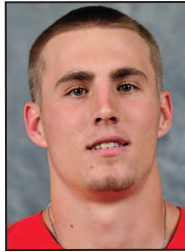
Stoneburner was the team's No. 3 receiver in the first half as he caught seven passes for 92 yards and three touchdowns, although some of that came when he lined up at tight end.

While his statistics left fans and reporters wondering why the senior wasn't playing a greater role, he did a lot to help the offense in other ways. Thanks to his 6-5, 245-pound frame, Stoneburner remained an excellent edge blocker. His ability to stay in front of defensive backs and the power to control them down the field often helped Miller or a running back turn a solid gain into something greater.

Smith and Brown also deserve praise for their work as blockers.

The rest of the receivers seemed to be in a jumble behind the starters with true freshman Michael Thomas fighting sophomores Evan Spencer and Verlon Reed for what playing time was left when the starters needed a blow.

BSB Midterm Grade: B



Jeff Heuerman

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MIDTERM EXAMS: DEFENSE

Defense Bent, Rarely Broke During First Half

By ARI WASSERMAN
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

The Ohio State football team had just cleared what was considered to be one of the biggest hurdles of the 2012 season with a 63-38 win over Nebraska in an Oct. 6 night game in Ohio Stadium, advancing to 6-0 in the process before earning the team's first top-10 ranking under head coach Urban Meyer.

Never shy about offering criticism to his still-growing team, regardless of what successes his Buckeyes are enjoying, Meyer offered a dose of reality through the celebration of knocking off the Cornhuskers.

"The defense can get better," the coach said. "We created some turnovers but can get better. (We're) pleased with their effort, but we all know we can't give up those kind of yards and those kinds of points and win the game."

The Buckeyes had just allowed Nebraska to put up 38 points and 437 yards of total offense, but the defense came up with big turnovers – including a Bradley Roby interception for a touchdown – and clamped down when the team needed it the most.

The Nebraska win served as a microcosm for Ohio State's entire season. Much as they did in the win over the Cornhuskers, the Buckeyes won each of their other five games despite having yet to put together a defensive performance that resembles the storied "Silver Bullets" defensive units of the past.

"We are happy to be at this point and it is good to be undefeated, but I think we all know that this defense has a lot to work on," Roby said. "We have made big plays and we have won all of our games, but we know we have to tighten things up if we want to keep winning games."

The Buckeyes kicked off their season by allowing Miami (Ohio) to score only 10 points and California was the only other team aside from Nebraska to score more than 20, but

Ohio State has been prone to giving up yardage in bunches.

Through six games, OSU allowed 386.5 yards of total offense per game, which ranked 10th in the Big Ten. In contrast, Michigan State paced the conference in the same category, allowing opponents an average of only 272.3 yards per contest.

There is something to be said, however, for bending without breaking. Despite allowing their opponents to gain sizeable yardage totals on a fairly consistent basis through the first half of the season, the Buckeyes allowed only 20.5 points per game, the sixth-best mark in the Big Ten. Again, Michigan State led the conference in that category, allowing only 15.2 points per contest through six games.

Still, Ohio State defenders didn't like watching opponents march up the field, even on possessions that don't result in points.

"It's good not breaking when we do bend, but I think we all would rather get stops at the beginning of drives so we can get the offense back on the field," senior

linebacker Etienne Sabino said before suffering a broken leg early in the victory against Nebraska. "We know it is all about how many points we give up, but we put ourselves in a much better position in that category, too, when we are able to stop teams from moving the ball altogether."

A major part of Meyer's "Plan to Win" has to do with field position, so drives during which the opposition is successful in gaining yardage, yet doesn't score points, aren't always what the head coach envisions as successful.

"That's not how I want Ohio State defense to be played for our careers," Meyer said. "However, I do understand injury issues. I do understand when a team comes rolling in here with good athletes at receiver. There are a lot of reasons that can happen."

Even with some of the uncertainties on



JOSH WINSLOW

BACK ON THE FIELD – Fifth-year senior Nathan Williams (43) provided a first-half spark on the defensive line after undergoing microfracture knee surgery last year.

defense, the Buckeyes hadn't allowed any opponent to score more points than their offense during the first half of the season.

