

BSB Interview Issue: John Cooper Has “Good Feeling” About OSU, College Game



This is an excerpt of a story from the July print edition of the Interview Issue at Buckeye Sports Bulletin. For four free issues of the print edition, no card required, sign up at the link here: <http://www.buckeyesports.com/subscribe-4issue-trial/>

It's been 35 years since Ohio State athletic department officials strayed from the family and hired Tennessee-born John Cooper to take over the university's football program.

Not since the 1934 hiring of TCU head coach Francis A. Schmidt had the Buckeyes employed a head football coach who wasn't either an Ohio native, Ohio State alum, or both. And like Schmidt more than a half-century before him, Cooper arrived in Columbus armed with an impressive résumé, a ready smile, and a seemingly endless supply of homespun homilies that he delivered rapid-fire with a rich Southern drawl.

Despite getting off to a ragged start at Ohio State, Cooper lasted a total of 13 seasons - the third-longest tenure in program history behind Woody Hayes and Dr. Jack Wilce - coached 22 first-team All-Americans, including 1995 Heisman Trophy winner Eddie George, produced 111 victories, captured three Big Ten championships, and led the Buckeyes to their first Rose Bowl win in nearly a quarter-century.

Unfortunately, his tenure was also marked by a number of excruciatingly tough losses to Michigan, and following the 2000 season, Cooper met the same fate as nearly every one of his predecessors. He was fired. In between, though, the coach did something for which he will likely never be credited because of his 2-10-1 record against Michigan. He transformed the Ohio State football program from its stodgy we-do-it-this-way-because-Woody-did-it-this-way approach to a more streamlined program better equipped to recruit nationally as well as perform on a significantly higher level.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin spoke with Cooper for the annual Interview Issue and in the four-page interview, Cooper discussed his upbringing, his tenure at Ohio State and the current direction of the program. Here is a sampling of those questions:

BSB: How did you get into coaching? Was it something you thought about when you were growing up in Tennessee?

Cooper: "I never thought about it growing up, to be honest with you. I always tell the story that our little-bitty town was so small that we had to go toward town just to hunt. Where I came from, back there in the hills of eastern Tennessee, very, very few people went to college. As a matter of fact, I don't know of anyone in my high school senior class that went to college. You basically went to school, got out, got a job and that's what you did for the rest of your life.

"I was one of six kids. My dad was a carpenter who said, 'I'll get you through (high) school, and after that you're on your own.' But that was OK because I didn't think I was going to college. I didn't have a clue what I was going to do, but I was pretty sure college wasn't going to be part of my future."

BSB: You had so many recruiting triumphs at Ohio State. Have you ever tried to compile a list of the best Buckeyes you ever coached?

Cooper: "People have asked me that from time to time, and it's hard especially when you consider the players we had like Joey Galloway, David Boston, Robert Smith and Eddie George. Gosh, I don't know how you can put one of those guys in front of the others. But probably the best football player I ever coached in my life - and I'll probably offend some other people - but I don't know how you would ever find a better player than Orlando Pace. You know, Eddie was a great, great player, and nobody loves Eddie George more than John Cooper. But Eddie didn't start for us until his junior year. You talk about a self-made football player, man. Eddie is the hardest-working football player I ever coached by far. But in terms of the best football player, I think it's Orlando Pace.

"I know I left out some people. You have to mention Mike Vrabel - tenacious, hard-nosed, smart, great work ethic. You've got guys like Antoine Winfield and Joe Germaine, Danny Wilkinson, Luke Fickell, Damon Moore, Bobby Hoying. And Andy Katzenmoyer. You talk about an athlete. Holy cow! If he hadn't gotten hurt, he would have been another Dick Butkus in the NFL. We had some great, great players. What a privilege that was to coach those great players."

The full interview with Cooper can be seen in the July print edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin, available to subscribers. Subscribe at this link to receive immediate online access, or call 614-486-2202 to subscribe and receive online access, and ask about receiving our July interview issue.