

OHIO STATE VS. WISCONSIN

Redemption: Buckeyes Blast Badgers, Claim Crown

By JEFF SVOBODA
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Editor

As the Ohio State football team danced, high-fived and screamed its way joyously throughout its locker room Dec. 6 in Indianapolis, there were a lot of emotions in play after the team's 59-0 slaughter of Wisconsin in the Big Ten Championship Game.

There was jubilation. There was relief. There was excitement for what was likely to come.

And in some ways, there was astonishment at the lopsided final score of the game, a drubbing that went down as one of the largest demolitions of a ranked team in college football history.

"If you would have told me earlier this week that we would shut them out 59-0, I wouldn't have believed you," senior Michael Bennett said after OSU won its first-ever league title game. "I think it would have been a hard-fought battle, but we would have come out on top.

"But seeing the guys before the game and what was going on in the locker room and how just hyped up everyone was and how everyone bought in to what we were saying, maybe I thought they would get seven points. A shutout is a big deal against this offense."

Anything that could go right did go right for the No. 5 Buckeyes (12-1) against the 13th-ranked Badgers. Sophomore Cardale Jones, making his first start in his career after the Michigan game injury to J.T. Barrett, threw three touchdown passes and was in complete command of the Ohio State offense from the beginning. On the other side of the ball, the Heisman campaign of Wisconsin running back Melvin Gordon came to an emphatic end as the Big Ten's all-time leader in single-season rushing yards finished with just 76 on 26 carries, a meager average of 2.9 per carry.

And when it was over, two of the team's larger objectives were accomplished. First, Ohio State washed the bitter taste of last year's title-game loss to Michigan State in Lucas Oil Stadium away, and the Buckeyes were impressive enough to move from fifth in the College Football Playoff rankings to fourth, punching a ticket to the inaugural event.

"To be here and see this right now, I don't even know what to say," offensive guard Pat Elflein said. "It's just really satisfying that we came together as a team. Everybody did their jobs, everybody played hard and we're Big Ten champs. That's always the ultimate goal is everybody to play their best game, and that's what happened."



SONNY BROCKWAY PHOTOS

BATTERING THE BADGERS – Ohio State senior wide receiver Devin Smith (9) caught three touchdown passes during the Buckeyes' 59-0 win vs. Wisconsin, and sophomore Cardale Jones (inset) claimed the game's MVP trophy.

Sweet Revenge

Sitting at home while nursing a season-ending injury a year ago, then-true freshman linebacker Darron Lee had tears in his eyes as he watched his crestfallen teammates walk off the field 52 weeks prior vs. Michigan State and swore that he would help make amends.

"What a difference a year can make, right?" he said in the locker room this time around. "I'll never forget when I watched on TV last year, I cried. I cried a lot, and I vowed one day to get a championship for my leaders and for my brothers, so it's crazy what a year can make.

"It feels good. Watching it from the TV and then coming out and winning it a year later, the feeling is indescribable."

Lee's smile was nearly a mile wide as the party around him was in full swing. The entire game – by far the largest shutout win vs. a ranked team ever for OSU and second-biggest beating ever put on a top-15 team in college football history – was essentially a celebration for the team and its fans, who swarmed the home of the Indianapolis Colts looking to wash away the lingering feelings from the year before.

The team jubilantly cheered Devin Smith's touchdown catch that started the shellacking just 1:59 into the game and was equally thrilled when Wisconsin's last-gasp drive ended just short of the end zone against OSU's second unit to keep the shutout intact.

After celebrating on the field and receiving the Big Ten championship trophy from commissioner Jim Delany, the Buckeyes retreated to the team locker room for a team dance party captured by reporters. Later, as reporters milled about, music blared as hugs were exchanged throughout the night.

"It's just a great feeling," senior linebacker Curtis Grant said. "Reality still hasn't hit me yet. I think it's all a dream. But I wouldn't trade this team for the world."

The thought that this year would be different entered the team's mind from the second it returned to Lucas Oil Stadium. A year ago, Ohio State was the visiting team, meaning it stood on the east sideline of the stadium, used the opposing locker room and wore its road white uniforms.

When the Buckeyes arrived this year, they were the home team, which meant using the Colts locker room and donning the team's iconic scarlet tops.

"We had that bad taste from last year," Grant said. "Coming out of the opposite tunnel (in walk-through before the game), the first thing I thought about was (Michigan State) coming out with their roses last year, and they were excited, man. It just hurt to be on the other end and to see it. Now we see what we can do."

That Michigan State loss motivated the team throughout the year. Before the Indiana contest Nov. 22 that allowed OSU to clinch a share of the Big Ten East Division title and return to the conference

championship game, the Buckeye players spoke unprompted about how important the goal to return had been to the team through winter workouts.

Once that mission was accomplished, the elders of the team spoke of how much they were looking forward to returning to Indianapolis to exorcise the demons of the past year. They did so in grand fashion against the Badgers.

"I think a lot had to do with how we finished the year last year," said senior tight end Jeff Heuerman. "We didn't forget that feeling, and they made sure of that in the offseason. We would watch before workouts, before mat drills, video of them celebrating out there and us losing and stuff like that.

