

Former Ohio State Running Back Pepe Pearson Opens Up About Playing, Coaching Career



Since the NFL draft's inception in 1936, the Ohio State football program has been a mainstay. The Buckeyes have had a whopping 477 players selected - including a nation-leading 84 first-round picks - across 85 drafts. A quick glimpse at the long list of players would reveal the 1997 Buckeyes as an anomaly, however.

After falling to Florida State in the Sugar Bowl, all of Ohio State's draft-eligible juniors opted to put their NFL dreams on hold for another shot at a national title. Running back Pepe Pearson didn't have a choice, however, as he was one of the few starters who had exhausted his eligibility that season.

Despite receiving a late-round grade from NFL personnel, Pearson went unselected in the 1998 draft. He signed a free-agent deal with the San Francisco 49ers and bounced around the league for three seasons, also spending time on the offseason roster or practice squads of the Chicago Bears, Cleveland Browns, Detroit Lions, Jacksonville Jaguars, Pittsburgh Steelers and Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Pearson, who weighed in at 5-10 and 209 pounds during his playing career, also had brief stints with the Rhein Fire of NFL Europe, the Las Vegas Outlaws of the original XFL and the Dayton Warbirds of the National Indoor Football League. If you ask for the highlight of his career, Pearson will quickly point to the Fire's 13-10 win over the Scottish Claymores in World Bowl 2000, the eighth installment of NFL Europe's championship game.

"I was able to say that I made it to and contributed at every level, but the highlight of my career has to be winning an NFL Europe title," Pearson told Buckeye Sports Bulletin. "I was given the ball six times on the final drive, and I was prepared for that situation and I ended up scoring the game-winning touchdown with a little over a minute remaining to win the World Bowl."

Pearson credits several of his former Ohio State teammates for his professional success, while also acknowledging how unlikely it was that he ended up playing for the Buckeyes in the first place. Despite growing up in Euclid, Ohio, Pearson actively rooted for Michigan and Notre Dame, which featured such notable running backs as Tyrone Wheatley and Jerome Bettis, respectively, in the early 1990s. He initially wanted to follow in their footsteps until he took an official visit to Ohio State during his senior

season of high school.



“I never really thought about Ohio State until I got into the recruiting process,” Pearson said. “I wanted to stay in the Midwest, so I took visits to Michigan and Michigan State and had another set up for Notre Dame. But once I went on a visit to Ohio State, it was over with. Just the way they did things, I fell in love with Ohio State and the people there. I felt like I could be teammates with the players there for four years. I just really felt at home once I stepped on campus. It was a no-brainer after that.”

Pearson, who rushed for nearly 4,500 yards and 43 touchdowns during his prep career, hailed from the same high school as former Ohio State running back Robert Smith, who played two seasons in Columbus (1990 and 1992). That connection also helped the Buckeyes’ recruiting efforts.

“He had a short but great career at Ohio State, and that piqued my interest,” Pearson said.

As a true freshman in 1994, Pearson competed with junior Eddie George for the starting running back spot. Although George ultimately won that battle, setting the scene for his Heisman Trophy campaign one year later, Pearson will forever cherish the lessons he learned in two seasons as George’s backup.

“Coming out of high school, I thought that I was a great player,” Pearson said. “I felt that I had a lot of confidence in myself. But the thing I learned most from watching him was the work ethic part. I got a chance to see it firsthand with Eddie, who we all know was the 1995 Heisman Trophy winner. He deserved to win it because of the effort he put in day in and day out. I got a chance to see that, and it helped me develop into a better player. He showed me how to work and get to the level they were playing at.

“That legacy of running backs at Ohio State was something that I really wanted to uphold. I wanted to make sure that my name was in the same sentence as Eddie George, Robert Smith and Raymont Harris and the other great running backs that have come through Ohio State. It was really a sense of pride and duty to uphold what Ohio State running backs represented.”

Pearson was notably a part of a 1994 recruiting class that was rated as high as No. 2 by expert Tom Lemming and included players such as offensive tackle Orlando Pace, interior lineman Eric Gohlstin, wide receiver Dee Miller and safety Damon Moore, among others. He credits Pace, specifically, for

making him a better running back.

“We came in together as part of the same recruiting class and we played in a couple all-star games together, so I got to know him prior to going to Ohio State,” Pearson said. “As soon as ‘Big O’ stepped on campus, he was a monster as a freshman.

“It made me better as a player because I knew if I was running to the left side of the line that nobody would touch me for at least 5 yards. It was great. He’s a Hall of Famer, and it was a privilege to play on the same team as Orlando, even if I didn’t know it at the time. We still have a friendship today. He’s was a great player and is still a phenomenal person.”

As a first-year starter in 1996, Pearson rushed for 1,484 yards and 17 touchdowns to lead the Buckeyes to a Big Ten championship and a 20-17 win over Arizona State in the Rose Bowl.

“That’s the best bowl game that a person can play in,” Pearson said. “It really is ‘The Granddaddy of Them All.’ Just being out at the Rose Bowl was spectacular, and then the game in itself was great. You know, they had Jake ‘The Snake’ Plummer at quarterback and Pat Tillman, who is no longer with us, on the other side (at linebacker). It was back and forth all the way down to the last second, and we ended up winning it. I had a really good game and was a big part of the win, but it was – to this day – the best game that I’ve ever played in my life. It was just an awesome atmosphere.”

