

OPINION

Magical Season Will Never Be Forgotten

I have had the great pleasure of covering the Ohio State football team for more years than I care to remember, but I have never borne witness to a more incredible, implausible, unbelievable chain of events than what culminated Jan. 12 with the sixth consensus national championship in program history.

Teams aren't supposed to lose their three-year starting quarterback less than two weeks before the start of the regular season and win a national championship.

Teams aren't supposed to lay a huge egg in front of a nationwide TV audience in early September and win a national championship.

Teams that are forced to start a third-string quarterback late in the season aren't supposed to win a national championship.

And yet, Ohio State overcame all of that adversity and then some, and still somehow found itself on the championship podium following a 42-20 vanquishing of second-ranked Oregon – installed by the oddsmakers as a seven-point favorite – following the inaugural College Football Playoff National Championship.

Throughout this magical season, I have often been asked to put the title chase into some kind of historical perspective, and I'm not sure I can.

National championship seasons are so unique to themselves that each is extraordinary in its own way. That is especially true at Ohio State, where most of its titles are ancient history to many of today's fans. Championships won in the 1940s, '50s and '60s helped shape the program but were accomplished so long ago that it makes the recent titles much more special.

Still, it's difficult to compare the 2002 and 2014 teams of destiny.

The 2002 national championship run was such a wild ride with all of its close games and fantastic finishes, but that team of Buckeyes didn't experience the kind of gut punches as this year's squad. Imagine, if you can, that championship team of a dozen years ago losing Craig Krenzel just before the season and then backup QB Scott McMullen early in the fourth quarter of the Michigan game. It is exceedingly doubtful that Ohio State could have handled defending national champion Miami (Fla.) in the BCS title game much less beaten the Hurricanes in double overtime.

I know there are teams that have ridden backup quarterbacks to championships, but I know of no team that has placed its fate in the hands of a third-stringer under center and even come within a whiff of winning a title.

What Cardale Jones was able to do by leading the Buckeyes to victories against Wisconsin, Alabama and Oregon was nothing short of remarkable. But the fact that he was even in position to excel must be credited to Urban Meyer and his coaching staff.

When Meyer was hired at Ohio State shortly after the end of the disastrous 2011 season, no one could have known he would bring a national championship to the school just three years later.

Think about it for a second. Where the program was the day Meyer was introduced as the new head coach and where the program is today can't be measured in conventional terms. The Buckeyes were mired in the wake of an NCAA investigation that had cost former head coach Jim Tressel his job and led to a 6-7 season, the most losses the team had experienced in one season in more than a century.

Some programs take years, even decades, to return to elite status following those kinds of tribulations. But Meyer responded with a perfect season during his first year, a trip to

the Big Ten Championship Game in his second, and a national championship in his third.

What can he possibly do for an encore? Placing the bar of excellence incredibly high is sometimes a difficult cross to bear. After winning the national title in only his second season in Columbus, Tressel led the Buckeyes to two more title-game appearances but was never again able to raise the championship trophy.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK
Mark Rea

But the feeling seems different this time. Although this season was so special because of all the mountains Ohio State had to climb, you get the idea that Meyer expects his team to contend for the championship next year and the year after that and the year after that. Beaming as he basked in the championship glow, the coach suggested how sweet it would be to make a return trip to next year's title game. That theme continued throughout the postgame comments from players and coaches inside the OSU locker room.

And why not? With a loaded roster that returns the likes of Ezekiel Elliott, Joey Bosa, Jalin Marshall, Michael Thomas, four-fifths of the offensive line, eight defensive starters, both kicking specialists and perhaps three star quarterbacks, why wouldn't Ohio State be favored to defend its national championship at next year's title game?

Of course, back-to-back undisputed national championships have been accomplished only twice in the last 35 seasons, and the Buckeyes have never in their long history won two in a row. Then again, Meyer seems to specialize in doing the impossible.

QB Times Three

When the Buckeyes open fall camp, they could have a two-time Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year, the fifth-place finisher in the 2014 Heisman Trophy voting and the offensive MVP of the Big Ten Championship Game playing quarterback.

Of course, those accolades were won by three different players, making it an understatement that the quarterback conundrum Meyer could face next fall is unique.

No one knows what transpired between the time Jones called a press conference at his high school to announce a self-described "life-altering decision," and then told the world he was going to return to Ohio State for the 2015 season. To my knowledge, only Peyton Manning and Mike Doss have scheduled press conferences to announce they were staying in school. The other 99.9 percent of those events typically signify the end of a college career and the beginning of the pursuit of NFL stardom.

Jones and his return will have a significant impact on the Buckeyes in general, but a greater impact upon Braxton Miller in particular.

Those who naturally assume Miller will transfer to Oregon, LSU, Houston or some other quarterback-starved program have apparently forgotten he will not be medically cleared to begin throwing again until early summer. Presumably, it will take some additional time after Miller resumes normal football activities – perhaps as long as another month – to know if his surgically repaired shoulder has fully healed.

While questions surround Miller and his

availability moving forward, Jones will have taken virtually every first-team snap at OSU spring practice while Meyer and new quarterbacks coach Tim Beck mold their 6-5, 250-pound man-child from raw gunslinger to polished product. In the meantime, J.T. Barrett will continue to rehab his ankle injury, making the signs seem clear to me that the Buckeyes have begun their transition to the Jones-Barrett (or Barrett-Jones) era at quarterback.

So, where does that leave Miller? Apparently in a state of limbo, but only if he wishes to remain a quarterback. Anyone can plainly see his athletic talents as a playmaker, but those same observers also know Miller has always been a flawed quarterback in terms of accurately throwing the football, and there is no place in the NFL for flawed quarterbacks with limited accuracy. If you don't believe me, ask Tim Tebow or Terrelle Pryor.

On the other hand, the NFL is in almost constant pursuit of athletic playmakers. Hines Ward, Kordell Stewart, Antwaan Randle El, Josh Cribbs and Denard Robinson are proof positive that former quarterbacks can excel in the NFL if they are willing to parlay their athleticism into playing other positions.

If Miller is willing to become a more versatile player, becoming the kind of hybrid who can line up in the backfield, in the slot, out wide and, yes, even behind center at times, he can become even more lethal to opposing defenses than he has been in the past.

And if he is willing to assume that kind of role on the field, it seems to me the best course of action for him is to return to Ohio State in the fall.

And Finally

- Obviously, any running back is only as good as his offensive line, and the Ohio State line improved tremendously over the course of the 2014 season. But Ezekiel Elliott is one of those game-changing running backs who actually makes his offensive line look better. How good is Elliott? He finished the season with three consecutive games of more than 200 yards rushing, and no other player in program history – not Archie Griffin, not Keith Byars, not Eddie George – has ever had as many as two 200-yard games in a row.

- ESPN and other news outlets reported that Meyer joined Alabama head coach Nick Saban as the only coaches in history to win major-college national championships at two different schools. That would be true if the conversation were limited to the modern era. The legendary Glenn "Pop" Warner was the first coach to win titles at two different schools, earning three national championships at Pittsburgh in 1916-17 and 1919, and another at Stanford in 1924.

- After the national title game, Meyer was asked if he entertained any thoughts of coaching in the NFL one day. The coach gave what seemed to be a rambling kind of answer, but OSU fans can relax. Meyer isn't going anywhere. He was made to coach college-aged kids, and college-aged kids were made to be coached by him.

- Two of the most unsung heroes of the 2014 national championship run were Mark Pantoni and Mickey Marotti. As recruiting coordinator, Pantoni has few peers in talent evaluation, especially as it pertains to the future needs of the Ohio State roster. Meanwhile, thank Marotti and his rigorous strength and conditioning program for keeping the Buckeyes motoring throughout the national championship game while their Oregon counterparts were sucking air about midway through the third quarter.

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OHIO STATE VS. OREGON

Ohio State Completes Chase, Bucks Ducks

By MATTHEW HAGER
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

"The Chase is complete."

The words of Urban Meyer rang true as confetti came down at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, after the Ohio State football team completed an unlikely run with a 42-20 victory against No. 2 Oregon in the inaugural College Football Playoff National Championship.

It was Ohio State's eighth claimed national title, its sixth of the consensus variety and the first crown since 2002. The head coach since 2012, Meyer instituted the motivational message known as The Chase after his initial season and in year three at Ohio State delivered the national championship to his home state.

"I love these guys," said Meyer, a native of Ashtabula. "I'll never forget what (legendary NFL coach) Bill Parcells said – it's like a blood transfer. We're officially brothers for the rest of our lives because we're champions."

