Gorbett's Orbit: OSU's Win Over Tennessee Was Ryan Day's Biggest As A Head Coach

There were basically two schools of thought on how Ohio State's mind-boggling 13-10 loss to Michigan on Nov. 30 would affect it in the College Football Playoffs.

No. 1: The already vulnerable Buckeyes would crumble under intense scrutiny from the media and their own fan base.

No. 2: The Buckeyes would use the public embarrassment and gut-wrenching loss to fuel them to play their best game of the season.

After less than seven minutes of actual game time, the 102,819 in attendance (many of them Tennessee fans) had their answer: Ohio State was unstoppable.

The Buckeyes outgained the Volunteers 473-256 in their 42-17 win on Dec. 21, Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava only threw for 104 yards, and on the other end quarterback Will Howard probably had his best game as a Buckeye and threw for 311 yards and two touchdowns.

In short, you couldn't have scripted a better game for Ohio State, and for embattled head coach Ryan Day the win wasn't just much needed, but one of the biggest of his career.

In the short term, the impacts of the win are obvious. Ohio State went from maybe the most embarrassing loss in program history against a 6-5 Michigan to being the team to beat in the College Football Playoffs. It keeps the season alive for one of Day's most talented teams and secured a playoff win that should temporarily wash the horrible taste of the Michigan loss out of Buckeye Nation's mouth.

In the long term, it's Day's biggest win of his coaching career for a couple of reasons. For starters, it's the first real accomplishment from this program since 2020. Sure, there was the Rose Bowl win in 2021, but even then, the achievement of a bowl win outside of the College Football Playoff was watered down by players opting out of bowl games for the NFL Draft.

Ohio State played extremely well in the Peach Bowl against eventual national champion Georgia but came up just one point short of a win.

The Buckeyes are yet to accomplish in the last four years one of their three main goals, beating

Michigan, winning the Big Ten, or winning the national championship, but on Saturday they picked up a meaningful win in the postseason, which over the last four years has been hard to come by for Day's bunch.

Perhaps more importantly the win can serve as a standard of what a Day-led team ought to look like in a game of this magnitude.

One of the reasons why Ohio State's insistence on running the ball up the middle repeatedly against Michigan was so shocking was because the game plan was so different compared to those of Day's past teams.

When Ohio State eviscerated No. 7 Michigan State 56-7 in 2021, C.J. Stroud threw for six touchdowns before halftime.

Despite having a similarly talented stable of receivers and a more than capable quarterback in Howard, the Buckeyes' offensive strategy against Michigan this year was almost unrecognizable compared to their strategy against Michigan State in 2021.

It wasn't perfect, few football games are, but the Tennessee game was a vintage Day-led-Buckeye performance. Howard made some great throws, but he really just spread the ball around to his supremely talented playmakers, who predictably made plays in space.

Defensively, the Buckeye pass-rushers routinely bothered Iamaleava in the pocket, and on the back end, the cornerbacks allowed very few opportunities for the five-star recruit to connect on passes down the field.

The Buckeyes narrowly won the rushing battle 156-152, but it wasn't because they force-fed their running backs carry after carry, it was because their passing game was such a threat that the Volunteers had to adjust accordingly.

In a press conference after the Tennessee game, offensive coordinator Chip Kelly was quick to point out how the opponents' strengths and weaknesses affect the game plan.

"It just depends on who you're playing," Kelly said when asked if the passing game can set up the run. "There's always a philosophical approach when you're playing somebody based upon what their strengths are and what their weaknesses are and what you're trying to exploit. I don't think it's necessarily as easy as saying you throw to set up the run. I've done that before and gone three-and-out, three-and-out, three-and-out and we haven't gone anywhere with it. It's not just, 'Hey do this, and it works." It's about the players executing and I thought they executed really well tonight."

What about *Ohio State's* strengths and weaknesses?

At one point before starting center Seth McLaughlin and starting left tackle Josh Simmons suffered season-ending injuries, the Buckeyes had one of the best offensive lines in the country, but those days are over. With younger players like Austin Siereveld and Carson Hinzman out there, the Buckeyes are simply not built to run the ball up the middle time after time. The good news? That's ok, not every offense is suited to be a run-first unit. Plenty of past Ohio State teams under Day proved you don't have to be a run-first team to win or even dominate in big games.

It wasn't just the high-flying passing offense that brought back memories of Day's early days leading the program. It also had that special sort of dominant feel that an Ohio State team hasn't had in a big game in a couple of years.

In Day's first three years it felt like at any moment his teams could simply take the competitive fire out of a team in a quarter. Former quarterbacks Justin Fields or C.J. Stroud would find one of their superstar wide receivers for an early touchdown or two, maybe the defense would force a turnover, and after that, the game was pretty much decided. This wasn't just the case against basement dwellers of the Big Ten but legitimate conference championship contenders.

In 2019, the Buckeyes dismantled then-top-15 ranked teams like Wisconsin and Michigan by scores of 38-7 and 56-27 respectively.

During the 2020 season, Ohio State tallied over 600 yards while destroying No. 2 Clemson 49-28. In 2021, Purdue came into Columbus ranked No. 19 in the country and left with a 59-31 loss, and of course, the aforementioned Michigan State game was over early in the second quarter.

Then that first Michigan loss happened, and in pursuit of toughness the Buckeyes seemed to gradually render themselves less dangerous offensively, especially in big games.

The Buckeyes have a pretty good record against pretty good or great teams since 2021 (excluding Michigan) but even in wins it almost feels like one side of the ball, typically the defense has to make up for the other.

In 2022, the offense was mediocre for much of a 21-10 win over No. 5 Notre Dame and the Buckeyes trailed in the fourth quarter in a 44-31 win over No. 13 Penn State. In 2023, the offense mustered up only 17 points in a last-second win over No. 9 Notre Dame and similarly struggled in a 20-12 win over No. 7 Penn State.

This year, Howard struggled throughout much of a 20-13 win over No. 3 Penn State and as Day pointed out after the Tennessee game, the offense wasn't as good as the 38-15 final margin suggests against No. 5 Indiana.

I understand it's a ridiculously high bar to expect a team to have a whooping ready for any opponent not named Alabama or Georgia, but that's genuinely how those first three Day-led teams made you feel.

Against Tennessee, that exact same feeling came flooding back. Every single Howard drop back felt like it could go for a touchdown and every Iamaleava drop back felt like a potential negative play was inbound for the Volunteers.

If Ohio State is blown out by Oregon in a little more than a week at the Rose Bowl, the big win over Tennessee and all the positives that came with it will be forgotten. However, if there is a national championship and wins over Michigan on the horizon for Day at Ohio State, all of Buckeye Nation will know the turning point for Day's program was during a cold night in December when instead of folding under the pressure of an angsty fanbase, the Buckeyes responded from a mortifying loss to Michigan with a decisive win over Tennessee.