

It's time to tee it up between the dollar signs at T. Boone Pickens Renovated Stadium at T. Boone Pickens State University! Welcome to the first installation of the weekend forecast, which began many years ago with Michael W. Smith as its founding recipient. I've added a person or two as the years have passed, and this year is no exception. Welcome to those lucky new fellows who will get my weekly weekend predictions of a mighty Dawg victory and a National Game of the Week contest. Customarily I issue these on Wednesdays, but this semester my Wednesdays are killers so I'm issuing an early forecast to provide this service with the time and attention it deserves.

Dawgs vs. T. Boone Pickens Monetary Units: Much has been made of the Big 3 suiting up for OSU: QB Robinson, WR Bryant, RB Hunter, and OT Okung. OK, that's four, but I've been to Stillwater (or have I? It's hard to remember) and believe me, it's everything they say: Mississippi State without the glamour or academics.

Anyhow, these guys score 98 points each quarter, or so I've read. Or was that their SAT scores? Hard to keep track. Anyhow, they are a top ten team and favored to win because of their prolific offense, produced in a league where playing defense draws a penalty flag. And poor UGA-new QB, new RB, and how will we stop their mighty offense from scoring every time they touch the ball? Who needs five offensive linemen when the great Okung can singlehandedly block the entire Iowa State marching band?

So, here's how I see it: UGA has a massive and brutal OL that will dominate this game. With all the attention given to 4 of the 11 OSU starters on O, this one will be won by 5 guys who only get attention from Stacy Searels. Behind them, Joe Cox will show that he's one smart and talented QB who had to wait his time behind the peerless talent of Matt Stafford, but who was an Elite Eleven QB in HS and will be a heck of a QB in 2009. Many in the DawgNation have turned sour on Caleb King, but his hamstring injury is one of the few points of concern I have about Saturday's game because I think we will attempt to control this game on the ground. Richard Samuel is a stallion at 6-2, 225 and 4.4+ speed. He won't bring the same moxie as Knowshon, or make guys fall out of their shoes with his wiggle, but for this team his job is to wear out a D and make guys hope he runs to the other side of the field while blasting out 5-6 yards a carry between the tackles. If he gets dinged that plan will be harder to implement because Carlton Thomas may outjoke people but won't damage their manhood by running over them. If Samuel gets dinged, then it's Thomas and Fred Munzenmeier moving from fullback to tailback. But then, behind our OL, I could probably get 3 yards a carry; and against OSU's defense, I could get 3.5. So let's go Freddy. Meanwhile, our receivers should have plenty of single coverage when OSU has to pack the box to try to stop Samuel and I think will enjoy frolicking through the open secondary. (Note that an OSU DB got arrested this week, but I don't think that Gundy's suspension policy includes guys who merely get arrested.)

The OSU O is of course what people are paying \$100 a seat to see. But I'm pretty confident that our D will rise to the occasion. Again, the trenches will tell the story. Zac Robinson vs. Geno, Jeff, and Kade will look like Sam Bradford vs. the Florida DL in January. If those guys can penetrate into the backfield, it won't matter how many points these guys can score against Baylor; they won't get too many on Saturday. I also expect our DEs to come to play, not only to prove that last year was a fluke but to re-establish DE as a position of pride at UGA. On third and long, of which I anticipate we'll see many, watch Marcus Washington, Rod Battle, Cornelius Washington, and co. romp through the OSU backfield and chase Robinson into mistakes and sacks. Of course we've got other guys back there, including a fast set of linebackers and some outstanding DBs. They will mop it up when the DL merely occupies blockers. But watch this game from the inside out and see how a line can dominate a game.

OSU special teams are supposed to be among their strengths. But I'm guessing that Butler will punt out of bounds to negate their return game; and that Prince Miller will be the highlight reel return man on ESPN later that night. There is legitimate concern about our kickoff team, but my man Blair Walsh has had 9 months to add 10 yards to his kicks and I'm confident he'll do it; and when not, that our rejuvenated coverage team will keep things under control and give Robinson a long field to master. I'm hoping that our kick return game is better this year, and Richt and co. have made it clear that the special teams are special enough for true freshmen to play on and make plays, which will reduce injuries among starters and provide continuity from week to week, which was lacking last year when a special teams guy broke his leg every week and forced a replacement who lacked sufficient reps to play the position.

Total picture: We enter this game with two key suspensions (Figgins at TE, Houston at DE) but aside from Caleb King, few injuries, which I still maintain was the downfall of last year's team much more than the vaunted lack of leadership, discipline, and commitment. We will bring a deep, focused, and determined team to Stillwater and come home a winner. Dawgs 34, Pokes 28.

National Game of the Week: Alabama at Va Tech. Saban has never had back-to-back 10-win seasons and I think he won't do it this time either. While UGA is being demoted in the rankings after losing the starting QB and RB, the Tide lost QB Wilson and RB Coffee, who both might make NFL rosters this year; and yet they are consistently ranked in the top 5. I'm guessing that Wilson's loss has been underplayed because he was overshadowed by Stafford and others, but the guy produced and the new guy will need to show a lot to win 10 games. VT is tough at home and I think comes out the winner. Hokies, 21-17.