

Week 13 - Bowl

Opponent: Michigan State Spartans

Kickoff: 1:00 PM

TV: ABC



Alright, it's been a month and that loss is still bitter. A complete defensive collapse saw another ugly loss to a bitter rival this year. What was up with that 3rd quarter? After the 2nd quarter against Bama and the 4th quarter against UF I really thought we had played our worst quarter of football this year. Man was I off. Oh well, now we rally the troops and "settle" for a New Year's Day bowl game that we would've killed to play in pre-Richt. My how times have changed.

About the GTGame

This is not fun. Aside from the fact it was (once again) miserable weather for a GT game, I felt pretty darn good at the half. The offense looked about as steady as they have all season, in fact, after the first drive I was wondering if it was 2002 all over again. It didn't take too long into the 3rd quarter before all hell broke loose and visions of the 2002 romp were shattered. Closer to 2000 in fact. In case you've forgotten, that wasn't a banner year in this rivalry, unless you're a Goose loving Trek fan.

The defensive collapse was just painful to watch. As my friend (and living legend in some circles) Maxwell Penn bemoaned downtown after the game..."we just lost to a team that runs 3 plays." While I don't necessarily agree with Mr. Penn on that point completely (I've been told Paul Johnson is an offensive genius by every GT fan on the planet I think), I will say that a couple of those long TD runs did look awfully similar. I think I counted at least 5 plays.

The end result of the game was that it might have been just embarrassing enough to get one of our stars or two to come back for another shot, although to their credit, you shouldn't have to worry about a loss when you drop 42 points on someone...especially when that someone struggled with Gardner-Webb. I'm still shaking my head.

MSU Offense

- The MSU offense is pretty pedestrian, even by Big 10 standards. Even with the #3 leading rusher in the NCAA they are a woeful 9th in the Big 10 in rushing. Their 56th scoring offense rank is their top national offensive stat. Not great. The offense obviously revolves around star RB Javon Ringer and he accounts for over 95% of their rushing yards on the year.
- At QB, 5th year senior Brian Hoyer is experienced but not overly gifted. A solid passer, his numbers aren't eye-popping although to his credit its difficult to put up big stats when you hand the ball off as much as he has this season (ask Buck Belue). He's had a rough senior season, barely completing 50% of his passes after going for right at 60% as a junior. His 9 TDs are significantly off of last year's 20 as well. He's struggled down the stretch, failing to throw a TD in their last 3 games (Wisc, Purdue and PSU) while tossing 4 INTs. He's got a touch of mobility but dang sure won't be the focus of the offense with his legs.
- Javon Ringer has gotten the bulk of the work this year in a big way, leading the nation in carries (370) by 32 attempts. In fact, 4 of the 6 highest single-game carry totals this season were performed by Ringer...44, 43, 39 and 37...you don't see that much anymore. At 5-9, 202 Ringer is a solidly built, fast tackle-breaker that just produces. Coming into this season he was averaging right at 6 ypc for his career (on over 450 attempts). Becoming the focus of the offense has slowed him some, as defenses have clearly keyed on him, dropping his average to 4.3. The end result is he put up big yardage numbers. Looking inside the numbers though, he was held below 70 yards



3 times (2 losses) in their last 5 games...wearing down maybe? He's a threat out of the backfield so look for him in the flats.