With a third-string quarterback leading a young squad that most thought was one year away from contending for a national title, the Buckeyes (14-1) pummeled the Pac-12 champions with their running game. Sophomore Ezekiel Elliott capped an unforgettable three-game stretch with a 246-yard performance and four touchdowns. Elliott sliced and diced the Ducks, averaging 6.8 yards per carry, and was the obvious choice for the game's offensive player of the game.

Not to be overlooked were the efforts of third-year sophomore Cardale Jones, who will likely never be forgotten by OSU fans after leading the Buckeyes to a 59-0 rout of Wisconsin in the Big Ten Championship Game, a 42-35 win against No. 1 Alabama in the Sugar Bowl and a national title win against the Ducks. He completed 16 of 23 passes for 242 yards with a touchdown and an interception against Oregon.

Seven receivers caught Jones passes. Redshirt freshman Jalin Marshall led OSU with five receptions for 52 yards. Sophomore Mike Thomas caught four passes for 53 yards, and junior tight end Nick Vannett caught a TD pass.



SONNY BROCKWAY

UNSTOPPABLE – Ohio State sophomore tailback Ezekiel Elliott (15) breaks through a tackle attempt by Oregon defensive back Reggie Daniels (8). Elliott rushed for 246 yards and four touchdowns in a 42-20 victory.

Ohio State's attack was a balanced one. The Buckeyes rushed for 296 yards and threw for 242. That helped OSU overcome four turnovers, including three involving Jones, who said he was able to take the mistakes in stride.

"I wasn't flustered because there were mistakes that could have been avoided," he said. "Definitely the fumble that I tried to throw out of bounds, and I think the interception, I think it bounced off Jalin (Marshall's) pads or something like that. They didn't force us to commit those mistakes."

"It was hard to be flustered or nervous or down when you have the other guys on defense playing the way they're playing, and then definitely when you've got the guys up front blocking the way they were blocking,

we really felt like we could score anytime we wanted."

The Ohio State defense allowed 465 yards but did a masterful job limiting the high-powered Oregon offense. The Buckeyes excelled in key situations, allowing just 2 of 12 third-down conversion attempts and also stopping the Ducks twice on fourth down. Oregon also scored just one touchdown and two field goals in four trips to the red zone and turned its four gained turnovers into just 10 points.

Sophomore safety Tyvis Powell led the way with nine tackles to earn defensive MVP honors, while redshirt freshman linebacker Darron Lee added eight stops. Sophomore safety Vonn Bell and junior defensive lineman Adolphus Washington each recorded a sack.

Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Marcus Mariota capped his impressive season by completing 24 of 37 passes for 333 yards and two touchdowns with an interception for the Ducks (13-2). He also rushed for 39 yards. Thomas Tyner led the Oregon rushing attack with 62 yards, while Byron Marshall caught eight passes for 169 yards and a score.

"They're an outstanding defense," Oregon head coach Mark Helfrich said of OSU. "We knew that coming in, and they did some different things – not different things completely schematically, but by kind of percentage of what they had done to that point. We had a couple opportunities to convert a couple of huge third downs and had some plays there to be made, but didn't execute in the red zone."

Meyer, meanwhile, was complimentary of the vanquished Ducks.

"I thought they were a great team," he said. "I think we tackled well, and other than turnovers, that's as well as we've played. I've got a lot of respect for them."

Rough Start, Good Finish

Oregon received the ball to begin the game and marched down the field for an opening score, dodging a pair of bullets on its first drive. The first came when Tyner fumbled on a 10-yard gain that moved the ball into OSU territory. He fell on it, allowing the drive to continue. Later, Mariota appeared to have the ball stripped by OSU linebacker Curtis Grant, but upon review Mariota's knee was down.

The Ducks scored the game's first touchdown four plays after the overturned Mariota fumble. On first-and-goal from the OSU 7, Mariota eluded pressure and found a wide-open Keanon Lowe in the end zone for a score. Aidan Schneider added the extra point to give the Ducks a 7-0 lead with 12:21 left in the first quarter.

The drive was quintessential Oregon. It went 75 yards in 11 plays but took just 2:39

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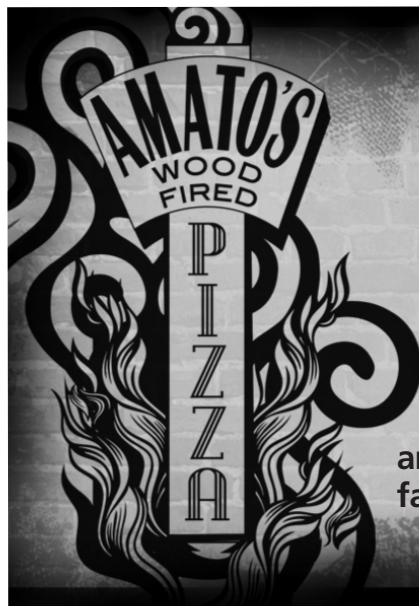
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off the clock. The Ducks never faced a third down and averaged 6.8 yards per play.

The Buckeyes failed to answer the score. Ohio State did record a first down on a third-down run by Jones, during which he bowled over Oregon inside linebacker Rodney Hardrick. He attempted to scramble for another first down three plays later but was stopped short by defensive back Reggie Daniels.

The Ohio State defense held Oregon to a punt on its second time on the field. After allowing a 28-yard gain on a Lowe reception up the middle to the UO 38, the Buckeyes forced a punt from the 45 that was downed at the OSU 3.

Ohio State took momentum thanks to a 97-yard drive that resulted in the Buckeyes' first touchdown. It did not start well, as the Buckeyes faced a third-and-8 at the 5 before Jones found Corey Smith for a 26-yard gain to the OSU 31. The march advanced to the UO 35 before the Buckeyes faced a fourth-and-2. Ohio State's offense remained on the field, and Jalin Marshall got the necessary 2 to continue the drive.

Two plays later, Elliott took a handoff, got a key trap block by junior tight end Nick Vannett, broke through some arm tackles and raced for a 33-yard touchdown. Freshman Sean Nuernberger added the extra point to knot the game 7-7 with 4:36 remaining in the opening quarter.

After the Buckeyes forced another Oregon punt, they marched down the field to take their first lead. Marshall gave Ohio State great field position following a 17-yard punt return to the UO 46. It took Jones and company just four plays to reach the end zone, helped in part by a pass interference penalty on Oregon that moved the ball to the 18.

Elliott then rushed 17 yards on another

bruising run to the UO 1, and on the next play, Jones found Vannett for a touchdown near the front left pylon.

"It was amazing," Vannett said of the touchdown catch. "Not too many people can say they got a touchdown in the national championship game. I have a lot to be thankful for."

Nuernberger's PAT made it 14-7 with 1:08 left in the quarter, the drive lasting just 1:27.

Ohio State committed the game's first turnover early in the second quarter. A botched handoff between Jones and Elliott caused a fumble that was recovered by UO's Alex Balducci at the Oregon 40.

The Buckeye defense prevented a momentum swing on the ensuing drive. The Ducks earned a first-and-goal at the 10 but were stopped on downs. On fourth down from the 3, Tyner rushed up the middle but was stood up by multiple players at the 1.

Ohio State committed its second turnover after the defensive stand. The Buckeyes drove the ball downfield and looked primed to get into the red zone. Smith caught a deep ball from Jones and raced down the right sideline toward the end zone. Oregon defensive back Troy Hill popped the ball from Smith's hands, however, and Hardrick fell on it at the Ducks' 9 with 8:46 left before halftime.

Again, the Buckeyes prevented the miscue from turning the momentum. Ohio State forced a three-and-out, capped with a sack by Washington.

Jones helped the Buckeyes extend their lead after the punt, thanks in large part to a 45-yard toss to Devin Smith in single coverage that advanced the ball to the 6. Three plays later, Jones barreled into the end zone on a 1-yard TD that, after the Nuernberger PAT, gave Ohio State a 21-7 lead with 4:49 left before halftime.

Oregon got back on the board on its next drive. Mariota engineered a 12-play, 66-yard drive that lasted 4:01. It ended short of the end zone, however, with Schneider booting a 26-yard field goal to make it 21-10 with 48 seconds on the clock.

Both teams had one additional possession in the final minute but neither team scored, giving the Buckeyes an 11-point lead at halftime.

Title Time

Ohio State marched down the field after taking the second-half kickoff before committing its third turnover. Spurred by a key Jones fourth-down run to keep the drive alive, the Buckeyes advanced to the 37 before Jones looked to find Jalin Marshall on a first-down pass. Marshall bobbled the catchable pass right into the hands of Oregon linebacker Danny Mattingly, who came down with the ball at the UO 30.

This time, Mariota made the Buckeyes pay. On the first play after the turnover, Mariota dropped back to pass and found an open Byron Marshall on a skinny post racing down the middle of the field. He hauled in the pass and reached the end zone, crossing the line an instant before dropping the ball in celebration. Schneider added the extra point to make it 21-17 with 11:23 left in the third quarter.

