

No. 1 Buckeyes Defeat Wildcats, 54-10

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EVANSTON, Ill. (AP) -The Ohio State Buckeyes made quick work of Northwestern, and now it's finally time to turn their attention to Michigan.

"It's the biggest rivalry in college football," running back Antonio Pittman said after the top-ranked Buckeyes routed Northwestern 54-10 on Saturday. "And it's been talked about for the last six weeks."

And it will be talked about day and night before next Saturday's showdown in Columbus - No. 2 Michigan (11-0) vs. No. 1 Ohio State (11-0).

"It's what you dream about as a little kid, playing in that game," defensive tackle David Patterson said.

The stakes have never been higher, either, with the winner getting to play in the Bowl Championship title game on Jan. 8 at Glendale, Ariz.

James Laurinaitis set the tone for the Buckeyes when he forced a fumble on the opening possession, and Troy Smith threw four touchdown passes.

The 54 points were the most for Ohio State since a 72-0 victory over Pittsburgh on Sept. 21, 1996, and the defense played a major role in that.

The Buckeyes converted four turnovers and a blocked punt into touchdowns en route to a 33-10 halftime lead and their 18th consecutive victory - the nation's longest winning streak.

Smith matched a season-high with his TD passes and threw for 185 yards while completing 12-of-19 with one interception. Pittman ran for 80 yards and a touchdown on 19 carries, and Chris Wells ran for a season-high 99 yards and a touchdown. Brian Hartline caught two touchdown passes.

Laurinaitis jarred the ball from Shaun Herbert after a catch near midfield on the fourth play from scrimmage, setting up Hartline's 14-yard touchdown catch, and the Buckeyes forced a season-high five turnovers.

C.J. Bacher was 17-of-28 for 212 yards with a touchdown for the Wildcats but threw two interceptions before being replaced by Mike Kafka midway through the third quarter. Tyrell Sutton carried 12 times for 57 yards and caught seven passes for 75, but Northwestern (3-8, 1-6) couldn't hang onto the ball.

"We moved the ball up and down the field, but a fumble here, a fumble there, an interception here and an interception there - you can't make mistakes like that against the No. 1 team in the country," Herbert said.

Two years after a 33-27 overtime loss at Ryan Field - its first to the Wildcats in 33 years - Ohio State led 21-0 after the first quarter. Unlike last week, when the Buckeyes allowed 10 points in the fourth and hung on to win 17-10 at Illinois, there was no drama.

Their only difficulties were getting to Evanston.

Scheduled to leave Columbus at 3:30 p.m. Friday, they had to wait for another plane to arrive from Miami after a truck backed into the nose of their charter. Bad weather then kept them on the ground until 8 p.m. and forced them to land in Milwaukee instead of O'Hare International Airport. They finally arrived at their hotel at 10:30 p.m.

With the stands colored in Buckeyes red, Ohio State made itself at home and recovered fumbles on Northwestern's first two possessions.

After Laurinaitis forced the fumble, Smith started the ensuing drive with a 28-yard pass to Anthony Gonzalez that put the ball on the Northwestern 27. Four plays later, Hartline had his first touchdown, and Ohio State had a 7-0 lead.

Northwestern, which upset Iowa a week earlier, immediately gave the ball back.

This time, Bacher fumbled away the snap on the second play, and Antonio Smith recovered, giving Ohio State possession at the Northwestern 27. After Pittman ran 14 yards to the 1, he bounced off the line and turned right for the second touchdown. And Brandon Mitchell made it 21-0 with 3:38 left in

the first quarter when he picked off Bacher in front of the Northwestern sideline and returned it 46 yards.

The Michigan game was an annual nightmare for the Buckeyes in the recent past. Ohio State was 2-10-1 against the Wolverines and never had a perfect November in 13 seasons under former coach John Cooper. But they've had better luck since Jim Tressel took over, winning four of five against the Wolverines, who beat Indiana 34-3 earlier Saturday.

If Ohio State was looking ahead, it was tough to tell. The Buckeyes did a good job staying in the moment even though several players admitted it wasn't easy.

"It was real hard not to look forward," Mitchell said. "Now that it's here, it's a surreal feeling."