"It was terrible at the time, honestly, but it truly motivated us the whole offseason. We learned from our mistakes and came out today and showed what we've been working for for the last year."

Jones Shines

Odds makers made Wisconsin the favorite before the game thanks largely to the fact Ohio State entered the game with a first-time starter at quarterback in Jones.

It was a fair move considering that when Barrett went down late in the Michigan game with a broken bone in his right ankle, Jones – who had thrown 16 career passes in nearly three years in the program before the U-M contest – was suddenly the No. 1 guy.

If there was any weight on his shoulders considering the OSU season hung in the balance, he didn't show it. Jones was superb from his first throw and finished with three touchdown passes on deep balls to Smith while completing 12 of 17 throws for 257 yards and no interceptions. More



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importantly, he was in command of the OSU offense throughout the game.

Teammates and coaches alike said they knew the 6-5, 250-pounder had the potential in him to shine, and most said they weren't surprised by his standout performance.

Then there was head coach Urban Meyer.

"I don't use the word surprised," Meyer said. "I guess I'll use it for the first time - I was a little bit surprised."

Jones was asked if he played with an edge considering how his presence as the starter had led many to decree OSU the underdog in the game, but he said that was not the case.

"I wouldn't say a chip on my shoulder," he said. "I played with confidence because of the confidence my teammates had in me, the confidence my coaches had in me, my family, close friends, Buckeye Nation."

"It was very fun, going out there showing everybody what we can do when we all come together as one."

During the week before the game, Meyer and his offensive staff went to great lengths to explain that a quarterback is the product of those around him while noting that the Ohio State offense had improved around Barrett throughout the first 12 games. That included a running back in Ezekiel Elliott who went from solid to a standout, an ever-improving group of receivers and an offensive line that jelled into a unit that brought back memories of 2013's dominant squad.

Jones was also lauded before the game for how he handled being the No. 2 quarterback this season, and his mature approach to preparation was consistent during the week leading up to the title game.

"To see the way he focused this week, he wasn't at the house like he usually is," roommate Tyvis Powell said. "He spent a lot of time at the Woody. He did a lot of throwing and a lot of film study. He stayed overtime at the Woody, so the work he put in this week, I knew he was leaving no doubt that he'd be ready to play."

Whether his gaudy numbers were a surprise or not, Jones got the job done when the spotlight was the brightest.

"He delivered just like I thought he would," offensive coordinator Tom Herman said. "We worked all week to make sure that his confidence level was up and that he prepared like a pro, which he did. He did all those things. When he did all those things it fills you with confidence."

"He still made some first-time blunders. He certainly didn't play a perfect game. The thing I was most proud of was when he did make some bonehead mistakes, he came right back and never got in the tank and continued to play extremely well."

Blow By Blow

The underdog Buckeyes thoroughly dominated the Badgers in every facet of the game. Ohio State outgained Wisconsin (10-3) by a 558-258 margin and limited Gordon to the 76 yards and no touchdowns

The Buckeyes chose to play a safety near the line of scrimmage to limit the Badgers rushing attack, and that move along with the standout play of the defensive line almost totally shut down the Heisman finalist.

The Buckeyes forced four turnovers, two coming during a dominant first half. Sophomore safety Vonn Bell and Lee led the unit with seven tackles apiece. Bennett, who wore the No. 53 of late teammate Kosta Karageorge, recorded two sacks and four tackles for loss and forced a pair of fumbles.

"It all starts up front with a game like this," defensive coordinator Luke Fickell said. "To have the ability to be able to stop Melvin Gordon, you've got to be able to do a lot of things, and those guys did an incredible job. As a whole everybody did a great job, but to finish the way they did, there was more energy on that sideline in the last 45 seconds than there was the whole second half."

Smith, long known as a deep-ball threat for the Buckeyes, had immediate chemistry with Jones. He caught just four passes, but three of them went for touchdowns of 39, 44 and 42 yards. Elliott outshone Gordon, rushing for career-high 220 yards and a pair of touchdowns, and the Buckeyes outrushed the run-heavy Badgers 301-71.

Even the special teams broke OSU's way. Sophomore punter Cameron Johnston had two punts downed inside the UW 5-yard line and recorded a career-long boot of 73 yards.

"I've been asked a lot, 'Did I see this happening?'" Meyer said. "I saw a team that prepared very well and is playing at a very high level right now."

Wisconsin (10-3) got little from its passing game. Quarterback Joel Stave completed 17 of 43 passes for 187 yards with no touchdowns and three interceptions. The Badgers were shut out for the first time since Aug. 24, 1997, vs. Syracuse, and it was the team's worst loss since a 59-0 setback against Earle Bruce's OSU squad in 1979.

"We're going to bounce back, take care of business," said Wisconsin head coach Gary Andersen, who instead took the Oregon State job days later. "I'll do a lot better job as a head football coach. I failed the kids tonight. So I'll come back, fight, and away we go."