The Buckeyes continued to shoot themselves in the foot on the next drive. Ohio State drove near midfield before Jones dropped back on a first-and-10 at the OSU 49 and had the ball slip out of his hands while backpedaling on a scramble. Oregon's Arik Armstead fell on the ball at the OSU 23.

Oregon narrowed the OSU lead to one after the fumble, as the Buckeyes held the Ducks to a 23-yard field goal by Schneider

to make it 21-20 with 6:39 left in the third quarter. Redshirt freshman Eli Apple made the biggest play of the possession, pushing Evan Baylis out of bounds before the tight end was able to come down with a potential touchdown pass on third-and-4 from the 6.

"It's phenomenal that we held them to a field goal when Cardale dropped it going way deep into our own territory," Meyer said. "That to me was a changing point of the game. It made it 21-20 if I'm correct, and I thought when that happened, I thought we had a chance to win this game."

The Buckeyes answered the bell. Elliott's talented legs carried the way on the 75-yard drive, as the sophomore rushed for 44 yards on six carries – the last of which went for a 9-yard touchdown run on the final play of the third quarter. Nuernberger added the PAT to give the Buckeyes a 28-20 lead.

The OSU defense forced a three-and-out, and Elliott followed that with the knockout punch. The Buckeyes marched 76 yards on nine plays – seven runs – and boosted their lead to 15 with a 2-yard touchdown run by Elliott against a tired Oregon defense that struggled to stop the run in the second half.

Nuernberger added the extra point with 9:44 showing on the clock to give Ohio State a 35-20 lead.

The Ohio State defense did the rest. The Ducks were held to a punt and turned the ball over on downs on their next two possessions following the Elliott TD. The sophomore tailback then provided the exclamation point and concluded the scoring with a 1-yard touchdown run with 28 seconds remaining.

Nuernberger added the extra point to set the final score and give Ohio State the national championship.

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OHIO STATE VS. OREGON

Offensive Line Delivers Complete Performance

By RYAN GINN
 Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

When the Ohio State football team flies in luxury, it's not the quarterbacks or the wide receivers who sit in first class. Nor is it sophomore Ezekiel Elliott, who ran for nearly 250 yards and four touchdowns in the CFP National Championship on Jan. 12.

No, that honor belongs to the offensive linemen.

"That's always been who we are," Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer said in a press conference the morning after the game. "You win on the offensive and defensive line."

Trench warfare was the recipe in a 42-20 win against Oregon at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, that gave the Buckeyes their first national championship since 2002. It was especially true of the offensive line, which tore up Oregon's defensive ends and generally made life miserable for the Ducks' entire 3-4 front.

Seeing a fit offensive line bully a group of defenders who couldn't keep up certainly fit the pregame narrative, but the parties involved were flipped when perception met reality. The Ohio State defense handled Oregon's tempo just fine, but the same couldn't be said for the success rate of the Ducks' defensive linemen.

In the fourth quarter, Oregon's defensive linemen spent the time between plays with their hands on their knees, trying to catch their breath before each looming battle against five bears in football uniforms.

"They were subbing out a lot," junior left tackle Taylor Decker said. "You could tell they were kind of huffing and puffing. We were just hitting them and hitting them and hitting them, and we were just going right at them. Right up the middle. We were running the ball right up the middle. We know we're a tough, physical team. Like I said, we can assert our will on people."

Part of that credit goes to strength and conditioning director Mickey Marotti, who made sure players on both sides of the ball were ready to go against one of the most athletic teams in the country less than two weeks after battling No. 1 Alabama.



SONNY BROCKWAY

NO PRESSURE – Ohio State's offensive linemen, including junior Taylor Decker (68), helped the offense slice and dice the Oregon defense – and kept sophomore quarterback Cardale Jones (12) upright.

"We have a great conditioning staff," offensive line coach Ed Warinner said. "Thanks to Mickey Marotti, our offensive line is in great shape. We saw them getting tired and kept banging away and banging away. We found something in the run game there."

They certainly did.

Ohio State handed the ball to Elliott just 11 times in the first half, but that number swelled to 36 by the end of the game. He finished with the most rushing yards in a championship game (dating back to the first BCS season in 1998), as his 246-yard total obliterated the 200 yards Texas quarterback Vince Young gained in the 2006 Rose Bowl. He broke his own record for most yards in a BCS/CFP game, besting the 230 yards he rolled up against Alabama just 12 days earlier, and also set OSU's new postseason record.

Although his workload in the first half was rather typical of his output throughout

the season, Elliott knew what would be coming from offensive coordinator Tom Herman the rest of the game.

"I knew we were wearing them down," Elliott said. "I knew we were bigger and more physical than them going into the game. If we did it right, at some point that D-line and those linebackers were going to break down."

"I think in the third quarter, I saw it coming on. I saw the O-line getting better and better. I knew they were going to have trouble stopping our run. Coach Herman, he was feeling the same thing, so we just gutted it out."

More importantly than Elliott and Herman, the offensive line knew it. The confidence increase in that unit from the Virginia Tech game to the end of the season was nothing short of remarkable. The five players who gave up six fourth-quarter sacks in the only loss of the year spent the national championship game begging their coaches

for more chances to grind Oregon down into dust.

"They've been growing," Herman said. "They've been maturing and growing and buying in and every week getting better. If there is a better O-line coach in America than Ed Warinner, you are going to have to prove it to me because I don't think there is. They love him, they play hard for him and they play for each other, and they just kept growing up and growing up and growing up and proving everybody wrong and getting themselves better every week. It's a real joy to see those guys succeed."

Before the drive that made it 35-20 in the fourth quarter, Meyer told his linemen that a touchdown would win the game. A few plays later, Elliott was in the end zone for the third time and the Buckeyes knew they had a stranglehold on the Pac-12 champions.

"We kind of found a rhythm running the football, and the guys were doing a really good job," Herman said. "We were wearing them out. Our offensive line came off the sideline after that drive and said, 'Keep running it because we've got them worn down,' and we listened to them."

"You kind of get a sense of when a team is going to break," redshirt freshman left guard Billy Price said. "They had some great players over there and they were tough guys. We just were the tougher team."

Elliott was the player sent to the podium after the game to collect the offensive MVP award, and it would be hard to argue that he wasn't deserving of that accolade. But he and the coaches also recognize that a group of five men paved the way for that to happen.

"Zeke's a tremendous talent and we wouldn't be here without him, but a running back is only as good as the guys up front," Herman said. "To couple his talent with their development and their improvement is a recipe for what you've seen the last few weeks."

In one of the better consolation prizes one could receive, the players who refer to themselves as The Slobs surely collected their reward on the flight home to Columbus the following day. Their first-class performance in the title game earned it.



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OHIO STATE VS. OREGON

Dominant Defense Shut Down High-Octane Ducks

By **BLAKE WILLIAMS**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

It was supposed to be a shootout.

That's how the College Football Playoff National Championship, a contest featuring two of the highest scoring offenses in the nation in Oregon and Ohio State, was billed.

The Buckeyes' defense made sure that only one of those high-powered units got going in the biggest game of the season. Ohio State held Oregon more than 27 points below its season average in the 42-20 championship win, limiting the Ducks' yardage total to 465, more than 90 yards below their average entering the game.

The Silver Bullets earned their name at AT&T Stadium, controlling the game with a physical approach that neutered the Ducks' famed tempo-based offense, dominating third down and responding when put in tough situations by the Ohio State offense.

It was a redemptive season-ending performance for a unit whose late-season struggles were a key factor in back-to-back losses to end the 2013 campaign.

"It's just so gratifying to see guys believe in what you're doing and then to go out there and perform," defensive coordinator Luke Fickell said. "I'll tell you what, at the end of the year we put on film what we really are: We're a great defense."

Third-Down Dominance

The Buckeye defense dominated in the title game, limiting Oregon to its lowest point total of the season. A main reason for the success was the way Ohio State dominated third down.

Oregon came out of the gates strong, engineering a 75-yard touchdown march on the game's first possession. The Ducks didn't face a third down on that drive, but once they did, they struggled. Oregon converted just 2 of 12 third downs in the game.

"We could really say tonight we won the game on third down," Fickell said.

Oregon didn't convert a third down until the final two minutes of the first half, failing on its first five tries. The Ducks converted on consecutive third-down attempts during that second-quarter drive, but the Buckeyes found



SONNY BROCKWAY

THE DUCK STOPS HERE – Oregon's high-powered offense found traction difficult against the Ohio State defense, including defensive linemen Rashad Frazier (17) and Adolphus Washington (92).

a way to get a stop on that possession as well, halting Oregon on a third-and-4 and forcing a field goal.

