BSB Split On Who Will Prevail In CFP First-Round Matchup Between Buckeyes, Volunteers

After three weeks of uncertainty and turmoil, Ohio State will finally have the chance to avenge its loss to Michigan and get back onto the field on Saturday night when it hosts No. 9 seed Tennessee in the first round of the College Football Playoff.

Saturday's matchup is a special one in many ways, as it is not only the first-ever game for Ohio State in the new 12-team College Football Playoff but also the first-ever Ohio State home game played in December and the second-ever matchup between the Buckeyes in the Volunteers.

With all of this taken into account, Buckeye Sports Bulletin took their crack at predicting this first-round CFP matchup, which is set to kick off in primetime at frigid Ohio Stadium in front of a nationally televised audience (8 p.m., ESPN/ABC).

Patrick Engels: One And Done For Bucks In CFP

Ohio State is running into a challenging situation Saturday night at Ohio Stadium.

Coming off a brutal loss to Michigan that increased the team's losing streak in the rivalry to four games, there is significant pressure on head coach Ryan Day and every player on the roster to extend the season as long as possible, as, in many Buckeye fans' eyes, anything short of a national championship would be a failure in this "natty or bust" season.

In addition to the mounting pressure on the team and their coach, the Buckeyes are also heading into the College Football Playoff with a lot of uncertainty in several important position groups, notably on the offensive line, where Day has indicated there will be a rotation at the two guard positions between Luke Mongtomery and Austin Sireveled at left guard and Tegra Tshabola and Siereveld at right guard.

The other position where there is uncertainty is at kicker, where the team is currently having an open competition between Jayden Fielding — who missed two close range boots against Michigan — and the seldom-used senior Austin Snyder.

To make matters even more murky, Ohio State is set to host a confident Tennessee team that is seemingly playing their best football and is as strong — maybe even stronger — as Michigan in the trenches with a dominant, deep defensive line and an All-American running back.

Taking all of these factors into consideration, I just can't see the Buckeyes overcoming these faults and leaving with a win Saturday night at Ohio Stadium.

Ohio State does have a major advantage considering the game is as home in front of a *mostly* Scarlet crowd (it seems like Tennessee fans will be travelling well to Columbus), but this advantage could quickly come back to bite them if it gets off to a slow start and the crowd begins to boo, similarly to what the fans did against Michigan after some three-and-outs. Because of this, it is imperative for the Buckeyes to get off to a hot start, but since they have had trouble doing that nearly all year, I don't see anything changing.

I could see the Volunteers making a statement early — similar to what Indiana did — and scoring a quick touchdown to go up in front. But unlike against the Hoosiers, I think the Buckeyes will have a much harder time punching back on offense due to their offensive line struggles. I simply cannot envision an offensive line who is playing a first-time starter at left guard in the College Football Playoff putting together a strong outing — especially when factoring in the future NFL studs the Vols have on the defensive line — which could make it a tough night for Quinshon Judkins and TreVeyon Henderson as well as Will Howard.

On the other side of the ball, I'm not sure if the Buckeyes have played a better offensive line yet this season, as the Vols' front five — led by All-SEC center Cooper Mays — is very experienced and physical. If Tennessee can impose their will on the Buckeyes' defensive line, they can control the line of scrimmage all game, allowing Dylan Sampson to put together a strong outing and continue to put pressure on the Buckeyes' defenders.

Ohio State can certainly win this one. It has the advantage on the perimeter on both sides of the ball — that is if Will Howard can get the ball to the outside — and they are also the more disciplined team (the Volunteers are the fifth-most penalized team in the country, with 99 flags worth 819 yards).

But like against Michigan, if the Buckeyes lose the battle in the trenches and can't get the ball to their playmakers, they could be in for another rough night on the frozen tundra of Ohio Stadium. With several holes on the offensive line, I just can't see Ohio State winning that battle, which means I see the Buckeyes' 2024 season ending way sooner than anyone in the country has expected. **Tennessee 20, Ohio State 17**

Bobby Gorbett: OSU Defense Fuels Low-Scoring Win

In the days leading up to Ohio State's last game against Michigan, I felt that not only would I be shocked if Ohio State lost, I would have been surprised if it gave up more than 10 points. As it turned out, the Wolverines only needed to surpass 10 points to win The Game, and instead of playing in the Big Ten Championship game and potentially earning a first-round bye in the playoffs, the Buckeyes will face a very talented Tennessee team in round one of the playoffs.

