



2012 LSU Football Preview: Offense



Sophomore running back Kenny Hilliard is one of the keys to the Tigers' success in 2012. PHOTO BY ZUMAPRESS.COM.

Mission Miami. The Road to Redemption.

Whatever tag you attach to it, the 2012 LSU football season is finally here.

Nearly eight months of talk about everything from the 2011 BCS title game to the Tigers' new quarterback to distractions associated with dismissals and academic issues are finally in their proper place.

In the past.

Tomorrow night LSU opens its quest for a fourth national championship when it hosts the North Texas Mean Green Saturday at 6 pm in Tiger Stadium. The Tigers have not lost a season opener since 2002 when it lost 26-8 at Virginia Tech, and are 16-1 in home openers, the lone loss coming in 2005 when they lost to Tennessee in overtime on the Monday night after Hurricane Rita hit Louisiana.

"If you have to look at what I'm looking forward to, I think our team is looking forward to taking the field," said Head Coach Les Miles. "I think there's an aggressor there that really speaks to where we want to start this season. I think our guys have a little bit of an edge to them about how we play. I think we look forward to taking the field."

Coincidentally, it was that year that the expected opening game--against North Texas--had to be moved to later in the year, forcing the Tigers to open with a tough SEC opponent. The status of tomorrow's game was in question until

Thursday afternoon after Hurricane Isaac stormed through the area.

"Our options are limited as far as opportunities to play this game and there was minimal damage to the stadium, so we are proceeding with the season opener on Saturday night," Director of Athletics Joe Alleva said.

LSU should have no problem with the Mean Green. The top-ranked Tigers boast a 36-0 record against Sun Belt Conference opponents and have not allowed North Texas into the endzone in the last three meetings. The Tigers have held North Texas to zero touchdowns in the last three meetings.

AIRING IT OUT

Much of the focus will be on LSU's quarterback play, as gunslinger Zach Mettenberger finally gets his chance to lead the Tiger attack. LSU was ranked near the bottom of FBS schools last year, averaging only 153 passing yards per game. Mettenberger figures to improve that number a great deal, which will in turn allow the Tigers to be more balanced on offense.

"The vertical passing game is part of anyone's passing game but that is where we have struggled," said offensive coordinator Greg Studrawa. "Two shots yesterday where we had [Odell] Beckham and Jarvis Landry come down the middle one time, and if you stand in the end zone it looks like it's covered. In the past we check it down, but Zach zipped it right in there through the linebackers and were 60-yard touchdowns. Before, we would never have thrown those balls because it would have been a struggle. That kid sits back there and he will make that throw because he has the confidence to do it."

Such confidence may make Miles more willing to throw the ball more. The Tiger offense is looking to be more balanced, as last year its pass-throw ration was 30-70. Studrawa believes the Tigers will be a better team when it achieves that balance.

“They’ll start dropping those safeties,” Studrawa said. “Then we can do anything. Then the defense is at our disposal. We can run it. We can pass it. We can do whatever we want and be balanced. I don’t want to be as much toward the run. We’d rather be balanced. It’s not going to be some aerial show where we throw it 70 times a game. No. But we want to be balanced. We don’t want them to know what we’re doing. We don’t want them to have our tendencies.”

Miles, who played his college days as an offensive lineman in the run-heavy Big Ten, seems intent on breaking the mold and going to the air more. In addition to Mettenberger, Miles believes he has the talent at receiver--especially in starters Beckham, Landry, and James Wright--to be a more dynamic offense.

“We have made more of a commitment to throwing it,” Miles said. “We did it in the spring. We’ve added periods in practice. We have a play action period. We have a naked period. We have a deep ball period - periods that specifically create those situations for Zach and our wide receivers.”



Junior Alfred Blue has emerged as the Tigers' starting tailback. PHOTO KEVIN C COX, GETTY

STILL RUNNING STRONG

Just because the Tigers have a legitimate starter at quarterback, however, does not mean that they are abandoning the run. The stable of tailbacks is still deep, with junior Alfred Blue and sophomore Kenny Hilliard being named the co-starters earlier this week. Last year's leading rusher Michael Ford was just cleared to play after appealing an academic issue, and in the mix is last year's starter Spencer Ware and freshman phenom Jeremy Hill.

"You can bet we are going to run it and we are going to try and do some different things," said Studrawa. "We were really good at running up the middle [last season], but we want to add some new things like misdirection or go outside. We want to evolve the running game just like the passing game and making it as solid as it was and getting them carries."

After suffering injuries that hampered him in both 2010 and 2011, Blue looks to wrestle to lion's share of the carries away from his teammates, a very talented group that includes the bruising and light-footed Hilliard.

"Sometimes I wish we didn't have so many great backs," said the 6-2, 215 tailback from Boutte. "Sometimes you want more reps, but at the same time it's a competition that just makes you better because the competition around here is every day - non-stop."

Blue led all rushers with 106 yards on 13 carries in the Tigers' final scrimmage of the preseason last week.

"He's really got his burst back, and he is a more confident back," Miles said. "He knows what to expect. He knows the cuts. He's really performing better."

The powerful Hilliard (6-0, 231) is the perfect compliment to the fleet-footed Blue. He has a knack for reaching the end zone, as he scored eight touchdowns on just 62 carries last year. He was the team's leading rusher over the final three games.

"Coach Miles tells us it's not just about one individual, it's about team. He expresses that alot, to express the whole team because they're out there working too. It's not about me. It's about us."

Despite the announcement that Blue and Hilliard are at the top of the depth chart, don't expect to Miles to move completely away from the talents of his other backs.

"I can tell you that it's never been about starting, I think that's a great point. It's always been about the contribution and how many snaps you get. So many times you go onto the field with a set. If the opponent plays full wide, and we're going with a dime set, that's not necessarily reflective of the full play of the game.

"Generally speaking, you win the position in games. Seldom do you win the position in a practice schedule."

And finally that practice schedule is over. Time to play ball.