Of course, third downs are not converted in a vacuum but rather a product of a team's success in earlier downs. Ohio State was effective on first and second down to disrupt the Ducks' plan and force Oregon into uncomfortable third-and-long situations. On average, the Ducks had to pick up 9 yards on their 12 third downs.

"It definitely was a mental thing," defensive tackle Adolphus Washington said of the success on the game's most critical down. "We pretty much knew what they were going to do most of the time, and we got the job done."

Washington, who had a third-down sack and helped stop the Ducks on one of their two failed fourth-down attempts with a tackle, played a big part in the defense getting Oregon off the field.

Oregon entered the game converting more than 51.6 percent of its third downs on the season, the fourth-best mark nationally. Fickell said a big part of the reason the Ducks connected on just under 17 percent of tries in the title game was the variations the Ohio

State defense had, never doing the same thing twice on third down.

Getting those critical third-down stops, 10 of them in all, allowed the defense to disrupt the Ducks' fast-paced attack.

"We knew the importance of it," Washington said. "We knew that we had to stop them on third down because we knew that our package, we had only three defensive linemen so we knew that if they got that first down, they were going to go hurry up. We just knew that we had to stop them."

Tempo Tamed

As Washington intimated, the success on third down was also effective in limiting the damage that Oregon could cause with its much-feared tempo. It's hard to wear out a defense when you can't stay on the field.

The Ducks entered the game running plays within 20 seconds of each other on average in the first half of games and could get as fast as every 16 seconds, a blistering pace that often caught opponents flat-footed with little time to get the call from the sidelines and diagnose the Oregon formation. The Buckeyes largely avoided those struggles in the championship game.

Ohio State took preparation for the Ducks' tempo seriously, posting "16" signs throughout the Woody Hayes Athletic Center to serve as a constant reminder and running two offenses alternating by play at the No. 1 defense with the goal being one snap every 16 seconds. Clearly, that preparation paid off.

"You get two huddles going. Two huddles running at us," junior linebacker Joshua Perry said. "You put the clock up there and try to get it running as fast as possible. It's trained us to make the play and get up and save the celebration for when we get off the field. You turn right to the sideline, get the call and then look at what's going on on the field."

The Buckeyes did appear a bit stunned on the Ducks' first drive, one that traveled 75 yards in 11 plays and took up 2:39 of game clock. Oregon ran a play every 14.5 seconds on that drive, but OSU found its legs from there, stopping the Ducks on their next five possessions.

"It's a mental side of things," Fickell said of combating tempo. "We knew we were in great shape from all of the things that we've done. The reality is, can you keep your mind in it? Can you keep your mind in the grind?"

D Bowed Up After Turnovers

The top-to-bottom success of the Buckeyes'

defense against Oregon becomes all the more impressive when accounting for the positions that the Ohio State offense put it in.

Four times the opportunistic Ducks defense capitalized on Ohio State turnovers, but their offense didn't as the Buckeye defense prevented Oregon from doing what it had done all season – converting turnovers into points.

"To have four turnovers and still beat a team like that 42-20, an incredible experience," head coach Urban Meyer said after the win.

Oregon entered the national title game scoring an average of 5.0 points on the 30 turnovers they had forced. Against Ohio State, four turnovers resulted in just 10 points.

After a clean first quarter, Ohio State gave Oregon the ball twice in the second. A Cardale Jones fumble on the Buckeyes' first drive of the period set the Ducks up at their 41-yard line, by far their best field position to that point. The Ohio State defense bent but didn't break, turning Oregon over on downs on fourth-and-goal.

On the Buckeyes' next drive, they were back at it. Corey Smith put the ball on the turf while fighting for extra yards after a 47-yard reception. The Ducks' field position wasn't as good this time as they recovered the ball on their own 9-yard line, and the Ohio State defense was even better in its second quick-change situation, forcing a three-and-out.

"We had too many turnovers, but we were able to withstand it just because our defense played their best and they were able to hold them," right tackle Darryl Baldwin said. "That didn't really hurt us that bad."

"They were put in some really bad situations."

In the first half, the Ducks had no points to show for the two turnovers they created.

Safety Tyvis Powell, the team's leader in tackles and defensive MVP in the championship game, said he was proud of how his unit handled the quick-change situations. The fact that the Buckeye offense had been moving the ball successfully also gave the defense confidence, he said.

"Just get the ball back," Powell said of the defense's mind-set. "We were excited to get out on the field anytime, and actually we saw that our offense was driving down the field the way they were. They just made little mistakes and turned the ball over. Seeing that, it just made us want to get the ball back."

The second half saw the Ducks offense convert on both opportunities that the Buckeyes handed them, but Ohio State was able to limit the damage. Oregon quarterback Marcus Mariota fired a 70-yard score after one turnover, but the OSU defense held Oregon to a field goal after the offense gave the Ducks the ball at the Buckeye 23-yard line on the next possession.

On average, the Ducks began drives on their own 39-yard line after turning the Buckeyes over. On its 10 drives that didn't come after turnovers, Oregon started on its own 20.

Despite being put in tough positions, the Buckeye defense responded on the biggest stage in the title game, limiting Oregon to 2.5 points per turnover. That's all the more impressive considering the Ducks scored 34 points on five Florida State turnovers just 11 days before the national title game.

"If you have four turnovers in a national championship game, you should be done," center Jacoby Boren said.

Because of a complete effort from the Ohio State defense, the Buckeyes weren't.

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OHIO STATE VS. OREGON

Buckeye Game Analysis

Play Of The Game

Ohio State used only a handful of different running plays to run over Oregon to earn the first-ever College Football Playoff championship, and one of those allowed the Buckeyes to reclaim momentum in the third quarter of the title game Jan. 12.

Oregon had used a pair of turnovers to inch back into the game, getting a touchdown and a field goal to trim the Buckeyes' 21-10 halftime lead to a single point. But the Buckeyes still had the lead, and a 12-play, 75-yard drive that came mostly on the ground allowed OSU to reclaim the upper hand.

Ezekiel Elliott ran for 44 yards on six carries on the drive, including the final 9 yards on the final play of the third quarter to give the Buckeyes a 28-20 advantage.

Ohio State went to one of its bread-and-butter plays, with quarterback Cardale Jones lining up in the shotgun and Elliott to his right. Tight end Jeff Heurman lined up on a wing to the right with Jalin Marshall in the slot to the left inside wideout Corey Smith. Devin Smith, meanwhile, lined up as the split end on the right.

Before the snap, Marshall went in motion from left to right in jet sweep action, causing the Ducks defense to shade to the right. At the snap, the offensive line blocked down to the right to seal off the Oregon defensive line, while right guard Pat Elflin and Heurman kicked back to the left.

The Ducks kept two men home on the right side for Marshall and Jones on the option action, while Elliott followed Elflin and Heurman to the left. The lineman stood up linebacker Tony Washington, while Heurman blocked linebacker Joe Walker, who had looked to blitz and made a nice play not to get caught up in the wash.

That left Elliott alone with Tyree Robinson, who didn't have much of a chance. Elliott cut left and started to outrace the safety to the corner, and Robinson could only jump on Elliott's back near the 3. The OSU back barely seemed to notice as he ran over cornerback Chris Seisay, whom Corey Smith had blocked near the goal line. The two Ducks were left in Elliott's wake as he spun across the goal line with the touchdown that ended all Oregon momentum for the game.

The run also pushed Elliott over 200 yards for the day in a dominating performance that earned him game offensive MVP honors.

Hidden Play Of The Game

Given that Ohio State never trailed in the second half, it seemed like an easy win for the Buckeyes in the 22-point beating of the Ducks. But early in the game, things weren't going well for Ohio State, which trailed 7-0 and was pinned deep in its own territory.

An Oregon punt was downed at the 3-yard line, and the first two plays netted just 2 yards for Ohio State, leaving the Buckeyes with a third-and-8 at the 5. Jones took a shotgun snap, settled into his own end zone and looked right.

Evan Spencer ran a deep route and Oregon dropped a corner well back into three-deep coverage, leaving a hole underneath. Rather than panic, Jones stood tall in the pocket and found Corey Smith on a deep cross to the right, and Smith caught the ball and got to the 31 before running out of bounds.

The 26-yard gain gave OSU a much-needed first down, and Jones found Marshall for another 26 yards on the next play. That sparked the offense, as Elliott ran for a 33-yard touchdown shortly thereafter, and the 97-yard drive tied the score and Ohio State would never trail again.