It did not take Jones long to make an impact in the game.

Wisconsin won the opening toss and deferred, and Jones quickly led the Buckeyes 77 yards to a touchdown in just six plays. He completed all three of his pass attempts, including a 39-yard touchdown pass to Smith. Jones took a shotgun snap, faked a QB run by taking a step toward the line of scrimmage and dropped back to pass. He flung the ball deep into the end zone, and Smith muscled past

Wisconsin cornerback Sojourn Shelton for the ball in the end zone for a TD.

Freshman Sean Nuernberger came on to add the extra point, giving the Buckeyes a 7-0 lead just 1:59 into the game.

"After the first touchdown, I knew the game was over," Smith said. "I went to Coach Meyer and I told him it was over. Their demeanor wasn't, 'We can still win this.' I feel like they were kind of scared of us, and we just came out and kept our foot on the throttle the whole game."

The Ohio State defense passed its first test against Gordon, holding him to a single yard on a pair of carries on Wisconsin's first drive, which ended with a punt after a three-and-out.

Ohio State extended its lead later in the first quarter.

This time it was Elliott taking a starring role. The Buckeyes started the drive at the OSU 7 and gained 12 yards on an Elliott run up the middle. The next play was much like the first, only Elliott went untouched up the middle 81 yards for a touchdown.

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Ohio State Cruises To Victory After Big First Half

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Elliott took the Jones handoff and immediately had plenty of room to run. OSU senior right tackle Darryl Baldwin had a key pulling block, and sophomore center Jacoby Boren had another crucial block to spring Elliott, who outraced the Wisconsin defense down the field.

Nuernberger's PAT made it 14-0 Ohio State with 4:06 remaining in the opening quarter.

A Stave interception by Bell turned into points early in the second quarter. Jones drove the Buckeyes from the OSU 41 to the UW 1 before a false start penalty and a dropped potential touchdown pass by Elliott forced Ohio State to settle for a 23-yard field goal by Nuernberger that upped the lead to 17-0 with 14:14 left before halftime.

Jones continued his stellar play with another deep touchdown pass that extended the lead to 24-0 with 11:09 remaining in the first half. It was another quick TD drive, lasting just three plays. At the UW 44, Jones dropped back and stood tall in the pocket, taking a hit as he threw deep for Smith again. And again, Smith came down with the ball in the end zone for another score. Nuernberger added the extra point to give the Buckeyes a commanding lead.

After throwing his second TD of the night, Jones had completed 7 of 9 passes for 165 yards – and one of those incompletions could have been caught for a third TD.

The onslaught continued with another

Ohio State touchdown later in the second quarter. The Buckeyes marched 69 yards in six plays, facing little trouble against the Wisconsin defense. Elliott capped the drive with a 14-yard touchdown run that, following the Nuernberger PAT, made it 31-0 with 6:36 left before halftime.

Ohio State concluded a near perfect half with another key play in the final minute of the second quarter. Following another impressive punt by Johnston that was downed at the Wisconsin 5, the Badgers had the ball at the UW 12 when Bennett forced a Gordon fumble. The ball was scooped up at the UW 4 by sophomore defensive end Joey Bosa, who rumbled into the end zone with just 36 seconds left in the half.

"Honestly I was desperate to make a big play," Gordon said. "I lost focus on the ball. That's how it came out. I was just trying so hard to make a play, get the team going."

Following the Nuernberger PAT, the Buckeyes boasted a 38-0 lead that they took into halftime.

The first-half stats told the story of Ohio State's dominance. The Buckeyes outgained the Badgers 364-91, and Jones completed 10 of 13 passes for 211 yards and two touchdowns. Elliott scored a pair of touchdowns and had 150 yards on 12 carries. Smith caught three passes, including two for a TD, for 95 yards.

Conversely, Gordon was limited to 43 yards on 14 carries, an average of 3.1 yards per carry. Stave completed just 5

of 14 passes for 58 yards and an interception.

Jones and Smith connected again for a third touchdown in the third quarter. The Buckeyes extended their lead to 45-0 with 9:24 on the clock on the 42-yard touchdown pass. On a play-action play, Jones again threw a ball up for Smith to beat a Wisconsin defender in a one-on-one situation. And again, Smith won the battle, bringing down the ball in the end zone for a third time.

Freshman Curtis Samuel capped the scoring with a pair of fourth-quarter touch-

downs. The first came on a 12-yard run with 11:39 remaining, one play after a 60-yard run by Elliott in which he lost his shoe during the run to bring back memories of Keith Byars' famous run vs. Illinois in 1984. Nuernberger added the PAT after Samuel's scamper over the left side to up the OSU lead to 52-0.

With 2:25 remaining, Samuel added a 1-yard run that set the final score at 59-0.

"I'm almost really at a loss for words," Lee said. "I don't really know what to do because I'm still trying to figure out what just happened."



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KNOCKOUT PUNCH – Ohio State sophomore Joey Bosa (97) provided the exclamation point on the Buckeyes' dominant first half with a 4-yard fumble recovery for a touchdown in the final minute of the second quarter.

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