

Ohio State Senior Class Wants To Leave Ohio Stadium On High Note Vs. Tennessee



About three weeks ago, Ohio State's loaded senior class exited Ohio Stadium with a sour taste in their mouths, with each of them seeing the two major goals they had set for themselves in their final collegiate season completely evaporate with a shocking 13-10 loss to archrival Michigan.

The Buckeyes' fourth-straight loss to the Wolverines had each member of that class — many of whom had mentioned beating Michigan and getting back to the Big Ten Championship as the main reasons why they came back to the program rather than departing for the NFL — in a state of disbelief in the hours after the game, with fifth-year linebacker and Block "O" recipient Cody Simon even holding back tears in the postgame press conference.

"I'm not really sure right now," Simon said after the game when asked how the team could regroup after this loss. "It's frustrating for all the seniors, all the older guys. We're just going to have to lick our wounds and regroup but I don't think anything has hurt more than this."

Although the sting of the Michigan loss will never go away and almost undoubtedly leave a massive hole in the resumes of each senior who have never beaten the Wolverines or gone to the Big Ten title game, they do have another opportunity to take that bad taste out their mouths with a national title run in the College Football Playoff, which is the final of the three goals they had set for themselves at the start of the year.

Better yet for the seniors, this path to a national title starts at home, where they will have the chance to leave Ohio Stadium on a winning note against No. 9 seed Tennessee in front of what should be an energized primetime scarlet crowd.

Having an extra opportunity to finish their Buckeye careers on the right note and start their quest for a national title at home is one that the returning seniors are relishing heading into the game, according to Simon.

"Sometimes you can't accomplish all your goals, but we have the opportunity to accomplish the biggest goal possible right now," Simon said on Tuesday. "So we're putting all of our chips in."

Playing at Ohio Stadium for one final game could come with a lot of emotions for the senior class, ones of which they are trying to control heading into the first-round playoff matchup.

Senior wide receiver Emeka Egbuka said that although it will be a special moment for him and his teammates to return to the Horseshoe in the College Football Playoff, the main focus will need to be on taking care of business against the Volunteers and doing whatever they can to advance.

"It's amazing. It's such a blessing just to be able to play in front of Buckeye Nation in the 'Shoe," Egbuka said on Tuesday. "It's an experience that I was gonna miss had (the Michigan game) been my last game in the shoe. But God has given us another opportunity to go out there and play in front of amazing home fans, to play on the field with my brothers that I played so many times with — knowing for sure that this is the last one.

"It's definitely a special feeling. So just trying to soak all in, but also have the intense mindset to go out there and execute."

Egbuka added on Tuesday that despite it being the last home game for him and his teammates, they will take the field on Saturday with the same intensity and focus they've had before every elimination game. He thinks it will be a similar feeling than the one his team came in with for the 2022 College Football Playoff Semifinal game against Georgia, where — after a home loss against Michigan, this won a 45-23 defeat — they played with the aggression and intensity needed to put the eventual national champion Bulldogs on the ropes.

"If you went back to Georgia 2022, the other time we made the playoffs, I was laser-focused then, too," Egbuka said. "So I think we have the same mindset going in. Obviously, in the back of our heads, we know, 'OK, this is our last hurrah, our last chance.' But we're never looking at it as, 'OK, it's now or never.' It's always now or never. We're trying to win every single game every time we get an opportunity to go all the way. So that's been our mindset the last couple of years. We've come up short, but we have an opportunity to do something special this year."

Egbuka's mentality is one that is shared by others in Ohio State's 2021 recruiting class, with running back TreVeyon Henderson and offensive lineman Donovan Jackson both saying this week that the team is focused on playing with the right aggression, discipline and focus needed to advance in the College Football Playoff.

But one of Ohio State's newer seniors — fifth-year transfer quarterback Will Howard — signaled a bit of a different tune prior to the first-round matchup. Howard, who never shies away from speaking his mind when with the media, said it is indeed "now or never," come Saturday night at Ohio Stadium, where he will do anything in his power to make sure the Buckeyes exit the field this time around as victors, one step closer to a national title.

"There's no other option than to just empty the tank and leave it all out here because this is all we have left as college athletes," Howard said. "Ohio State or not, this is it. I'm just excited to finish it the right way, because we have such a good group of guys, man. We have such an unbelievable team that we have here. It's a special group, and we can't go out any other way than winning it all. That's the way that I see it, man. I want this for this team so bad."