What Worked Well

Winning the line of scrimmage: There was some concern coming into the title game about the way the Buckeyes would be able to run the football. Oregon runs a 3-4 defense with big defensive ends who try to pinch toward the middle of the field on run plays, resulting in a look that somewhat mimics the "Bear" defense that Virginia Tech used to shut down the Buckeyes early in the year. Meyer spoke before the game about how impressed he was with the Oregon DEs, but the Buckeyes won the battle with 296 yards and five touchdowns on the ground.

Third-down success: Oregon's opening drive of the game ended with a touchdown after 11 plays, and it was so ruthlessly efficient that the Ducks didn't face a single third



SONNY BROCKWAY

MOVING THE STICKS – Ohio State wide receiver Corey Smith (84) picked up a key first down during an OSU touchdown drive in the first quarter.

down. But by the end of the game Ohio State dominated that stat. The Buckeyes went 8 for 15 on their own third downs, but the defense shone, keeping Oregon to 2 for 12. In the two games of the playoff, Alabama and Oregon converted a combined 4 of 25 third downs.

What Didn't Work

Holding on to the ball: Not to harp on one of the themes of the game, but Ohio State turned the ball over four times against one of the most opportunistic teams in the nation. Oregon wasn't able to convert as it had in the past, a credit to the Buckeye defense, and Ohio State was able to win a number of games on the season despite multiple turnovers including wins at Michigan State and Minnesota and both playoff games. Just imagine how good the Buckeyes would have been if they could have held on to the ball.

Inside The Numbers

1: The loss was the first for Oregon head coach Mark Helfrich when his team won the turnover battle (17-1) and when scoring first (15-1).

3.75: That was the difference in average number of points for each team in the red zone. Ohio State had five trips and left with five scores, an average of 7.0 points. Oregon had a touchdown and two made field goals in four trips, an average of 3.25.

5: Ohio State moved to 5-0 all-time in the state of Texas.

14: The Buckeyes won 14 games on the season, tying a school and national record in FBS.

37:29: Ohio State's time of possession in the game, the second time in as many postseason games vs. Oregon's blur offense that it has dominated the stat. The Buckeyes had the ball for 41:37 in the 2010 Rose Bowl, a game record, on the way to a 26-17 win. OSU had a 23:01-6:59 advantage in the second half of the playoff championship.

288: Ohio State gained only 19 yards on its first eight plays then had 288 on its next 28, an average of 10.3. Oregon, meanwhile, had 103 yards on its initial 12 plays (8.6 average) and just 96 on its next 24 (4.0).

Reviewing The Matchups

Ohio State rush offense vs. Oregon rush defense: After Ohio State put together an impressive performance against Alabama, it seemed like the Buckeyes would have a physical advantage up front, and that was proved as Elliott

ran for a BCS/CFP title-game record 246 yards. Jones added 38, many of the tough variety, as he bowled over Oregon defenders multiple times to convert critical third downs. **EDGE: Ohio State**

Oregon rush offense vs. Ohio State rush defense: Oregon's pass offense has improved this year – after all, QB Marcus Mariota won the Heisman Trophy – but the Ducks have often excelled on the ground during their record-breaking run of exciting offenses over the past decade. But after early success, the Ducks couldn't get anything going, finishing with 132 yards and 4.0 yards per carry. That included just 33 net rushing yards after halftime, and the Ducks couldn't get the tough yards in the red zone. **EDGE: Ohio State**

Ohio State pass offense vs. Oregon pass defense: Elliott got a lot of the headlines for his physical, pounding runs, but Jones was excellent, completing 16 of 23 passes for 242 yards. He had a single touchdown and an interception, but the pick should have been hauled in by Marshall. Jones also lost a fumble when the ball squirted away as he tried to throw it away, but he more than made up for it with his efficient throwing. **EDGE: Ohio State**

Oregon pass offense vs. Ohio State pass defense: The Ducks had their most offensive success through the air as Mariota put up excellent statistics including 24 completions in 37 attempts, 333 yards, two touchdowns and an interception on the last play of the game. Byron Marshall had an excellent day receiving for the Ducks with eight catches for 169 yards and a 70-yard TD as safety Vonn Bell bit on an underneath route. **EDGE: Oregon**

Special teams: Ohio State's kickoff coverage unit was excellent, as Kyle Clinton had three touchbacks and the Buckeyes limited dangerous return man Charles Nelson to just 52 yards on four returns. Cameron Johnston also had two more punts downed inside the 20 on three tries. Otherwise, Oregon was solid as well as Aidan Schneider made both of his field-goal tries. **EDGE: Even**

Intangibles: Ohio State dominated this category as it has tended to do this season. The Buckeyes didn't let an early deficit bother them, but Oregon didn't react well to adversity as the Ducks struggled on third downs, committed 10 penalties to OSU's five and couldn't convert the gifts given by OSU into points. It takes tremendous intangibles to be a championship team, something proved yet again by Ohio State. **EDGE: Ohio State**

– Jeff Svoboda

OHIO STATE VS. OREGON

BSB Quotebook: Ohio State 42, Oregon 20

Ohio State head coach Urban Meyer on the Buckeyes' improvement this season: "I don't want to get overdramatic, but it's as improved a football team – and I've watched football for a long time – from game one to game 15. I've never seen anything like it."

Oregon head coach Mark Helfrich on the loss: "It's not much fun because these guys had a great season – not a good season, a great season – and to end it like this is certainly not the way we wanted to do that. But again, I could not be prouder to be associated with these guys."

Ohio State quarterback Cardale Jones on whether the win validates the Big Ten: "It depends how people want to look at it. When we got into the playoffs, we didn't say, 'Let's do it for the Big Ten.' All due respect to our conference, to me it's one of the toughest conferences in the country, but we didn't strap up and say, 'Let's go play for Wisconsin, let's go play for The Team Up North.' We wanted to play for each other. We wanted to prove something to not the country about the Big Ten but prove something to the country about The Ohio State University."

Meyer on winning for Ohio: "I'm not shy about the love I have for this great state. Ashtabula, Ohio, is my hometown. I've gotten to travel all around the country, and I realized how fortunate I am to grow up in a great town like that in a great state. I played college football here, and to bring now a national title to the great state of Ohio, it's almost surreal."

Meyer on the decision to run the ball in the final minute of the game instead of taking a knee up 35-20: "I didn't even think about taking a knee. I can't even tell you the situation. I'm trying to even visualize what happened. But we play to win and we play to be aggressive in what we do, so that didn't even – I didn't hear it over the headsets, and I certainly didn't think about it at that time."

Oregon quarterback Marcus Mariota on the loss: "I mean, it hurts. You put in so much work, you put so much effort into the year, and it's tough. It's tough to go out with a loss. That's just – things happen. Ohio State played a great game today, great program. They just out-executed us for a couple more quarters."

Ohio State defensive coordinator Luke Fickell on strength coach Mickey Marotti's impact on preparing to face Oregon's tempo: "That's Coach Marotti. That's more of a psychological thing. Are you really going to get in better shape in 10 days? No. Physiologically you're not going to get in better shape, but if you lose a couple of pounds you think in your mind, 'I'm leaner, I'm lighter, I'm faster.' That's the master thing that Coach Meyer does. He gets them to

believe in what they do and when guys believe, it's unstoppable."

Meyer on Ohio State's improved defense this season: "Defense won the game. We lose that game if we don't stop them on turnovers. We consider that a stop when you hold them to a field goal. Championships are won with defense, and our defense has been on a difficult journey the last couple of years, but the future of our defense is even better because there are a lot of young guys playing."

Meyer on limiting Oregon's tempo-based offense: "That was the whole challenge since when we found out after the Alabama game we were playing Oregon is if we can somehow eliminate that fatigue factor and turn it into inside drill and turn it into a game that's a block-and-tackle game that we could win this game, and obviously they did it."

Ohio State defensive tackle Michael Bennett on Oregon's status as the betting favorite: "We're underdogs to the media. We know what we can do. Other teams watch us on film and know what we can do. So we have a lot of confidence coming into these games. We never felt like underdogs, especially in this game. We felt we would be able to shut them down, and we did."

Oregon wide receiver Byron Marshall on why the OSU defense succeeded: "Ohio State has a great defense. They have all season. Their front seven is unbelievable, so hats off to them. There was not one thing specifically. I think they just played a great game. I think we kind of missed some opportunities. We had a couple of red-zone trips in the first half that we didn't capitalize on, whether it was a field goal or a touchdown. I think we kind of missed some opportunities, and they played a great game."

Ohio State offensive line coach Ed Warinner on the run game: "We have confidence in who we are and what we do. Early in the game, I didn't think we were playing that well. I could see some jitters, I could see some things happen that aren't usual for our guys, but we weathered that and started playing better, and as our confidence grew and we started helping them with some better play selection, we started getting an idea of what would work and started figuring them out on defense a little bit, then good things started happening."

