

Former Ohio State Linebacker A.J. Hawk Highlights 3-1 Run Against Michigan



A.J. Hawk is one of the most decorated Buckeyes ever, winning a BCS national championship and earning two unanimous All-America selections along with the Lombardi Award.

Growing up 90 miles from Columbus in Centerville, Ohio, Hawk bled scarlet and gray long before strapping up the pads for Ohio State.

“When I was a kid, I don’t really remember specific games, but I just remember it was always Michigan week,” Hawk told Buckeye Sports Bulletin. “Each day of school you’d wear different Ohio State gear, and each day it ramped up and got bigger and bigger. I remember that going back to first grade.”

One of Hawk’s memories of the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry came while he was still at Centerville High School and then Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel was recruiting the three-star recruit who would become an all-time great linebacker.

“Coach Tressel came to my high school once, and all the teachers were going crazy and the students wanted to see him,” Hawk recalled. “He would be walking down the hallway of my high school, and a teacher would yell at him, ‘You going to beat Michigan this year?’ And he’s so classy; he’d have the perfect answer all the time and be funny. It feels like it’s always on anyone’s mind in Ohio.”

As an Ohio native and lifelong Buckeye fan, Hawk thought he had a good idea about the significance of the rivalry with the team that Buckeye fans call “The Team Up North.” It turned out that the standout linebacker had no clue just how much emphasis the Tressel-led team put on the battle between the Buckeyes and the Wolverines.

“There are so many awesome traditions that we had with Coach Tressel,” Hawk said. “The scout team had its helmets taped up to look like Michigan the week of The Game. The whole week in practice, we were practicing against those Michigan helmets.”

Practicing against the scout team wearing Michigan helmets fired up the team, but Hawk didn’t realize quite how significant the rivalry was until the marching band became involved. On the Sunday after Ohio State’s 23-16 overtime victory at Illinois on Nov. 16, 2002, Tressel had the team watch the entire game film from the Michigan matchup of the prior season. Generally, after late-night film sessions, the team would call it a night, but not during Michigan week.


“He said, ‘Go into the Woody Hayes indoor facility,’ ” Hawk said of Tressel, “and you go out there and the whole marching band is out there. You take an instrument and traditionally you walk Script Ohio with them holding an instrument. I was like, ‘Wow.’ I didn’t know about it at all. It was a surprise to me, and I realized, ‘OK, yeah, this is a pretty special thing to be a part of.’ ”

The Buckeyes entered The Game with a 13-0 record in 2002, needing a victory to secure their spot in the BCS national championship. Ohio State held on at home, keeping its perfect season intact with a 14-9 victory at Ohio Stadium, where enthusiastic fans flooded the field.

“We knew winning that one we were going to get a chance to play for it all,” Hawk said. “I just remember after that game it seemed like everyone in the stands rushed the field and you couldn’t even move. Trying to get back to the locker room was almost impossible. Out of nowhere, I actually ran into my mom and one of my brothers in the middle of the field after that game.”

Hawk backed up standout linebacker Cie Grant during the 2002 campaign and saw action against Michigan when Grant went to the sidelines for a minor injury. A true freshman, Hawk made two tackles against the Wolverines, including one tackle for loss.



 Coming off their national title, the 2003 Buckeyes were the team to beat in the Football Bowl Subdivision (then known as Division I-A). They entered The Game with a 10-1 ledger, with the only blemish coming from a 17-10 loss at Wisconsin.

No. 4 Ohio State fell 35-21 at No. 5 Michigan, spoiling what could have been an excellent season for the Buckeyes. Hawk recorded eight tackles (three solo) with one pass breakup as a sophomore starter, but solid stats did not lighten the lingering sting of losing to the archrival Wolverines.

“That one was tough,” Hawk recalled. “That was my only loss to Michigan. We went up there and it was one of those days where we didn’t play very well, especially defensively, and they played really well. Their offense was kind of on fire, and that was brutal. Everything was out in front of us again, and then we dropped that game.

“You don’t ever get over them. I guess it makes you appreciate the wins. Guys now don’t know what it’s like to lose to Michigan, and that’s a good thing. It wasn’t always this one-sided.”

The Scarlet and Gray have won 14 of the last 15 games in the rivalry. The 2004 Buckeyes helped turn the tide of the rivalry after a disappointing season.

“That year was crazy,” Hawk said. “I came in and went 14-0 in my first year. I was like, ‘Man, we’re going to go to the national championship every year. We’re not going to lose a game.’ And then I realized how difficult it really is.

“Leading up to that Michigan game, we didn’t have to talk about it a whole lot. I do remember Coach Tressel leading up to that talking about - ‘Let’s send the seniors off right.’ Every senior class obviously wants to go out with a win against Michigan. I remember talking about that, and that resonated with us - it definitely did.”