Are there issues that need to be addressed? Sure, and Meyer would be the first to admit that. However, the coach seemed pleased with the progress of his team's defense in his first year guiding the program.

"At the end of the day, keep them out of the end zone," Meyer said. "That's where we are right now."

The following are BSB's evaluations of each defensive position group followed by a midterm grade for the first six games of the season.

Defensive Line

A quick look at the depth chart was reason enough for many experts to crown the defensive line the strength of the team, if not one of the most dominating units in all of college football.

Led by senior John Simon and junior Jonathan Hankins, the unit sports plenty of star power to lead a group that has about as much depth as any defensive line Meyer has coached in his entire career.

But as is always the case with one of the most brutal positions in all of football, the OSU defensive line saw its depth tested in the first half of the 2012 season.

Simon battled a myriad of nagging injuries including a bothersome shoulder, Michael Bennett was used sparingly as he recovered slowly from a groin injury, and senior Nathan Williams was working to fully recover from the microfracture knee surgery he had last year.

Add in the fact that Adam Bellamy – one of the team's starters a year ago – apparently lost his love for the sport and left the team before the season, and all of a sudden the deepest and most talented unit on the team faced a burgeoning crisis.

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MIDTERM EXAMS: DEFENSE

After what Meyer described as a slow start for the line – specifically struggling to pressure and sack the opposing quarterback – the defensive front seemed to be regaining its form as the season hit the midway mark.

It started with Simon, who had the biggest game of his career against the Cornhuskers when he posted seven tackles, including a school record-tying five for loss. He added two sacks and forced a fumble.

Simon's three sacks were tied for fifth in the Big Ten, but no other OSU defensive lineman had recorded more than one. In all, the Buckeyes forced 16 sacks through six games, which was second most in the conference behind Nebraska.

Success on the defensive front wasn't measured only in sacks, however. The Buckeyes saw improvement in pressuring the quarterback, a surge led by Hankins. Using his massive 6-3, 322-pound frame, the junior bullied opposing offensive linemen, pushing them into their own backfield, while showing tremendous lateral quickness in pursuit of ball carriers. Hankins led OSU defensive linemen with 31 tackles, including one sack, after six games.

Defensive lineman Garrett Goebel, a team co-captain alongside Simon, posted 25 tackles, which was sixth best on the team. Against Nebraska, the often-overlooked senior posted eight tackles and a stop for a loss.

Williams was somewhat of a wild card heading into the season because Meyer was unsure of how the senior would heal from his knee surgery, but Williams played in five of the team's first six games and posted 19 tackles, a stop for a loss, two quarterback hurries and a forced fumble.

Playmaking ability from the reserves was sometimes lacking, and playing time for such freshmen as Noah Spence, Adolphus Washington and Tommy Schutt was less than most anticipated it would be heading into the season.

There were some flashes, however, as Spence recorded a sack on his first career play. He played the most of the freshmen during instances when the defensive line was limited because of injuries to Bennett and Williams. And Washington proved to be a natural pass rusher in limited action, recording his first career sack.

Though Meyer is the first to point toward the youthful talent on his defensive line, the head coach has said multiple times that a program of Ohio State's caliber shouldn't be in a situation where it must rely on freshmen in critical moments.

Co-defensive coordinator Everett Withers, however, said the freshmen have shown enough ability to earn bigger roles as the season progresses.

"They learn the game well," he said of the three freshmen. "We didn't just give them their spots to play; they earned their spots. Obviously, we want to see those guys continue to get better (because) they're going to be guys we're going to need as the year progresses."

OSU's defensive line wasn't as dominant as most envisioned it would be, but as the team reached the midpoint of the season, things were certainly looking up. Opposing teams had rushed for only 121.2 yards per game against the Buckeyes, which ranked No. 35 in the nation and fifth in the Big Ten.

BSB Midterm Grade: B+

Linebackers

As Ohio State went through the rigors of fall camp, linebacker Storm Klein wasn't a part of the team as he faced domestic violence charges from an incident during the summer.