Ohio State running back Ezekiel Elliott on the toll of his 36-carry workload: "Oh, I definitely feel it now, but I knew going into the game that we wanted to run the ball. We knew that our O-line was bigger and more physical than their D-line, and we just had to punch them in the

mouth. The O-line, they came out, they played their butts off and they paved the way for me."

Ohio State running backs coach Stan Drayton on Elliott: "He's a disciplined back. You give him footwork, you give him landmarks, he's going to stay true to that. The vision and the instincts come natural. That's what happens with great backs."

Ohio State center Jacoby Boren on the play of the running backs: "They made our job a heck of a lot easier. They were running the ball hard. I told someone else, I kept looking up at the Jumbotron. Zeke was breaking through tackles and going for another 10-15 yards, and that makes our job a heck of a lot easier. He had a great game tonight."

Ohio State left tackle Taylor Decker on the drive that increased the lead to 35-20: "Coach Meyer came over to us and said, 'You guys go get another score and this one might be over.' We took it upon ourselves, especially as an offensive line, to get that done."

Elliott on his rushing performance, including an OSU bowl-record 246 yards: "It's starting to sink in. Just getting the MVP, I credit that to my big boys up front – actually everybody on the offense. Everybody does their job, and nothing would be possible without that team effort. But just setting that record, I feel blessed. All the great running backs that have come through Ohio State – Archie Griffin, Eddie George, Beanie Wells – just being able to accomplish something that all of them weren't able to accomplish, it means the world to me. I'm happy that I was able to carry on that lineage this season."

Helfrich on the challenges of the playoff system: "You know, if anything it's the newness of it. Certainly you get to the point where you're playing for the Pac-12 championship and then it's one avenue, and then you're committed 100 percent to winning that game and then congratulations and high fives, and you flip around and get ready for another outstanding team."

Ohio State wide receiver Michael Thomas on the possibility of repeating next season: "I mean, why not? This is a great group of guys, great group of coaches. I just want to soak in everything that they're giving me and enjoy everything and get back here and win another one for the next senior class."

Elliott on what it will take to repeat as champions: "We've just got to stay a hungry team. We're losing some great seniors, but we have a lot of great young players that will step up, and this year was just a great year to learn a lot of things. I think we'll be the same team next year. As long as we stay humble, we grind hard in the offseason, don't let our heads get too big, I think we'll be here next year."



Mark Helfrich



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OHIO STATE VS. OREGON

Meyer, Buckeyes Talk Championship Victory

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

Following Ohio State's 42-20 win vs. Oregon to capture the first-ever College Football Playoff title, OSU head coach Urban Meyer, game offensive MVP Ezekiel Elliott and quarterback Cardale Jones met with the media at the postgame press conference.

Abridged comments from the three Buckeye representatives follow.

Meyer: "On behalf of the Ohio State University and the great state of Ohio and my players and coaching staff, I want to tell the College Football Playoff committee and everyone associated with this incredible experience that it was done first class, and I think you have two great teams out there. We have a lot of respect for Oregon and (head coach Mark) Helfrich, but I love these players."

Question: You guys turned the ball

over four times. I think you said coming into this game you couldn't do that and win this game. Is this sort of a microcosm of all the adversity you had to overcome this season to win this game?

Meyer: "It is, and it's also a testimony to the improvement our defense has made. We won that game because of Ezekiel Elliott and of course our offensive line, but our defense, to hold Marcus Mariota - I know he threw for a bunch of yards, 300-plus yards, but our defense, we tackled tonight and did a great job."

Q: This was an extremely young team that you have. First of all, is this something that you thought would be coming perhaps another year, maybe not right now, particularly the way you started out, and secondly, could you

talk about the future of the program and just how bright it is?

Meyer: "Well, I think Eli Apple, Zeke, I thought we had high expectations for Zeke because we saw what he could do last year, but that group of sophomores that we have that really stepped up and played, they complemented the seniors. Whenever you have a coaching transition, there's usually a little bit of a blip or a miss in the recruiting, and if our sophomore class didn't step up, we wouldn't be where we are. I mean, it's incredible."



Urban Meyer

"A lot of them are redshirt freshmen, and yes, to answer your question, I certainly did not see that happening after spring practice and early in the season. But I undervalued - I didn't quite understand the improvement that these guys could make."

Q: I know you probably prefer not to talk about yourself but maybe you can in this one case. You do join one other person who's been able to bring two schools to a national championship. It does say a lot about what Nick Saban has done, what you have done. Can you talk about what it means to do something that has so rarely been done?

Meyer: "I'm very humbled that you brought that up, but I'm also the first one to appreciate the people who did it, and that's our players."

Q: Zeke is obviously the MVP of the game, rushes for a new record ...

Meyer: "A monster."

Q: What have you seen from him all season as improvement, and then the last three games where he obviously just blew up?

Meyer: "I love Zeke because he's very humble, comes from a great family and deserves the credit. However, he's the most underrated back in America. He's one of the best post-contact-yard guys I've ever been around, and on top of that he's a great human being. We get him at least for one more year. I'll give you a couple days off, Zeke, and we're back at it, you and Cardale."

Jones: "The chase is on."

Q: Urban, could you in a nutshell talk about how you challenged your defense tonight to face that so-called up-tempo challenge?

Meyer: "We challenged them and we had 16 (seconds between plays) signs everywhere. Every time our players went to get

something to eat we had one of those big signs that lights up, and we thought if we could eliminate the fatigue factor and make them block us and make them play football that we'd be in pretty good shape, and that's what we did, even after all those turnovers."

Q: Two years ago you were doing postgame coverage for ESPN after Alabama beat Notre Dame, and you said something to the effect that everybody had to rise to their level. What impact, if any, did that have on you, and do you feel like your program is in that position now?

Meyer: "I think I sat and watched it, and every one of these players and everybody on the coaching staff, everybody associated with our program, I called our strength coach, I said I'm going to send you a text right now and I want it in their hands immediately. That was 'The Chase,' and that's when that big sign went up in the facility, that's when we created an area for our players to go get extra work, and that was one of those wow moments when I saw a team just dominated in the national championship game, and they looked better than we did. Somehow we had to get to that level, and that was The Chase."

Q: Can I ask each of you to take a step back, first Cardale, then Ezekiel - what does it mean to have done this, to overcome the odds and to be on top of the college football world?

Jones: "It means a lot because going back to early August, late August, around camp, everybody counted us out when our Heisman Trophy quarterback went down, and then when the first college football playoff rankings came out we were like No. 16. Long story short, we weren't supposed to be here. The odds were stacked against us through the whole season, and for us to be sitting right here as national champs, it not only means a lot to me but our community, Buckeye Nation and our hometowns."

Elliott: "It means everything to us, just being able to accomplish this great accomplishment, winning the national championship after everything we went through this season, losing Braxton (Miller), then losing to Virginia Tech and how we rebounded against that, and the tough game at Penn State that went to double overtime, then traveling to Michigan State in that hostile environment, then losing J. T. (Barrett) and having this clown (Jones) step in. It seems like we've been through everything, and it made us who we were."

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NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP REACTION

Plenty Of Praise For OSU After Buckeyes Take Title

By **MARCUS HARTMAN**
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

As has become habit at Buckeye Sports Bulletin, we thought it would be interesting to see what some of the best writers from across Ohio and beyond had to say about a big sports event involving the Buckeyes.

When we started doing these stories (after the loss in the 2006 title game), they tended to follow negative events more often than positive. Lately that has not been the case, such as in this look at the reaction to Ohio State's national title triumph vs. Oregon.

Holly Anderson, Grantland.com – "What we got was the drowning of the Ducks, in a shallow puddle, and the Voltron bloom of Cardale Jones and Ezekiel Elliott on the sport's biggest stage. Ohio State's redshirt sophomore quarterback is capable of sneaking up on people, it turns out, in the sense that under so many helmets and pitchforks you can't always tell that what's being trotted up to your gates is a battering ram. Short of bolting one of his feet to the floor, there didn't seem to be much to do in the way of stopping him. The title game marked his third collegiate start. Meanwhile, Elliott you could hear even when you couldn't see him, with the acoustics of the JerryDome rounding out the vowels in the ZEEEEEEEEKE bellows until every successful carry was borne up to the catwalks on an indistinct rage-hum. He is, as of this writing, 19 years old. Surprise!"

David Briggs, The (Toledo) Blade – "If Ohio State's players said they were at a loss for words, the scene early Tuesday morning at AT&T Stadium was worth a million of them. All of the emotions from this implausible football season suddenly came undammed in a burst of joy. Doran Grant and a mass of his teammates dove headfirst into the golden confetti piled inches deep on the turf, then rolled over to carve out angels. Others futilely fought off tears."