- At WR 3 similarly-sized options have been pretty consistent this season for the Spartans in Blair White, B.J. Cunningham and Mark Dell. Dell is the deep threat of the group, averaging nearly 20 ypc. Big TE Charlie Gantt is an efficient pass catcher, scoring 4 TDs on only 19 catches so look for him in the red zone. The MSU WRs account for only 4 TD catches this year...3 by Dell and 1 by White. The backup TE has 1 and the starter and backup at FB each have one. I guess they get a little creative with the play action down close. This MSU team doesn't sport an Andre Rison, Charles Rogers or Muhsin Muhammed.
- The MSU OL is pretty large, averaging over 300 pounds per man. They start 2 seniors and a junior, with the experience all being on the right side of the line. Unlike us they've had almost no issues with injuries, with the team starting the same person in every game at 4 of the 5 OL spots. They're averaging only 1.5 sacks per game given up...not too bad.
- **Bottom Line:** This offense revolves almost entirely around Ringer. Surprise. When you've got a back like Ringer, you ride him. Unless you have a QB to match his talents, in which case you use balance to lose close games to your arch-rival (sorry, got bitter again there). Look for Ringer to get 30+ carries and try to wear us down. They won't be relying on the same type stuff that GT used to run all over us. No RB really had great success running on us all year other than Scott at LSU and that was mostly bullish type stuff which isn't the same game Ringer brings to the table. This will be classic Big 10 ground game against the (supposed) SEC team speed on defense. We haven't done a great job of translating our considerable defensive talent into results this year but there's plenty of room for improvement.
- **Key Matchup to watch when they have the ball:** In his final college football game, look for a big game from Dannell Ellerbe at LB. He's battled injuries all year and should be significantly improved for this one after all the time off.

MSU Defense

- Similar to their offense, the MSU defense doesn't do anything to particularly stand out. 8th in the Big 10 in rush defense, 7th in pass defense...nothing great. Very similar to us, they're prone to defensive collapse performances, giving up 38 to Cal in the opener, 45 to Ohio State and 49 to Penn State...not so surprisingly, these are their losses. Outside of those 3 games they played relatively well, albeit against some pretty bad offenses.
- None of their DLs made any postseason all-conference teams. DE Trevor Anderson is probably the best of the bunch and his 8 sacks on the season attest to his ability to get to the passer. Their interior is a bit undersized, weighing in at 273 and 288 for the two starters.
- At LB, the star of the group is SLB Greg Jones. The sophomore leads the team in tackles by a large margin and his 12.5 TFLs point to a nose for the football. Eric Gordon and Adam Decker round out a solid LB corps.
- SS Otis Wiley is the lone senior starter amongst the back 7 on D. He's a good one, earning all Big-10 1st team honors. He's 3rd on the team in tackles and has 4 INTs on the season to go with 7 pass breakups. He pairs with Dan Fortener to form a really good safety combination. CBs Ross



Weaver and Chris Rucker have excellent size for the position. It will be interesting to see how they handle the strong WR tandem of Green and Massaquoi.

- **Bottom Line:** In their losses this year the MSU defense was exposed. Cal rushed for over 200 yards, as did Ohio State. Penn State didn't, but they threw for 419 yards so that qualifies as being exposed. They're giving up 4.2 yards per rush...not great. The 557 yards they gave up to PSU was their season high (or is it low?), but they gave up 430 or more to 4 other teams, including bad Wisconsin and Indiana offenses. Look for UGA to do what they've done all year...use the pass and run to equally depending on what the defense is doing. Given how well Stafford's been playing since the UF debacle and his potential jump to the NFL, he could have a big day.
- **Key matchup to watch when we have the ball:** Given that MSU is giving up over 4 ypc against the run, I fully expect to see Knowshon get a fair number of touches and rightfully so. Between him and Stafford, Knowshon probably has less to prove in college so this could very well be the last time you see him wearing the Red and Black. Given all he's done for us in the 2 short years we've had him I'll be watching him closely. He always seems to do something special.

The MSU Game Overall

If you thought this season was a frustrating (OK, infuriating) one, just add a bowl loss on top of it and you've got the recipe for some serious offseason heartburn. Heck, in 2005 we won an SEC title but a fluky bowl loss to West Virginia (one that ESPN is still getting mileage out of...thank you Pat White for finally graduating) ended the season sourly. A bowl loss this year would just be horrible.