Once released from the team, Klein's future with the Buckeyes seemed all but nonexistent.

Fast-forward three months, however, and the senior filled one of the most important roles on Ohio State's defense. After serving a two-game suspension, Klein returned to the team and eventually took sophomore Curtis Grant's spot in the starting lineup.

For a while, it seemed hard to imagine that Klein would have had any kind of senior season, but with Sabino out, it became difficult picturing Ohio State's linebacker corps without Klein.

"I worked my butt off," Klein said, stating that he never was concerned about earning a role on the field once he was approved by Meyer to return. "Things happened for me and I got the spot back. I am grateful."

Meyer is likely just as grateful he allowed Klein to return to the team since the Buckeyes' depth issues at linebacker are as glaring as any spot on the field. Of the 10 linebackers who have committed to Ohio State since 2009, only two – Klein and sophomore Ryan Shazier – were getting meaningful playing time during the first half of the season.

"We have to get going," Meyer said of the linebackers. "That position isn't at Ohio State's standard right now. Not depth-wise."

In four games, Klein posted 14 tackles including a big sack in OSU's win over Nebraska. The Buckeyes' biggest playmaker at linebacker, however, continues to be Shazier. A big hitter with a nose for the football, the sophomore stands out easily as he flies across the field to make big stops.

But as youthful players often do, Shazier has been prone to overpursuit, which causes him to be out of position at times. Meyer, however, has been a big advocate of the sophomore, stating that he admires Shazier's ability to play the game fast without thinking too much about making a mistake.

Shazier led the team in tackles through the first six games with 59 – 18 more than anyone else on the team – and he had 4½ tackles for loss, two sacks, three pass breakups, two quarterback hurries and a forced fumble.

The loss of Sabino hurts the Buckeyes moving forward, especially because the senior was starting to play the best football of his career. With 11 starts and appearances in 46 games under his belt, he was third on the team in tackles (37) and tied for second with sacks (two) with an interception and a forced fumble through six games.

Meyer said Sabino – who took a redshirt during the 2010 season – will be missed as he recovers from a fractured bone in his right leg. The best-case scenario for his return is early November.

"That's a tremendous blow," Meyer said of the senior linebacker's injury. "Sabino is like a son and brother to everybody."

Grant was expected to have a breakout year as a sophomore, but his slow start eventually dropped him down the depth chart. At the midway point of the season, he had played in just five games and registered only eight stops – a grave underachievement given that most anticipated the five-star recruit out of Richmond (Va.) Hermitage would take the starting spot and run with it this season.

Meyer isn't comfortable with the depth at the position, especially because the team is counting on youthful players such as freshman Joshua Perry to take over for Sabino in Ohio State's base defense. Perry had two tackles in five games during the first half of the season.

Another possibility in the second half could be freshman David Perkins, who had made two tackles on special teams, although Meyer admitted that he hoped Perkins would be further along in his understanding of the defense.

BSB Midterm Grade: C-

Secondary

As Ohio State prepares to take the field each Saturday, Roby seeks out senior cornerback Travis Howard and relays an important message to his counterpart.

"Every game before we're out there, during warmups, I tell him why we're the top two Big Ten corners," Roby said. "I tell him that every game. I feel like when he's out there and I am out there, it is going to be hard for teams to complete passes."

There is merit to Roby's statement, especially when it is quantified in game-altering plays. Howard picked off opposing quarterbacks three times during the first half of the season, recording more interceptions than any other player in the Big Ten.

Roby completed his first half with perhaps his most prolific collegiate game when he recorded two interceptions against Nebraska, including one in the first quarter that he returned 41 yards for a touchdown to give the Buckeyes an early 7-0 lead.

Now in his second season after redshirting his freshman year, Roby has come on as one of the most talented cornerbacks in the country. Along with making big plays in the passing game hard to come by for opposing receivers, the sophomore has made plays all over the field, including blocking the first punt of the Meyer era at Michigan State.