Matt Brown, LandGrantHolyLand.com – "This was an easy Ohio State team to love. We got to see the maturation of not one but two quarterbacks who performed at levels none of us could have credibly dreamed of. Their running back became one of the best in Ohio State's already storied tradition of running backs, but he did it with half a shirt. Their best defensive player threw up a Twitter emoticon when he sacked a QB. Their second-best defensive player was an undersized high school quarterback, an afterthought to most fans in the most stacked recruiting class in school history. The team was littered with thoughtful, interesting, dynamic athletes. They took on every stupid, hacky #narrative that surrounded Ohio State football over the last several seasons, and blew it up with dynamite."

Paul Daugherty, The Cincinnati Enquirer – "What an absolute clubbing. Such a brass-knuckles show, in the last show of the year. Some of us believed Ohio State had a chance, if Ezekiel Elliott could be the star of

the evening. None of us who were objective and not rabid saw this coming. The Buckeyes played smash and grab against Oregon. They took what they wanted. In this game at least, Star Wars offense had no chance against a team that kept its feet firmly on the ground. Literally and metaphorically."

Spencer Hall, EDSBS.com – "After watching Ohio State smash Oregon to bits, you might be tempted to say that Ohio State doesn't have an obvious loss on the schedule for the next five years. You might really want to say that after watching this. No one would blame you. The Buckeyes defense turned a Heisman Trophy winner into a largely harmless irrelevance with nice numbers and zero danger, and the Buckeyes offense made a consistently excellent Oregon defense blow basic gap assignments it hadn't missed since 2013.

"They're deep, loaded with talent, and just won a national title with their third-string quarterback. Go back and watch their offensive line if you don't believe that, because they carried Oregon's D-line around like squawling infants who don't want to go in their car seats."

Bob Hunter, The Columbus Dispatch – "In a gitzzy football palace that seemed like the perfect stage for the Ducks' highlight-reel offense, this was a national championship that an old-timer could love. OSU coaching legend Woody Hayes always saw the game as a test of manhood as much of a test of football, and he might have become giddy watching this."

Bill Livingston, The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer – "This is a victory that resonates throughout – as Meyer, a native of Ashtabula, a graduate of Cincinnati, a coach at Bowling Green and now at Ohio State always calls it – 'the great state of Ohio.'

"Our part of the country needed something good to happen," Meyer said.

"A good thing happened for much of Ohio Monday night, a year ahead of Meyer's most ambitious schedule, at the end of a journey his team completed against all odds, and it was accomplished with so many underclassmen playing such big roles that there will be immediate, serious talk of a repeat next season. The lasting image, as victory confetti sparkled in the lights, was of sophomore defensive end Joey Bosa, a unanimous All-American, holding the championship trophy. He cradled the gold and black bauble in his arms and rocked it, as if it were a baby with only good things ahead in life."

Stewart Mandel, Fox Sports – "No question, the Buckeyes have made (College Football Playoff Committee members) Jeff Long, Tom Osborne, Condoleezza Rice and the gang look smart indeed for including the Big Ten champs in their inaugural four-team bracket. But even they couldn't have possibly foreseen just how drastically their decision would alter the paradigm of college football. Two games ago, Ohio State's Cardale Jones was a still largely unheralded third-string quarterback. Two games later he's a national championship quarterback. Two games ago, Jones' teammate Ezekiel Elliott was not even an honorable mention All-Big Ten running back. Two games and 476 yards later, Elliott could win the Heisman if they held a re-vote this week. Two games ago the Big Ten was still a national laughingstock. Two games later, the Big Ten owns a more recent championship than the SEC. Two games ago, Alabama was the No. 1 team in the country and Nick Saban the sport's undisputed No. 1 coach. Two games later,

Urban Meyer has unseated Saban as college football's current top dog. And Ohio State is the sport's new budding dynasty."

Michael Rosenberg, SI.com – "The beauty of this, for Urban Meyer, is that he will win big regardless. Meyer is building a program that may surpass the one he built at Florida, and it was there for the country to witness in the national championship game Monday night. Ohio State was supposed to be a year away from this, but somewhere in the last six weeks the impossible became inevitable. Ohio State did not just beat Oregon 42-20. It physically dominated the Ducks. Nike founder Phil Knight has spent hundreds of millions on Oregon's facilities, and you wonder if he forgot to buy a bench press. The truth about this game was that Ohio State players felt it was over before it started. They watched film. They knew running back Ezekiel Elliott would barrel through the Oregon defense."

Drew Sharp, Detroit Free Press – "But it's utterly laughable to think that the Buckeyes' statement elevates the Big Ten's collective football profile. The two worst conferences in the Power Five have won the last two titles. But did Florida State's 29-game winning streak and 2013 national championship improve the overall perception of the ACC? Of course not.

"This wasn't Ohio State lifting up Michigan State and Michigan. This was Meyer putting further distance between the Buckeyes and the other 13 members of a conference that still looks at Outback Bowl victories over the SEC as celebratory achievements. If you're a Michigan State or Michigan fan today – and if you're being honest with yourself – you can't be happy with the realization that Meyer owns the Big Ten and won't surrender the title anytime soon."

Jon Solomon, CBSSports.com – "There's a new king in college football after Ohio State's 42-20 domination of Oregon. It's a resourceful, selfless team that rode the back of a historic running back who was virtually unknown a month ago and a third-string quarterback who blew up before America's eyes."

Pete Thamel, SI.com – "Part of Meyer's mad genius – more than any X's or O's he moves on the grease board – is his relentless ability to motivate. He emphasizes more themes than an English professor. He has more rallying cries than a rack of bumper stickers. There's pushing and pulling. There's prodding. Any motivational tactic will be exploited. And on Monday night, Meyer showed why his methods work."

Dan Wetzel, Yahoo.com – "The most remarkable thing about this team is that it arrived seemingly a year ahead of schedule, full of talented sophomores Meyer believed would form a title contender next season. OSU will certainly open the year at No. 1 in the polls and a favorite to repeat.

"The dominance of these Buckeyes (14-1) opens up the question whether Meyer is college football's top coach, a title most often given to Alabama's Nick Saban. It's a subjective title that spurs debate online and through talk radio. Saban's four national titles (three at 'Bama, one at LSU) still trumps Meyer by one. However, these Buckeyes showed Meyer at his best, recruiting and then meshing talent into a cohesive unit, developing players to maximize their ability and finally instilling them with confidence and motivating them to victory."

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Ohio State Not Perfect, But Buckeyes Are Champs

THE VIEW FROM 15TH & HIGH Frank Moskowitz, Publisher

When I think of Ohio State's victory over Oregon in the inaugural College Football Playoff National Championship, I think of the same thing I think about the Buckeyes' win over Alabama in the Sugar Bowl to advance to the final and about their pivotal conference win over Michigan State during the regular season. I think about how the final score in those games is not indicative of how well Ohio State played in those crucial contests.

As any Buckeye – player, coach or fan alike – has noted by now, Ohio State had a whopping four turnovers in the game against the Ducks, generally not a statistic associated with a championship win.

Or as national championship center Jacoby Boren said after the game, "If you have four turnovers in a national championship game, you should be done."

However, the turnovers were the only thing that could stop the Buckeye offense. The Ducks defense never really did, as Ohio State scored on six of its nine other drives. And the Buckeye defense was superb, limiting the damage of the turnovers to just 10 points.

When the defenders weren't covering for the foibles of their brothers on the other side of the ball, they were doing just fine in non-quick change situations, as well. In all, Ohio State forced Heisman Trophy winner Marcus Mariota and the vaunted Ducks offense into six punts, stopped Oregon on downs at the OSU 1, and also stopped the Ducks at the OSU 9 and 6 to force field goals.

Sure, Oregon ran up 465 yards, but much of those yards came on the dizzying 11-play, 75-yard opening drive and a 70-yard, lightning-quick scoring strike from Mariota to Byron Marshall. The Buckeye defense was dominant.

If you just looked at the stat sheet, you would think that Mariota had a nice game, as he completed 24 of 37 passes for 333 yards and a pair of touchdowns against a single desperation interception.

But Spencer Hall of EDSBS.com said it better than I could: "The Buckeyes defense turned a Heisman Trophy winner into a largely harmless irrelevance with nice numbers and zero danger."

Who knows what the score might have been if the seemingly self-destructive Buckeyes hadn't turned the ball over those four times.

Similarly, Ohio State repeatedly shot itself in the foot against top-ranked Alabama in the Sugar Bowl. The Buckeyes lost a pair of turnovers against the Crimson Tide among myriad other mistakes but still posted the impressive victory.

