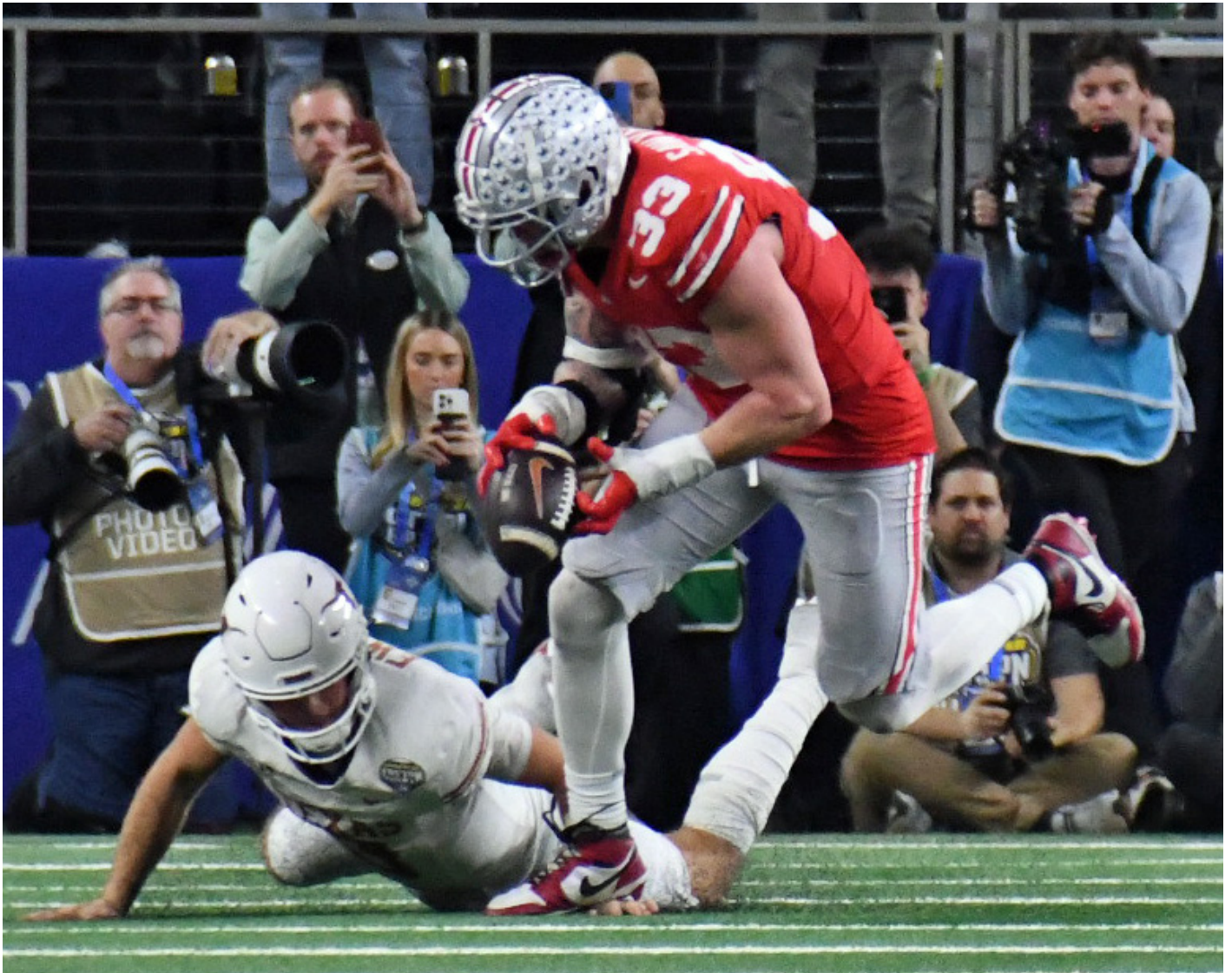


# Game Notebook: Sawyer Finds Glory With 83-Yard Fumble Return



Over a month and a half before Ohio State's triumphant 28-14 win over Texas on Jan. 10, senior defensive end Jack Sawyer and the rest of the Buckeyes were preparing for their biggest game of the season against Michigan. For Sawyer, a local kid from Pickerington, Ohio, and one of several seniors who hadn't defeated the archrival Wolverines, a win over Michigan would have meant everything.