"I believe in myself," Roby said. "I believe in my talents. I know the types of plays I can make, and I don't really see a lot of corners out there doing the things that I can do. I'm not trying to say that in an arrogant way, but I just feel like I'm one of the best, so I try to go out there every week and just prove it."

Roby had a dream prior to the Nebraska game that he'd intercept Cornhuskers quarterback Taylor Martinez and return it for a touchdown. That came to fruition, but not by coincidence. Meyer said Roby is one of the hardest workers on the team, which makes it no wonder he's one of the biggest standouts on defense.

Given that he's been with the program for three years, Roby is eligible for the 2013 NFL draft, and one website ranks him the No. 6 cornerback available.

There's no telling if Roby will leave the Buckeyes early, but his performances have at least made it an option.

"Frankly, I think the sky's the limit for him," OSU cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs said. "I think Bradley's a first-round draft pick down the road."

The Buckeyes have seen some movement with who is playing at the back end of the secondary, especially after starting safety C.J. Barnett has missed three weeks with a high ankle sprain.

Fifth-year senior Orhian Johnson, who split time as a junior last year, made three straight starts in Barnett's place. Johnson was productive with his newfound chance at playing time, tying with eight other players for second in the Big Ten with two interceptions through Oct. 6.

Fellow safety, big-hitting junior Christian Bryant, has become one of the Buckeyes' most dependable defenders.

Bryant had a game-clinching interception in Ohio State's win over Cal on Sept. 15, and through six games, he was second on the team with 41 tackles.

Meanwhile, Howard started all six games at the cornerback position opposite Roby and registered 24 tackles to go along with seven passes defended, four passes broken up and his three interceptions.

Not all has been good for the Buckeyes on the back end, however. Despite having a lot of star power and eight picks among the regulars, OSU was prone to allowing big plays during the first half.

Through six games, Ohio State allowed an average of 265.3 yards of passing per game, ranking 11th in the Big Ten and 96th nationally. The Buckeyes also experienced multiple blown coverages as well as blunders stopping receivers from gaining extra yardage on shorter routes due to poor tackling and/or miscommunication.

BSB Midterm Grade: C



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MIDTERM EXAMS: SPECIAL TEAMS

Mixed Results Plague Specialists Through First Half

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

For years, Jim Tressel was trumpeted as the piper of special teams in college football, the champion of the punt and the kind of guy who seemingly had an underground lab designed to pump out kickers who could put three points on the board with the regularity of a metronome.

When the coach's 10-year reign came to an end, it seemed that it would be hard for the Ohio State football program to find a new mentor who cared as openly about special teams as Tressel, but the Buckeyes did just that in Urban Meyer.

The first-year head coach personally oversees the team's special teams units, and he cares so much about that part of the game that one of the four points in his bedrock "Plan to Win" philosophy is that his team needs to win the kicking game.

"I coordinate the kicking game and the best players are on it," Meyer said at the start of the season. "There's an emphasis."

Coming in from Florida, where his teams thrice led the SEC in net punting and also developed a penchant for blocking kicks, Meyer has talked about installing a championship-level special teams unit in Columbus since he arrived.

Through the first six games, the results were mixed, however. While Ohio State made some big plays in the kicking game – notably a blocked punt vs. Michigan State and a punt return touchdown vs. Nebraska – the team still sat near the middle of the Big Ten in most special teams categories at the midway point of the season.