The Tide turned an Ezekiel Elliott fumble into one touchdown and a Cardale Jones interception into another. Additionally, Jones fumbled a shotgun snap from the Alabama 1, helping to force a field goal rather than scoring a potential touchdown, ceding another four points.

Additionally, on a fourth-quarter possession, Jones was sacked deep in OSU territory and the Buckeyes were whistled for a pair of penalties, forcing punter Cameron Johnston to kick from his own end line, where he barely got away a short punt that back spun, giving Alabama the ball at the OSU 23.

No problem. Vonn Bell intercepted Crimson Tide quarterback Blake Sims on the very next play.

And I can't help but level that rare criticism against Buckeye coach Urban Meyer and offensive coordinator Tom Herman for throwing that long ball at the end of the game when pounding Elliott and running out the clock was the wiser move. That gave Alabama one last shot at what

at that point would have been an improbable victory.

Meyer would have looked like a genius if the long pass had worked, but he was going to look like a genius regardless unless his Buckeyes somehow misplayed what was a pretty pat hand. If ever there was a time to play Tresselball, this was it.

Yet despite all of the miscues vs. the Crimson Tide, Ohio State played outstanding offense and defense against what most felt was the best team in the country, and it was the Buckeyes who advanced to the CFP National Championship.

Of course Ohio State would never have faced Alabama and Oregon if it had not handily dispatched conference nemesis Michigan State, 49-37, in a game in which the score was not indicative of how much the Buckeyes looked to be the better team. There were a pair of lost fumbles, seven penalties for 50 yards, a field goal that fell short by inches and some dropped passes thrown in for good measure to slow the Ohio State Express against the Spartans.

Still, the Buckeyes prevailed easily because they were that good.

In the key games, they were good on offense, they were good on defense, they were good on special teams and, of course, they have a great coaching staff headed up by Meyer.

Now I guess you could say that if a team was *really* good it wouldn't make the kinds of mistakes and turnovers that Ohio State made in those three big football games. But the Buckeyes, despite their penchant for mistakes, still won those three important contests decisively.

It makes you wonder what Ohio State could do if it played a flawless game.

Oh, they did that against Wisconsin.

It Was Great, But ...

Shortly after the Buckeyes prevailed over the Ducks to win their first national championship since 2002, a reader emailed to ask where this game ranked for me among my favorite Ohio State games of all time.

Of course, I told him, it ranks right up there with the 2002 championship game and other favorites of mine like the Rose Bowl after the 1996 season and perhaps my all-time favorite, at least for entertainment value, the 1984 win over Illinois.

But as I said to the reader then, and I say to all readers now, I think I took more satisfaction from the win over Alabama in the Sugar Bowl. No, that game was not for the national title, but in the big picture, the long-term picture, it may be a more significant win.

Alabama is the standard by which football programs are measured right now, and its conference, the SEC, is the conference by which conferences are measured. Tide mentor Nick Saban is the coach by which coaches are measured, though I think many had Ohio State's Meyer right up there, even before the victory.

Alabama and Saban are certainly the team and coach that Meyer aspires to unseat as top dog, both on the field and in the recruiting wars.

There is no escaping Ohio State's record in the postseason against the SEC. The record book says the Buckeyes had never defeated an SEC school in the postseason, though I recognize the Sugar Bowl victory over Arkansas – I saw it, you saw it and you can't pretend it didn't

happen. But let's face it. The Razorbacks are not looked upon as an elite SEC team.

If you want to prove your team is fast, strong, tough, deep and well prepared, you have to beat Alabama. Ohio State did that and with no room for question such as when the Buckeyes beat Miami – the Alabama of its day – in the '02 championship game. Hurricanes fans, a dozen years later, are still complaining about that pivotal pass interference call.

Crimson Tide fans have no choice but to acknowledge that on Jan. 1, 2015, their team was soundly defeated by the Ohio State Buckeyes.

By the time the game with Oregon came around, it was almost anticlimactic. Oh, I savor the national championship. But I had already seen Ohio State beat Oregon soundly just a few short years ago in the Rose Bowl. I knew the Ducks would have to contend with the physical nature of the Buckeyes.

For all of the sophistication of today's game, football still comes down to who hits the hardest and who tackles the best. I am not minimizing the accomplishments of the Ducks in any way. They earned their way into the championship game. But in some ways Oregon features a gimmick offense that teams are ill-prepared for because they don't typically see that ultra-quick attack – almost like playing Navy and its option that most teams are unfamiliar with.

How well do they play against a truly physical team like Ohio State? Would they have struggled similarly against Alabama if the Tide had advanced?

I must admit that I was nervous after Oregon's first drive against the Buckeyes. Because we work on Saturdays, I hadn't seen the Ducks in action. That 11-play, 75-yard drive made me dizzy just watching it, so I can imagine how the Buckeye defenders must have felt as they were run up the field with little chance to get organized or catch their breath.

But by the end of the game, it was the Oregon defense that had trouble catching its breath as its members got a taste of good old-fashioned – and frequently belittled – Big Ten smash-mouth football.

"You could tell they were kind of huffing and puffing," OSU offensive tackle Taylor Decker said. "We were just hitting them and hitting them and hitting them, and we were just going right at them. Right up the middle. We were running the ball right up the middle. We know we're a tough, physical team."

Not only were the physical Buckeyes moving the football, but the Ohio State offense was indirectly helping slow the vaunted Ducks offense. A good way to hold a potent offense in check is to keep the ball away from it, and Ohio State held a dominating 23:01 to 6:59 edge in time of possession in the second half.

In Ohio State's 26-17 victory over the Ducks back in the Rose Bowl, they held a clock advantage of 41:37 to 18:23.

As I said, I had already seen Ohio State beat Oregon. And now I have seen the Buckeyes beat Alabama.

They Took Their Lumps

A couple of people who have taken their share of criticism from pundits and Buckeye fans alike should be acknowledged in light of Ohio State's amazing postseason.

Linebacker Curtis Grant has been pointed to by many Buckeye fans as someone who under-

performed throughout his Buckeye career, not because of his play so much as his failure to live up to his five recruiting stars earned coming out of high school. By the time Ohio State's latest linebacker stud, freshman Raekwon McMillan, took the field for the Buckeyes, those same unsatisfied fans were clamoring for the senior Grant to take a seat in favor of the rookie.

Rather than resenting McMillan, who had his moments as a freshman, Grant mentored him – another example of the team's all for one, one for all spirit.

Being a team player is fine, but it is still about what you do on the field, and when the championship march was in full swing, Grant played arguably the best football of his college career.

Grant had four tackles and a stop for a loss against Wisconsin in the Big Ten Championship Game, a team-leading 10 tackles in the Sugar Bowl and another six tackles against the Ducks in the championship game.

Grant definitely rose to the championship occasion.

Kicker Kyle Clinton also took some knocks this season for his penchant for kicking the ball out of bounds, giving opponents good field position. He and his mates on the kick coverage team were outstanding in the College Football Playoff.

Alabama's average starting point after kicks was just short of its 21, while Oregon, on average, started just past the 20.

And what can you say about Luke Fickell, the lightning rod for any criticism directed toward the Ohio State defense for the past three years?

Those critical of Fickell will say that the improved defense is completely because of the presence of new co-coordinator Chris Ash. But if you say that all woes can be pinned on Fickell, you have to give him his props when the defense shines.

"Defense won the game," Meyer said of the championship victory. "We lose that game if we don't stop them on turnovers. We consider that a stop when you hold them to a field goal. Championships are won with defense, and our defense has been on a difficult journey the last couple of years, but the future of our defense is even better because there are a lot of young guys playing."

There is no question that Ash had an influence on the defense, but if he and Fickell hadn't meshed, his hiring would not have worked.

Give Fickell his due. The lifelong Buckeye is well versed in overcoming adversity, the hallmark of the national champions, and his demeanor no doubt rubbed off on his charges, as did his knowledge of defense.

Rose Bowl Revisited

With regard to the previously mentioned victory by Ohio State over Oregon in the 2010 Rose Bowl, we ran reprints of several BSB stories about that game from our Jan. 16, 2010, issue in our recent Jan. 9 electronic BSB Quickly that previewed the CFP National Championship.

Speaking of players perpetually blasted by some Buckeye fans, Terrelle Pryor was outstanding in that victory, completing 23 of 37 passes for 266 yards and a pair of touchdowns and rushing 20 times for a game-high 72 yards.

As I watch the Meyer-Herman offense, I often think about what Pryor might have done if he had been given the same coaching as Braxton Miller, J.T. Barrett and Jones and was in the same system.

The stories of the 2010 Rose Bowl are archived, and access is free to current BSB subscribers. For instructions on how to access BSB Quickly, see page 5 of this issue or call (614) 486-2202.