

Column: Unprecedented And Unusual Season Could Have Storybook Ending For Ohio State



When the Big Ten announced in August it was postponing the fall football season due to the coronavirus pandemic, it felt like our last glimpse of Justin Fields in an Ohio State uniform would be of him with his hands on his helmet after throwing a game-sealing interception in the Fiesta Bowl loss to Clemson.

As Heisman finalist in his lone season as a starter and a presumed top-two pick in the 2021 NFL Draft, he didn't need to take another snap for the Buckeyes before cashing in at the next level. Yet, he was among the most-vocal proponents of playing the season, starting a petition that asked the conference to let the players decide if they wanted to play or opt out. It garnered more than 300,000 signatures, including hundreds of his peers.

Fields said at the time his actions were fueled by his love for the game and his teammates, particularly those who were nearing the end of their careers or overcame injuries in the offseason. But, even then, his efforts alone weren't enough.

Parents from several Big Ten schools, including Ohio State, penned a letter to the conference urging them to reconsider. They protested outside of the Big Ten headquarters in suburban Chicago and held a rally in the shadow of Ohio Stadium demanding transparency into the decision, too. Still, the Big Ten wouldn't budge.

It wasn't until other conferences began playing (and new medical information was supposedly presented) that leadership reversed course. And it was just in time, too, as an eight-game schedule that started in late October gave one of the most-talented Ohio State teams of my lifetime a chance to compete for a national title.

After initially having the season taken away, each game this fall felt like a bonus for the players, coaches, parents and fans. The Buckeyes playing really well early on, especially offensively, only added to that feeling that this year was one of destiny. But then November arrived.

Ohio State struggled to put away Rutgers and Indiana, as the lack of a true offseason and spring practice contributed to the Buckeyes' apparent defensive woes. Games against Maryland and Illinois were cancelled, too, with the latter due to an outbreak within the Buckeyes' program.

Suddenly, one more game being cancelled would spoil Ohio State's chances at a fourth straight Big Ten title and, presumably, a spot in the College Football Playoff. Fields' hard work, as well as the dedication from the parents, would have been for naught.

That nearly happened, too, when Michigan had to cancel The Game due to an outbreak within its program. But luckily for Ohio State, the conference made the correct decision and allowed the Buckeyes to play in the Big Ten Championship Game by virtue of its win over the Hoosiers earlier in the season.

Just like it has throughout this unprecedented and unusual season, Ohio State took advantage of the unexpected chance to play for a conference title. That turned into a rematch with Clemson in the Sugar Bowl, where Fields torched the Tigers to the tune of six touchdowns. And to think he almost didn't have the chance at revenge.

Now, the Buckeyes find themselves taking on top-ranked Alabama in the College Football Playoff National Championship. It was where I expected them to end up all along. But to say I anticipated the road they would have to travel to get to this point would be a lie.

This has been the strangest, most anxiety-filled season of my lifetime — and that's speaking solely as someone who covers the program. It even overtakes the 2002 national championship season when Ohio State won seven games by seven points or less and 12-year-old me watched every game through my fingers.

Regardless of tonight's result, this has been a season we'll always remember. We can thank Fields, his teammates, coaches and every parent who spoke out against the Big Ten's initial decision for giving us this season. But if the Buckeyes win, they will be a team we'll never forget. And given how hard they fought and I make it happen, they deserve exactly that.

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