Kicking Game

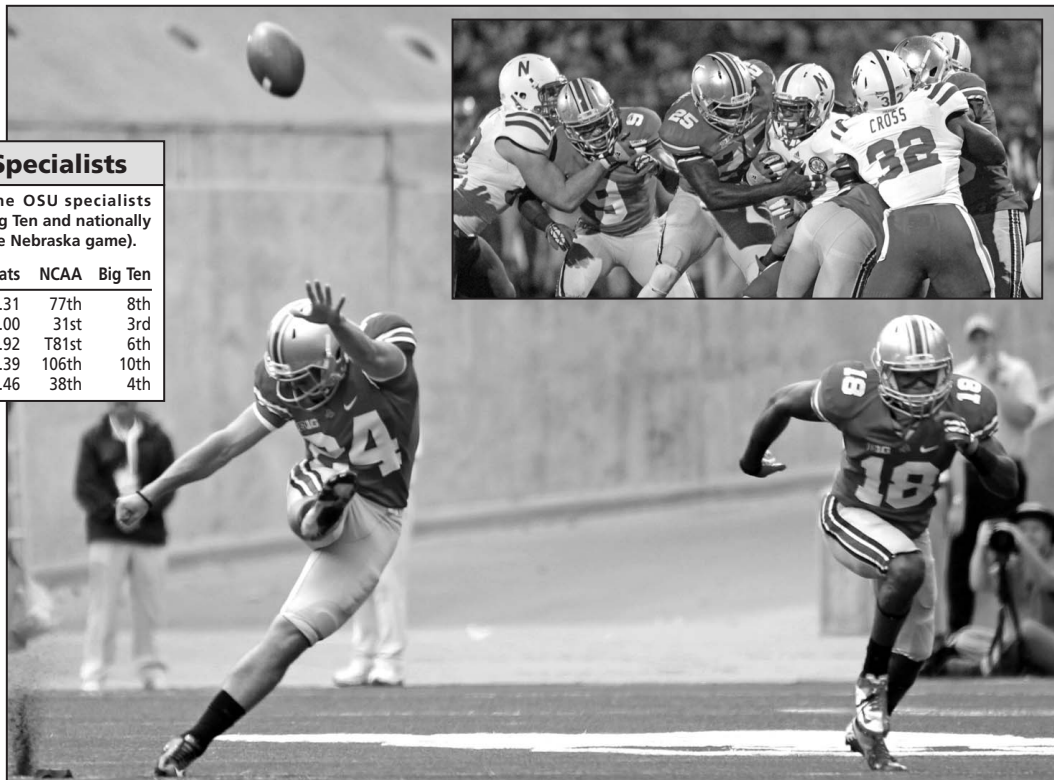
Through the first six games, Ohio State junior kicker Drew Basil was perfect on field goals.

In past years, when many more drives seemed to fizzle in three-point range, that would mean a lot for the Chillicothe native. But this season, with Ohio State punching in touchdowns at an efficient rate, Basil had attempted only two field goals, banging in a

Rating The Specialists

Here is where the OSU specialists ranked among the Big Ten and nationally (statistics through the Nebraska game).

Category	Stats	NCAA	Big Ten
Net Punting	36.31	77th	8th
Punt Return Avg.	12.00	31st	3rd
KO Return Avg.	19.92	T81st	6th
Punt Return Def.	12.39	106th	10th
KO Return Def.	19.46	38th	4th



JOSH WINSLOW PHOTOS

OFF AND RUNNING – Junior Drew Basil (24) has helped "piranhas" such as freshman Najee Murray (18) keep opponents from reaching the 25-yard line with shorter kickoffs. The kickoff unit, including sophomore Adam Griffin (9) and freshman David Perkins (25), held Nebraska kick returner Ameer Abdullah (center inset) at bay during Ohio State's 63-38 win on Oct. 6.

24-yarder vs. Central Florida and a 26-yard try against Michigan State.

Basil's only failure when it came to booting the ball through the uprights occurred in the win against California when he missed his opening point-after try. Otherwise, Basil had made 29 extra-point attempts.

Junior George Makridis served as the short snapper without incident.

Where Basil's leg received the most work was when it came to kickoffs. Ohio State

kicked off 38 times in the first half of the season, with opponents starting at an average of their own 24-yard line, one better than the new touchback spot in college football.

Ten of Basil's kickoffs – and one of two by reserve kicker Kyle Clinton – went for touchbacks, but Ohio State had adopted the philosophy that it wanted to try to pin opponents inside the 25 thanks to a young but hungry kickoff coverage unit known as "the piranhas."

"Some teams have made the conscious decision to kick the ball out of the end zone," said cornerbacks coach Kerry Coombs, who works with that unit. "What we've decided is that we're going to try to keep you inside the 20 or the 15 and try to follow the 'Plan to Win' – put the ball down there as tight as we can. We're intentionally not kicking it out of the end zone because we like the way those guys run down the field and cover."

