

Column: The Rose Bowl Delivered Despite Opt-Outs, And Other Postseason Games Can Too



The Rose Bowl didn't look like a meaningless postseason game.

Ohio State and Utah provided one of the most entertaining bowl games of all time, with the Buckeyes emerging victorious in a 48-45 win in Pasadena, Calif.

Yes, it came in the College Football Playoff era, when anything other than hoisting a championship trophy means failure for Ohio State, but that doesn't mean the team waved the white flag before kickoff.

Several players opted out of the contest, including future first-round receivers Garrett Wilson and Chris Olave. However, the Buckeyes still entered the game with their young core of C.J. Stroud, TreVeyon Henderson and Jaxon Smith-Njigba intact, with additional support from Julian Fleming, Marvin Harrison Jr. and Emeka Egbuka.

Utah, led by 17-year head coach Kyle Whittingham, wasn't even a Pac-12 team when Ohio State made its first Rose Bowl appearance in 1920. The Utes made their first trip to The Granddaddy of Them All in 2022, and Cameron Rising, Tavion Thomas, Devin Lloyd and Nephi Sewell made it clear that they were ready to win.

Both teams played like they wanted to be there. The 108th edition of the Rose Bowl was a game for the ages - much like the 52-49 shootout between Penn State and Southern California in 2017.

Smith-Njigba turned in one of the most outstanding bowl-game performances of all time, finishing with 15 receptions for 347 yards and three touchdowns. He recorded the most receiving yards in any bowl game and most receptions as well as tied for most receiving touchdowns in the Rose Bowl.

The sophomore wide receiver also broke multiple Ohio State records - including single-season receiving yards, single-season receptions and single-game receiving yards - and tied the single-game receptions record he had set earlier this season against Nebraska. He firmly cemented himself as a contender for the 2022 Heisman Trophy.

If any player in Pasadena could challenge Smith-Njigba for the award, it would be his quarterback. Stroud shook off the loss to Michigan with a Rose Bowl- and Ohio State-record 573 passing yards with six touchdowns on 37-of-46 passing.

Without Wilson and Olave, Stroud and Smith-Njigba used their opportunity to shine in one of college

football's biggest stages. They will undoubtedly reap the benefits of their performance - from NIL to the NFL.

The duo's record-breaking game charged a remarkable comeback after Ohio State trailed 14-0 at the end of the first quarter. The Buckeyes and Utes combined for 42 points in the second quarter, with both teams scoring 21 points, giving Utah a 35-21 lead at halftime.

For Utah, Micah Bernard made an amazing catch in the back of the end zone late in the first quarter for a touchdown, Britain Covey had a 97-yard kickoff return for a score and Cameron Rising took a fourth-and-1 sneak for a 62-yard TD among Utah's scores in the second. Ohio State's offensive production came through the air, with Smith-Njigba making two trips to the end zone and Harrison snagging his first career touchdown reception.

To describe the second quarter as exciting would be an understatement. It was some of the craziest college football I have ever seen.

"Thirty-five points at half is ridiculous," Ohio State head coach Ryan Day said at halftime of Utah's points.

The Buckeyes seldom allow their opponents to score 35 points in an entire game, let alone a half. But Ohio State's locker room - with the help of super senior Demario McCall - came together to win the football game.

"I just think it was resiliency, mental toughness, and that says a lot about our culture," Day said. "Down 14-0, down two scores at halftime, they said enough, and they were going to impose their will in the second half. I think that's what's going to build momentum in the next year because that's what we need if we want to win a bunch of championships, and I think that a lot got done in this game because of that. But I think it says a lot about our kids the way we played this game."

Ohio State's much-maligned defense tightened up in the second half, allowing only 139 total yards, 5.0 yards per play and 10 points. Harrison caught his second and third touchdowns while Smith-Njigba scored a go-ahead touchdown with 4:22 left.

Rising took a hard fall in the fourth quarter and left the game with a concussion. The Utes were down seven, and it looked like the game was over. That's when backup quarterback Bryson Barnes, who had zero career completions before the Rose Bowl, orchestrated a drive that ended with a 15-yard touchdown pass to tight end Dalton Kincaid and tied the game at 45-all with 1:54 left.

Ohio State entered the two-minute drill.

Stroud found his favorite target twice, connecting with Smith-Njigba for a pair of passes for 20 yards, pushing the Buckeyes deep into Utah territory and setting up Noah Ruggles with the game-winning 19-yard field goal.

The Rose Bowl delivered one day after both College Football Playoff semifinals were duds. Cincinnati's Cinderella story came to an end after it fell 27-6 to Alabama in the Cotton Bowl before Georgia boat-raced, curb-stomped and obliterated Michigan, 34-11. But Ohio State and Utah provided what will likely be the best bowl game of the 2021-22 season.

The Buckeyes proved that they could win without Wilson, Olave, Nicholas Petit-Frere and Haskell Garrett - four of the team's best players - in front of a nationally televised audience and nearly 90,000 spectators in Pasadena. It is proof that college football's most talented NFL prospects can opt out of their final game yet their respective teams can put a capable and worthwhile product on the field.

If the four players competed in the Rose Bowl, we wouldn't have seen Smith-Njigba break records or Harrison catch three touchdowns. Fleming and Egbuka wouldn't have received valuable snaps before next season, and Matthew Jones wouldn't have played another full game at guard.

Because of their absence, the coaching staff got an accurate understanding of how the 2022 Ohio State Buckeyes might look. And, man, does it look like a pretty dangerous team. Sure, the defense still needs work, but newly hired coordinator Jim Knowles has an excellent track record, and he can start making changes to the Silver Bullets as soon as spring ball.

On the other hand, the offense will look almost entirely like it did against the Utes, save for Thayer Munford and a potential draft departure from Dawand Jones. Stroud, Smith-Njigba and Henderson will be a three-headed monster for the Buckeyes next season, creating one of the most formidable offenses in college football.

Ohio State finished 11-2 under Day and will be right back in the top five of the 2022 preseason rankings. If Ohio State had lost its bowl game after losing to Michigan, there would have been more than enough exasperation on Columbus message boards on Jan. 2.

Utah lost the game, but it will continue to build under Whittingham. He is an established and well-respected coach who seems to be finally hitting his stride. The Utes are no longer the team that spoils the wide-eyed Pac-12 title favorite. They are the Pac-12 champions.

Both teams can use this experience as a launching point for next season. After a disappointing season, Ohio State will reload with a crucial win over a talented opponent. At the same time, Utah hung around with a Buckeye team that many picked to win the Big Ten and contend for a championship before the year started.

The 2022 Rose Bowl was college football entertainment at its highest. Ohio State and Utah delivered a matchup on the short list of all-time great bowl games. Sometimes you don't have to search for meaning when the competition speaks for itself.