Even after a slow start to the game, where the Buckeye offense struggled to move the ball and failed time after time to capitalize in Michigan territory, Sawyer, the hometown kid, appeared to save his team with a spectacular play. With less than eight minutes to go in the fourth quarter, Michigan had the ball at the 3-yard line on first-and-goal, but Sawyer read the eyes of Michigan quarterback Davis Warren, and although he made it only to the 12-yard line in his return, he seemed to save his beloved Buckeyes with an interception.

As time wore on though, what seemed like a fairytale ending for Sawyer developed into a nightmare. The Buckeye offense struggled to move the ball on their next drive, the defense wore down to allow a field goal, one last gasp from the offense went by the wayside, and the 2024 Ohio State team - with preseason national championship expectations bestowed upon them - faced a world of criticism from the media and its own fan base.

Rather than crumbling under the intense pressure of an awful loss to Michigan, the Buckeyes banded together to dismantle their first two playoff opponents to set up a huge matchup with Texas in the College Football Playoff semifinal. The first three quarters of the Buckeyes' clash with the Longhorns started eerily similarly to their bout with the Wolverines.

The offense, plagued by mistakes and penalties, struggled to put points on the board, and with 15 minutes to go the Buckeyes and Longhorns were tied at 14. An extended offensive drive put the Buckeyes up seven with only 7:02 to go, but the Longhorns appeared to have their answer when they marched all the way down to the Buckeye 1-yard line on first-and-goal in the waning minutes of the fourth quarter.

Instead of folding and allowing a game-tying touchdown, the Buckeyes showed their resilience and fought for every inch, forcing the Longhorns back to the 8-yard line on fourth-and-goal. It was there that Sawyer had his moment. With Texas starting quarterback Quinn Ewers dropping back to pass, Sawyer came flying around the edge and ripped the ball out of the hand of his former teammate and roommate to put the ball on the ground.

Unlike that fateful late November day, Sawyer's magical moment wasn't ruined by tacklers in front of him or a struggling offense. Instead, the ball bounced perfectly in front of him as he grabbed it and completed one of the most iconic plays in Ohio State history with an 83-yard fumble return touchdown.

One may have guessed that Sawyer had all sorts of thoughts about fate or irony, his status as a Buckeye legend being solidified or the fact that he was delivering Ohio State its biggest win in a decade, but what actually came into his head when he picked up the loose ball was something much simpler than any of those things.

"S—t, I guess just don't fall," Sawyer joked about what went through his head when he had the ball in his hands after the game. "I'm kidding, but no seriously I hit about the 30 and I looked back and I'm like, 'I hope I have some blockers. I'm running out of steam here.' But they were running with me side by side."

Sawyer's touchdown and the euphoric celebration that lasted long after were certainly a far cry from the agony of the heart-wrenching loss to Michigan, but according to Ohio State head coach Ryan Day – who was seen jumping into Sawyer's arms on the sideline after the score – the adversity faced by this team is now a part of its story.

"No great accomplishments are ever achieved without going through adversity," Day said. "That's just the truth. We've gone through our share of adversity, and that's life, and I told those guys that. We're not focused about what's happened in the past, we're focused on right now and being right where we are. Then at the end, we want to be able to tell the story of this team, and that's really what this team is focused on right now."

Whether it was karma, fate or something else, everything lined up perfectly for Sawyer to have his signature moment, and according to Day, it summed up everything about him and the team.

"What happened on fourth down by Jack just symbolizes not only his career, but our team in general, who they are and the toughness," Day said. "The clutch play right there was something that I'm sure the whole city of Columbus was exploding and all of Buckeye Nation during that play."

### **Screen To Henderson Keeps Buckeyes In Front**

Although the Longhorns never had the lead in the semifinals of the College Football Playoffs, there were a couple of instances where they seemed to have all of the momentum. Perhaps the most energized the Texas sideline was all game was after the Longhorns' first touchdown late in the first half, when Ewers

found running back Jaydon Blue for an 18-yard pass to tie the game at seven.

After getting the ball back at their own 25-yard line with only 29 seconds left in the first half, Day and the Buckeyes had a decision to make - send the game into halftime tied with Texas feeling good about their chances or keep pushing to try to regain the lead. Day opted against running out the clock and instead dialed up a screen pass.