Through six games, that unit was only 38th in the country, allowing 19.5 yards per return. However, the group – which features a few veterans such as senior safety Zach Domicone and third-year sophomore corner Adam Griffin but is dominated by such freshman defenders as Camren Williams, Najee Murray, Armani Reeves, David Perkins and Devan Bogard – was critical to the Nebraska win, keeping explosive return man Ameer Abdullah under wraps.

Abdullah averaged only 18.0 yards on eight returns, and he was stopped inside the 25-yard line seven times, prompting praise from Meyer.

"That was impressive," the OSU head coach said. "That was a very good kick returner."

Domicone, who combined with Griffin on two tackles against the Cornhuskers, said the coverage unit was pleased with its performance in the first half but still needed to get better. Nebraska was the fifth team in a row to face the Buckeyes that posted at least one 30-yard return.

"We started off strong and had our ups and downs," the fifth-year senior said. "We were definitely challenged (before the Nebraska game). Coach Meyer challenged us, Coach Coombs challenged us. With the rule change (moving the touchback out to the 25) and everything else, the kickoff is a very important play. It's the first play of defense. We were challenged, we embraced that challenge and wanted to make the most of it."

While Domicone acknowledges consistency is something the kickoff coverage men need to continue to work on, there is a reason they have started to impress.

The coaching staff has stressed how important it is for those players to sprint down the field and make a play, staging weekly races in which fast get-off times are encouraged and competition is used to make the players better.

The unit's nickname has come from the fact that the staff wants those players to be like sharks – sense blood in the water and attack aggressively. And in Coombs' words, such players as the 5-8 Griffin, 5-9 Murray and 5-10 Reeves are small enough that the piranha description fits perfectly.

"They can't be sharks yet because they're only this tall," Coombs said, holding out his hand. "They have to be piranhas. We like to say that when they go after a guy with the ball,

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it's like sharks to blood. But with this group, they're like piranhas just because they're mid-gets."

Those players don't seem to mind the nickname, though, as they've embraced their chances to make an impact.

"When we're out there, you're just thinking go get the tackle, get down there as fast as you can," Reeves said. "You just have to go make a play."

BSB Midterm Grade: B+

Punting Game

Ohio State's ranking of 77th in the nation and eighth in the Big Ten in net punting through six games was not where the team wanted to be, and there have been some positives and negatives.

On the plus side, of senior Ben Buchanan's 31 punts, 14 were fair caught, eight pinned teams inside the 20 and just two went for touchbacks.

"What we're trying to do is change the field position," said Buchanan, who was averaging 42.0 yards per kick. "We want to pin them deep, and I think when we have the correct blocking assignments, we can do a very good job of that."

One major reason the team isn't higher in the rankings is the blocked punt the team suffered vs. UAB on Sept. 22. The Blazers came in untouched on the Buckeyes' first punt of the game, swatting the ball out of Buchanan's hand before he could even drop it and returning the loose pigskin for a touchdown.

Ohio State left a gap on its line while trying out a new formation for that game, resulting in multiple players running free toward Buchanan.

"It was a missed assignment," Meyer said. "You're supposed to block two. If you don't block two, something bad happens. And because of injuries, we had a lot of young players. That was (freshman Joshua Perry's) first rep in the game, so we did not do a good job preparing him."

Buchanan said he expected the team to rebound from that strongly for the rest of the season.

"We just try to focus on consistency," he said. "We knew we had that one lapse on protection, but I'm confident in my guys."

Ohio State got off to a very good start when it came to limiting returns, as Cal's dangerous Keenan Allen had just one return for minus-9 yards. That moved the punt return yardage given up by the Buckeyes to minus-2 through three games.

But things dipped downward a bit after that. In the official game statistics, the 20-yard scoring return by Nick Adams of UAB was erroneously counted twice, and that represents 40 of the 99 return yards teams have against the Buckeyes on the season. Forty-three more were picked up by Abdullah on a single return in the Nebraska game.