The players have plenty to play for. Pride, the seniors, etc. but as a fan of the SEC in general this game (as usual) features a matchup of the SEC and the Big 10. It'll be billed as Big 10 brawn versus SEC speed and it'll be partly right. In recent years UGA has had great success against Big 10 teams, going 2-0 against both Wisconsin and Purdue in the past 12 seasons. Of those matchups, Michigan State will more closely resemble Wisconsin than either of the two Purdue teams (that brought Brees and Orton and the Tiller passing attack to their bowl games). With Ringer, they'll have that classic Big 10 workhorse even if he's in a slightly smaller package than we're used to seeing. Of course, when it came to playing Ron Dayne, everyone was in a smaller package.

I honestly have no idea what to expect from this team. There have been so many cases where history pointed to them playing well and they completely bucked the trend. With that said, I'm not sure what to make of Richt's darn good bowl record (5-2) with regards to this team. Everything I've heard and read says that the staff is getting back to fundamentals; let's hope we see some results, particularly on the defensive side of the football.

Positional Notes

- It sounds like Carlton Thomas is putting on a show in bowl practices. He's a little, little fella but I've said all along that I really expect him to make an impact whenever he gets a shot. He's basically a mirror image of UF's undersized return specialist/slot receiver/running back.
- With the GT game injury to Gamble (broken leg) coupled with the other considerable injuries we're down to 4 healthy LBs I think. Dent, Curran, Ellerbe and Downtin. That's unreal considering how deep we were there preseason. We've lost 4 guys to season-ending injuries and redshirted one...of course he got hurt too.



- Looks like Josh Davis will be getting the nod at OT ahead of Bean.

Random Thoughts

- How much is ESPN hyping the Rose Bowl? I'm sure it's because it's an excellent matchup and has nothing to do with the fact it's being carried on ABC (ESPN's sister station). I think they've promo'd that game more than the national championship game in their bowl build-ups by about 3:1. They've gotten pretty transparent.
- The bowl games this season have mostly been really good. I needed that. If UGA's season had lived up to the considerable expectations, this would have been one of the great college seasons ever because there have been some really, really good games all year.
- Pay close attention to the Ok State –Oregon Holiday Bowl tomorrow night. We'll be opening with those same Cowboys next year in a pretty unbelievable early season tilt out in Stillwater.
- Yes, I know Stafford could be going #1 overall, and if he does he'll get paid a ton of money, but man Detroit's going to be a bad place to be for a long time. Seems I heard something about the auto industry struggling. Turns out the football team is worse than bad too and is way more than a new coach/QB/GM miracle like the Falcons pulled from becoming even decent again. For the sake of Stafford and Bradford or whoever else might go #1, I hope Detroit trades the pick. They've got 2 first rounders already but they'll need about 10 (although that'd be tough to sign).
- For the record, I'm hoping Stafford strongly pursues the opinions of the Mannings and guys like Troy Aikman when making his decision. There's a reason QBs that stay 4 years in college are more successful. The NFL is not a place to still be polishing your game as a QB. It will eat you alive, especially on a Detroit-level bad team.
- So, for some reason I was watching College Football Live the other day before a bowl game or something and because the whole crew was different I actually paid attention. Instead of the usual merry band of morons they had Wendy Nix hosting (very professional) and was joined on set by Corso (ok, one moron, although I've noticed when Herbstreit's not around Corso acts much more normal), Tommy Bowden and Todd Blackledge. I realized a couple of things. One, Blackledge is as good in studio as he is during broadcasts where he's the best in CFB. Two, Blackledge was so good it made me realize how bad the bulk of the rest of the ESPN studio-heads are.
- Recruiting's coming to a boil but we probably already got our biggest fish when Stacey Searels decided to stay. That's beyond huge. The guy's been an absolute magician as OL coach in his 2 years in Athens. With the guys we'll have returning there next year and with Searels decision not to head to his alma mater, the future is certainly bright for the UGA OL. He's a saint.

Have a safe New Year,
Jody

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