

Welcome To Week 2: Western Michigan



OPPONENT: Western Michigan (0-1, 0-0 in Mid-American Conference)

Following a blowout win over Akron to begin the season, Ohio State will welcome another MAC team to Ohio Stadium this Saturday in Western Michigan for what will likely prove to be another convincing win for the Buckeyes as they gear up for the brunt of their Big Ten schedule.

Much like against the Zips, Ohio State is a heavy favorite against the Lance Taylor-led Broncos, with the spread currently sitting at -38.5 in favor of the Buckeyes. But if the beginning of last Saturday's game against the Zips serves as any indication, this game could prove to be more competitive than it seems, especially considering Western Michigan put up a strong showing in its season opener against Wisconsin at Camp Randall Stadium on Friday.

Despite the Broncos eventually falling to the Badgers by two scores, 28-14, Taylor's squad put up a commendable fight against their Big Ten opponent, flirting with a season-opening upset and even taking a 14-13 early fourth quarter lead after a Western Michigan field goal.

Western Michigan was able to compete with Wisconsin on Friday despite being an over three-score underdog in large part due to their strong defense, which, under new defensive coordinator Scott Power, was able to hold the Badgers' offense to just 13 points on 286 total yards (126 rushing, 160 passing) through three quarters before giving up 15 points in the fourth.

These successes were led by the Broncos' veteran linebacker corps, with Donald Willis, Boone Bonnema and Damari Roberson combining for 22 tackles and a pair of pass breakups while serving as the generals of the unit all night. Bonnema filled in for Jacob Wahlberg, who was ejected in the first half for targeting but will return against the Buckeyes.

Western Michigan was also able to establish the line of scrimmage on offense Friday night behind an excellent offensive line that features several veterans who could have futures in the NFL, including All-MAC center and Rimington Award preseason watch list recipient Jacob Gideon, 6-7, 305-pound left tackle Tedi Kushi and Notre Dame fifth-year transfer left guard Quinn Murphy.

Together, this unit paved the way for last year's MAC freshman of the year Jalen Buckley and his fellow

backs to finish with 120 rushing yards and two touchdowns, both scores by Buckley.

Western Michigan under Taylor seems to have built a physical team who can establish the line of scrimmage on both ends, a strength that Ohio State should be prepared for when they line up against the Broncos Saturday night under the Ohio Stadium lights.

“Our guys are excited,” Taylor said earlier in the season when asked about his team’s tough start to the schedule. “But we’ve got one thing on our mind, and that’s playing to our Bronco standard...When you play in the MAC, there’s great football played. You have to bring your A-game every single week. So it really helps battle test you for those games later in the season when you have to be at your best.”

PLAYERS TO WATCH:

RB Jalen Buckley - Buckley won MAC Freshman of the Year and was named a freshman All-American last season after becoming one of just two first-years in the nation to reach the 1,000-yard rushing plateau, tallying 1,003 yards on 189 carries - an impressive 5.3 yards per tote - along with 10 touchdowns.

S Tate Hollock - The former Michigan State Spartan Hollock led the Broncos’ defense last season with 75 tackles along with two interceptions and six pass deflections, a stat line that has allowed him to emerge as one of the best defensive backs in the MAC. Hollock lived up to that title against the Badgers, recording six tackles, ½ a tackle for loss and a pass breakup.

WR Anthony Sambucci - Sambucci was quarterback Hayden Wolff’s most reliable target in the red zone last year, finishing the season with five touchdowns on just 21 receptions, a unique stat line that helped him earn third-team All-MAC honors. The junior recorded just 12 receiving yards on two receptions against the Badgers, but could prove to be a tough guard for the Buckeyes on the outside.

SERIES HISTORY: Ohio State and Western Michigan, despite their campuses being just 275 miles apart, have matched up just once in their respective program histories, with the only matchup occurring on Sept. 26, 2015 in Columbus, a 38-12 win for the Buckeyes in which quarterback Cardale Jones threw for 288 yards and two touchdowns and Ezekiel Elliott rushed for 124 yards and a score on 16 carries.