Ohio State will have home-field advantage on its side, but as ESPN's Kirk Herbstreit pointed out after the Final CFP Rankings were released, this certainly could be a nuisance if the Buckeyes struggle early in front of what will likely be a volatile Buckeye crowd.

The good news for Ohio State is that as talented as fourth-year Tennessee head coach Josh Heupel's bunch is, they've had their share of struggles on the road this season. The Volunteers suffered their first loss of the season on the road to an eventual 6-6 Arkansas team, before losing a few weeks later to

Georgia.

After going up 10-0 on Georgia, the Volunteers' defense fell apart, conceding 31 points in three quarters to lose 31-17.

The common thread between both of those losses outside of both of them being on the road, is that Tennessee's pass defense struggled in each game. The Volunteers allowed 266 and 347 passing yards to Arkansas and Georgia respectively.

On paper, the Buckeyes have more than enough options available to take advantage of this vulnerability with receivers like Jeremiah Smith, Emeka Egbuka and Carnell Tate, but against Michigan, they seemed slightly unwilling to fully utilize their playmakers.

The colder temperatures might make it tough for graduate quarterback Will Howard to throw for 300 yards but perhaps the criticism that offensive coordinator Chip Kelly has faced in the past few weeks will make him more willing to pass the ball.

On the other end, Tennessee has been at best a mixed bag offensively against the quality teams it has faced. As talented as former five-star quarterback Nico Iamaleava may be, his stats against SEC opponents were pretty average.

I expect the Volunteers to rely pretty heavily on their running game behind SEC Offensive Player of the Year Dylan Sampson, much like Michigan did in the last game of the regular season.

Ohio State didn't get the result it wanted against Michigan, but it's hard to solely blame a defense that gave up only 234 total yards that game.

In my opinion, the Buckeyes have the advantage on both ends of the field, but the mental component to this is real. Led by a group of seniors, who largely returned to Columbus to beat Michigan, only to lose to a 6-5 Michigan team as a near-20 point home favorite, the Buckeyes' confidence is probably a little shaken.

Playing the most talented team they've faced since at least Penn State, I think the Buckeyes will get out to a bit of a slow start. Eventually, Ohio State's running game will be efficient enough to take some pressure off of Howard. It won't be a high-scoring affair, but Ohio State will earn the precious first win to get itself going back in the right direction. **Ohio State 24, Tennessee 21**

Greg Wilson: Buckeyes Back On Track With Big Win

Looking ahead at this game against Tennessee, it's easy to imagine anything happening, especially after the last time the Buckeyes were on the field it was a demoralizing loss to Michigan.

The feelings around the Ohio State program aren't what they were at the beginning of the season when they were considered to be one of the best rosters, if not the best, in the country. The feeling isn't even the same as less than a month ago when the Buckeyes beat No. 5 Indiana by more than three touchdowns.

When Ohio State lost to Oregon, there were overreactions about the season being over and the Buckeyes being overrated. They went on to look great for most of the rest of the season and proved that wasn't the case, beating Penn State and the Hoosiers along the way. When Ryan Day loses games, he

normally comes back with a vengeance and proves why he's Ohio State's head coach, like he did in 2022 when the Buckeyes loss to Michigan was followed up by putting 41 points up on Georgia's phenomenal defense, losing because of a missed field goal from 50 yards out as the clock ran down.

I'm ready for the offense to be as explosive as can be expected in a game that could reach temperatures below 20 degrees, and the defense will just continue what it has been doing for pretty much the entire season.

Tennessee is obviously no pushover, however, so avoiding mistakes on the offensive side of the ball will be extremely important for Will Howard. The other question is the Buckeyes offensive line and whether the new version of it will be able to pass its first test with what sounds like will be Luke Montgomery at left guard and Austin Siereveld rotating at right guard with Tegra Tshabola.

But whatever it is that had Ohio State playing like it did against Michigan on Nov. 30 is going to be long gone in this game, and the Buckeyes will be back to try to prove themselves, now with nothing to lose.
Ohio State 28, Tennessee 20