Ohio State regularly flipped between junior quarterback Stanley Jackson and sophomore Joe Germaine throughout the season, and the Rose Bowl was no exception. Trailing 10-7 early in the third quarter, head coach John Cooper called Germaine off the bench in hopes of igniting the stagnant offense. The move instantly paid off, as Germaine led Ohio State on a quick two-play drive that included a 72-yard touchdown pass to Dimitrious Stanley that put the Buckeyes back in front.

The Sun Devils regained the lead when Plummer scrambled and slithered his way into the end zone with 1:40 remaining in the game. But Germaine calmly marched Ohio State down the field on a 12-play, 65-yard drive that ended with him finding wide receiver David Boston from five yards out for the game-winning score. The win snapped the Buckeyes’ four-game losing streak in the Rose Bowl while Germaine’s MVP performance caused a quarterback controversy in Columbus as Cooper stuck with a two-quarterback system to mixed results the following season.

“They were two different quarterbacks with two different techniques,” Pearson said. “The way they handed the ball off was a little bit different, for example, so you really had to concentrate on the little things, the fundamentals and the ball-handling. People might not think of that when you’re talking about a quarterback change, but for a running back and an offensive line, it’s difficult. There’s a different cadence each quarterback gave and just the way they enunciated the plays. We all had to be tuned in 10 times more than what you would normally be because we had two different individuals coming into the game at any given point.”

Ohio State finished the 1997 season at 10-3 overall with losses at No. 2 Penn State, at top-ranked Michigan and against No. 4 Florida State in the aforementioned Sugar Bowl. Pearson admitted there were factions of the team who wanted Jackson to remain the starter on a full-time basis or for Germaine to unseat him, but at the end of the day, they trusted the coaching staff to put them in the best position to win each game.

“That’s what we were all concerned about,” Pearson said. “We all just bought into the coaches making

great decisions on who needed to be in the game to win, and we really just focused on doing our job. That was one reason why we were able to be successful despite having a two-quarterback system. Everybody was focused on what they needed to do individually at their position and trusted the coaches to make the right decisions.”

Pearson finished his college career with 3,121 yards, which is 11th most in school history behind Archie Griffin, J.K. Dobbins, Ezekiel Elliott, Eddie George, Tim Spencer, Beanie Wells, Braxton Miller, J.T. Barrett, Keith Byars and Carlos Hyde. He hasn't been able to pay as close attention to the Buckeyes as he'd like in recent years but was thrilled to see Dobbins - who broke Ohio State's single-season rushing record with 2,003 yards in 2019 - also surpass his career total.

“I loved his play,” Pearson said. “He reminds me of myself a little bit. He's a smaller back with quickness that can make you miss in the secondary and had the speed to finish off his runs. He was totally impressive. Just to see his maturity over the course of three year was special. I know his performance in 2018 (1,053 yards and 10 touchdowns) wasn't up to his standards, but I think he did the right things to bounce back last season.

“To see the progression of who he became was great. Him not being satisfied just speaks to his mentality that he developed over time. Even when I was at Ohio State, I learned to have a certain mentality because of Eddie George. In order to be great, you have to put in the extra work. So that's what happened with Dobbins. The great ones are always looking for something to give them the edge or the advantage over his competition, and that really allowed him to have a great season.”



Having that mentality is something Pearson now preaches every day as a coach.

Shortly after his playing days were over, Pearson was offered a spot as the running backs and special teams coach at Ohio Dominican University in Columbus. He spent 11 seasons with the Panthers (2004-14), several of those years under former Buckeye assistant coach Bill Conley, before joining former Ohio State safety Bo Pelini's staff at Youngstown State in 2015.

“I didn't really want to be done with the game,” Pearson said. “I figured, well, what better way to help young men along than to be a coach and help give back my experiences to help them become the best they can be? It's been a tremendous experience for me because I'm able to be an example for the young

men that I coach.”

Pearson spent just one year with the Penguins before he was hired to the same position at Marshall, where he remains to this day. His star pupil, Brenden Knox, was named Conference USA’s Most Valuable Player last fall after he rushed for 1,284 yards and 11 touchdowns, leading the Thundering Herd to an 8-5 record and an appearance in the Gasparilla Bowl.

If his players continue to have that kind of success, Pearson will undoubtedly field offers in the coming years to be the running backs coach of a larger program. Perhaps he’ll even have the chance to run a program of his own.

“I feel like I’ve learned a lot throughout my entire coaching career, and I do have goals and aspirations that exceed being here,” Pearson said. “Marshall has been a great place, and it still is for me. But I do want to possibly be a head coach one day. I always think about what it would be like to come back and coach at my alma mater, too. Those things do cross my mind.

“I will say that even though those things cross my mind, I always strive to be great at whatever I’m doing and wherever I am. I’ve learned, as time has gone on, that’s how you create success, so I continue to just focus in and locking in on the things that I can control. I can’t say that I want to be a head coach or go back to Ohio State because I have to be given that opportunity. I’ll be ready if that opportunity comes, but for right now, I’m going to continue to be great here as a coach. I want to continue to impart my wisdom to my athletes and to help them become the best that they can become.”

***This story originally appeared in the May edition of Buckeye Sports Bulletin. For four free issues of the now-monthly paper, sign up at the link below. No credit card required:
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