Ohio State was 6-4, unranked and coming off a brutal 24-17 loss at Purdue on Nov. 13, 2004, while Michigan entered as the nation’s seventh-ranked team at 9-1 on an eight-game winning streak.

“They were very good,” Hawk said. “It was a weird opportunity to kind of be a spoiler to them. Our season hadn’t gone that well, especially with Ohio State’s standards. Luckily for us, we played well against a good Michigan team and beat them at home, and that kind of propelled us through our bowl

game and even in the offseason.

“That whole season didn’t go very well for us, but at least winning that game at home when I don’t think a lot of people expected us to win, I think that went a long way for the next couple years.”

Hawk, who earned his first unanimous All-America selection that season, made a team-high 11 tackles (four solo) and broke up one pass in a convincing 37-21 Ohio State victory. The Buckeyes took out their season-long frustrations and somewhat salvaged a lost season with the taste of revenge.

“We kind of knew our backs were up against it going into that game, but you feel how big The Game is,” Hawk said. “No matter what really happens the rest of that year, good or bad, it doesn’t really matter that much if you can find a way to beat Michigan.”

“If you go undefeated but then you lose your last game to Michigan, that can still put a damper on the whole season and everything you did. Likewise, if you’re not playing that great and don’t have as many wins as you want, and then you go and you beat Michigan, especially a game like that, where they were the favorites in it, it can really help you out.”

The Hawk-led Buckeyes carried their momentum into the Alamo Bowl, where they demolished Oklahoma State, 33-7. In 2005, Ohio State did not enjoy the start it wanted, with a three-point loss to Texas and a seven-point loss at Penn State putting the ledger at 3-2. But the ninth-ranked Buckeyes found their groove in Hawk’s senior season, winning five straight before a showdown with the No. 17 Wolverines in Ann Arbor.

“It was a battle,” Hawk recalled of his final matchup with Michigan. “It was back and forth. I know a lot of people I talk to, family and friends, they were a little nervous in that game. Their offense played well, and we tried to hold up as much as we could on defense. Ultimately, (there was) Troy Smith and his iconic pass to Tony Gonzalez down there by the goal line that I always remember when I think of that game. What a battle.

“I definitely remember being in that game thinking, ‘You don’t want to go out like this. You don’t want your last game against Michigan, at Michigan, to end on a sour note and you lose to them.’ It’s hard to ever forget those. You never truly do. It turned into one of those really special wins for myself and all of my buddies, especially all of us guys that that was our last year.”

Hawk helped assure he and his classmates would go out victorious against their archrival, with seven tackles (five solo), including one TFL. Once again, Ohio State carried its momentum from topping Michigan into a bowl game, besting Notre Dame, 34-20, in the Fiesta Bowl.

In their big bowl victory, the Buckeyes were led by Hawk against his soon-to-be brother-in-law Brady Quinn, who was the quarterback for the Fighting Irish. Hawk posted a game-high 12 tackles (nine solo), including 3½ TFL and two sacks against a guy who would become family.

“Looking back, I’ve got four kids with Brady’s sister, and we actually got engaged shortly after that game,” Hawk said. “It was kind of weird going into it. I wasn’t really sure going into it how to handle it and didn’t really want to bring any light to it. But somehow it kind of got out there, and people ran with it.

“And then we played the game, and I found out afterwards that they showed my wife multiple times and

she was horrified. She doesn't want any part of that, that's for sure. We were so young and naive. We had no idea. We didn't really think of anything of it. It's crazy how it worked out though. That's my last game at Ohio State and I got to play against Brady, who is my brother-in-law and close friend now. It's pretty amazing."

Hawk and his wife, Laura, have four kids, and each one of them shares a name with a rock star: Lennon, Hendrix, Axel and Vedder. A busy father of four, Hawk also hosts a podcast called "The HawkCast," in addition to doing various SiriusXM radio shows.

Since he experienced the highs and lows of both beating the Wolverines and losing to them, he knows how much it hurts to drop a game to an archrival. While he likes good competition, Hawk remembers when Michigan dominated the matchup for most of his childhood.

"I'm fine with winning every year," Hawk said. "I think anybody would be. But it's good for everybody for Michigan to be good, for the Big Ten as a whole to be good. That's why it's good this season that Michigan's turned it around and they look a lot better now. And they're playing so much better now than they were before.

"It's tough for people who are new to it, they think, 'Well, how is it a rivalry? Ohio State has won seven in a row and 14 out of the last 15.' I'm 35, I understand what the rivalry is. I played in it. It's not always this one-sided. Why not? Let's keep the streak alive."

| Year | Class | Location | Result |
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|------|----------|----------|---------|
| 2002 | Freshman | Columbus | W, 14-9 |
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| 2003 | Sophomore | Ann Arbor | L, 35-21 |
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| 2004 | Junior | Columbus | W, 37-21 |
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| 2005 | Senior | Ann Arbor | W, 25-21 |
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