"The screen, we were laughing a little bit in the locker room, having some fun with it because we do screen drill," Day said. "I think sometimes these guys are like, 'Are we ever going to call a screen?' And I actually said to the coaches, 'We're going to stop doing screen drill because we don't call any big screens.' So sure enough, 'What do you want to run? You want to run the ball? You want to take a knee?' I said, 'No, just run the screen.' "



Day's call to run the screen may have been his best of the season, because when Will Howard dropped back to pass, Texas wasn't at all ready for a convoy of blockers to get out in front of senior running back TreVeyon Henderson. After catching the pass 6 yards behind the line of scrimmage, Henderson found the hole, burst through it and went untouched for a 75-yard touchdown, the third-longest touchdown reception in playoff semifinal history.

"I don't think anyone thought that was going for 75 yards," Howard said of the play. "I mean that was trying to set something up. That's the kind of a drive start in that two-minute scenario and you run that first play, and we did it in the Tennessee game where we come out, we run the ball and if we get a positive gain maybe we can continue to work on our two-minute drill, but when you have a guy like (Henderson) that can make plays like that - Carson Hinzman made some unbelievable blocks down the field, the receivers stayed on their guys and (Henderson) took off. That was a huge play for us, a huge swing."

A couple of Ohio State offensive linemen made some nice blocks on Henderson's catch and run. Tegra Tshabola started the play with a solid block on Texas linebacker Anthony Hill Jr. before Hinzman pushed aside a pair of Longhorns himself.

A blitz from the Longhorns hurt their ability to cover the screen, but Day was pleased with how his team executed the play.

"Very well-executed," Day said. "The line got out there and (Howard) made a great play because they brought pressure. He just got it off, and TreVeyon went down and caught it. It was another huge play in the game."

### **Buckeyes Show Composure In The Final Scoring Drive**

After being fairly unstoppable offensively in wins over Tennessee and Oregon in the first two rounds of the playoffs, the Buckeyes had more than their share of offensive struggles against Texas. Going up against a standout Texas defense, the Buckeyes' first drive of the game was the only one where they had sustained offensive success in the first three quarters.

There were all sorts of issues preventing the Buckeyes from moving the ball down the field. A few drives were derailed by costly penalties that backed the Buckeyes up behind the line of scrimmage, one was ended by an interception thrown by Howard, and a couple went scoreless after Texas' defense simply flexed its muscles and made some quality plays.

The Buckeyes' lack of offensive efficiency not only had the game tied at 14 heading into the fourth quarter but left the defense a bit tired, according to Day.

"At that moment I was getting concerned that the defense was getting worn out because we were not on the field very much and we needed a big, long drive, and that's what these guys answered with," Day said.

The Buckeyes' fourth-quarter go-ahead touchdown drive started with 14:47 left to go in the game at their own 12-yard line. They immediately got out of the shadow of their own end zone when Texas cornerback Malik Muhammad committed a pass-interference penalty against Emeka Egbuka, but two plays later they were faced with a third-and-8. The Buckeyes picked up Texas' blitz call on the third down to give Howard enough time to find his favorite target of the night, Carnell Tate for an 18-yard gain.

Howard found running back Quinshon Judkins for a first down shortly thereafter, but after two plays and a false-start penalty, the Buckeyes had to get past another third-and-long to keep moving the ball down the field. Howard found Gee Scott Jr. well behind the marker on third-and-9, but the tight end fought through Texas defenders to bring up fourth-and-2 rather than fourth-and-5.

The fourth-and-short situation allowed offensive coordinator Chip Kelly to open up the playbook, and what he came up with was a quarterback draw play that worked to perfection. Howard had no defenders between himself and the end zone after picking up the crucial first down, but the former Kansas State transfer fell victim to the turf monster and went down at the Texas 16.

“That fourth down was huge, man, and they came out and gave us a good look for the play and the offensive line blocked it up well. I fell on purpose,” Howard said with a laugh. “I’m joking. I didn’t fall on purpose. It should have been a dang touchdown, but I was trying to keep a couple of seconds on the clock. No, I’m joking. But it was a great play and a statement drive.”

Despite Howard’s fall, the statement was officially made four plays later when, unlike Texas, Ohio State was able to punch the ball in the end zone at the goal line when it mattered most.

“We talk about it all the time,” Howard said. “Get the game to the fourth quarter, and that’s where we’ll win it, and we leaned back on our training and all that work that we put in. That’s for that time. I’m just so proud of our guys. The offensive line played great on that drive. The guys made some plays, and we were able to punch it in.”