Ohio State also tried a fake punt that didn't work when Buchanan gained only 6 yards on a fourth-and-7 vs. Nebraska before being hauled down.

"I watched the first two or three times where we did punt, and I thought it would be there and we needed a momentum shift," Meyer said. "It didn't work."

Buchanan was helped by the emergence of long snapper Bryce Haynes. Though the redshirt freshman split time with Makridis on punt snaps, when he had been in the game Haynes had more often than not been one of the first players down on coverage.

Haynes had forced a number of players into fair catches, made one tackle and even corralled a punt for his teammates to down near the goal line.

"I'm excited to do anything I can for the team," he told BSB. "It's been awesome get-

ting out there this year. It's really been a great experience."

The Georgia native redshirted a season ago while Makridis held down the snapping jobs. But Haynes added weight and strength while perfecting his form, which has led to this season's success.

"I definitely got bigger and tried to improve my strength and got faster, too, and worked on my snapping and consistency," he said.

BSB Midterm Grade: C

Returns

Before Ohio State played Nebraska, Meyer was left ruing the fact the Buckeyes hadn't broken a big return on the season.

That was rectified against the Cornhuskers when Corey "Philly" Brown took a second-half punt from Nebraska's Brett Maher, picked up some excellent blocks, juked the punter and went 76 yards for a touchdown.

"Going out there, I knew I had to make a play," Brown said. "Coach (Stan) Drayton was in my ear, in my face telling me I had to change the game. When I caught the ball I saw no one even close to me, so the blocking was excellent. Coach Drayton did a good job motivating me, and those guys did it for me."

It was the first big return the Buckeyes have had under Meyer, and it came one week after Bradley Roby broke around the Michigan State line and blocked a punt against the Spartans. That play came after Roby begged the coaching staff to put a block on, and Ohio State improved Meyer to 17-0 since 2005 when his team gets a blocked punt.

"Coach Meyer kept calling 'white,' which is a return," Roby said. "I was like, 'Coach Meyer, call punt block. I can get it. Call punt block.' He called it the very next time and I blocked it. I just feel like I try to make as many plays as possible for my team to win the game."

The excitement those two players showed after making those plays shows just how important the kicking game remains at Ohio State, and it showed just how critical those plays were considering that not many good things had happened this season up to that point when opposing teams were getting ready to kick the ball to the Buckeyes.

The UAB game provided a stark example. In addition to having the blocked punt returned for a touchdown, Ohio State committed a running-into-the-punter violation to keep one Blazers drive alive and also allowed UAB to recover an onside kick at the start of the second half.

That particular miscue left Meyer annoyed at his team's fundamental breakdowns in special teams.

"Stand there and catch it," he said. "We've got to put on the tip sheet: Catch the ball if it's kicked to you. In all seriousness, that's a major error, and we've just got to cover it."

Brown's touchdown return also helped rectify the fact the Ohio State return game wasn't living up to Meyer's expectations. OSU was 83rd in the nation and ninth in the Big Ten in punt returns leading into the Nebraska game, and Brown's big play helped boost the Buckeyes to 31st in the country and third in the league.

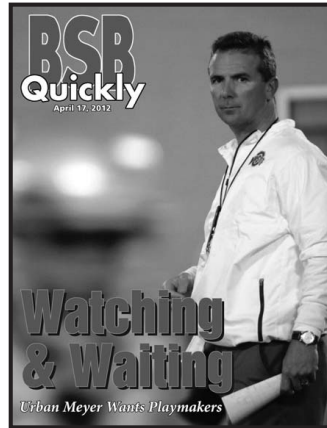
In all, Brown had four returns for 88 yards and the score, while Devin Smith had four tries for 15 yards. Roby had also chipped in one return for 11 yards, while Jordan Hall had one try for 6 yards.

Things weren't much better when it came to kickoff returns. In the first six games, Ohio State had 12 returns for 239 yards, an average of 19.9 yards that placed 81st in the country and sixth in the Big Ten.

Smith, the primary return man, had eight tries for 147 yards (18.4-yard average), while Reeves had two for 45 (22.5).

BSB Midterm Grade: C

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