

The Sky Is The Limit For Brian Maisonneuve's Buckeyes



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When longtime Ohio State men's soccer head coach John Bluem retired on March 19, 2018, the trajectory of the program shifted forever. After 21 years in Columbus, four Big Ten titles, 17 Major League Soccer draft picks and all 10 of Ohio State's appearances in the NCAA tournament - including a national title appearance in 2007 - Bluem's program had started to falter in his final seasons, with the Buckeyes falling to 5-13-1 in his penultimate season and 8-10-1 in his final year.

It's hard to dispute his status as an Ohio State legend, given his ability to elevate and maintain what had been a largely listless program prior to his arrival. But the Buckeyes had fallen back behind the middle of the pack within the ultra-competitive Big Ten and were no longer equipped to compete with those at the top of the league, namely Indiana, Maryland, Michigan State and Penn State.

The blue-blood Hoosiers have served as the cream of the crop for decades, first under coach Jerry Yeagley - who led the program for 30 years and built it up to its national-contender status - and now under his son, Todd, who picked up where his dad left off seven years after the elder Yeagley's retirement, taking over in 2010 following the brief Mark Freitag tenure. If there's a program to replicate in the Big Ten, it's the one under Yeagley's command in Bloomington.

In replacing Bluem, the Buckeyes announced their intention to do just that - replicate the Hoosiers. On April 23, 2018, Ohio State hired Brian Maisonneuve, who had been Todd Yeagley's right-hand man and associate head coach since 2010, as well as his former teammate both at Indiana from 1991-94 and with the Columbus Crew from 1996-2002. You can't get much closer to the Indiana program than that without just hiring a Yeagley, and none of those were presently available for the Buckeyes.

For Ohio State, the move was a no-brainer.

Maisonneuve has spent essentially his entire soccer life in the region, growing up in Michigan, playing for Indiana and then suiting up for the Crew for eight seasons (1996-2004) before spending time as a coach with both the Hoosiers and the Louisville Cardinals. There are very few coaches, assistant or otherwise, with as many ties to the area that Ohio State would like to recruit more than Maisonneuve, and there's no program that Ohio State would like to mirror more than Indiana's. For Maisonneuve, Ohio State was obviously appealing enough to pluck him away from one of the top programs in the nation, but it was not a job without its challenges, especially with it in the state it was in when he arrived.

"We knew we were coming into some challenges," Maisonneuve told BSB. "We knew what was in front of us, that we had some work to do. It's (been a) great experience, but there were some challenges. We knew that it was going to take some time, building the culture that we wanted. John Bluem, who was here before us, he did a great job as well, but we wanted things a little bit differently and it takes time to build it."

It certainly took time and some serious growing pains for the new-look Buckeye staff to return Ohio State to its comfort zone of competing in the Big Ten. Ohio State bottomed out in year one under Maisonneuve, winning the second game of his tenure against Hofstra and then losing 14 of the final 16 games, with two draws mixed in on the way to a 1-15-2 record, the worst for the program since 1972, when Bill Servedio went 0-9-2. It was a season of struggles and heartbreaking results for the Buckeyes, who went to overtime on four different occasions and couldn't once notch a victory, along with seven losses by just one goal. Ohio State was without any sort of consistent goal scoring and lacked the kind of defense needed to make up for its severe offensive impotence.

Those early troubles weren't especially surprising. Maisonneuve and his staff arrived after the spring practice window when the roster had already departed for summer break, meaning that their first season on the job was pieced together with a patchwork fall camp and practices between games, nowhere near enough time to establish much in the way of strategy or culture.

Season two saw the Buckeyes deal with similar issues, namely in the goal scoring department, but with a spring camp to develop and begin to install a system, Ohio State did take a step forward. It improved to 7-11-1 and found a number of stable contributors to build around moving forward, with defenders Joshua Jackson-Ketchup and Sean Ryan, midfielders Xavier Green and Matteo Bennati, and forward Devyn Etling chief among them. Star forward Jack Holland led the team in points and departed after his senior season, but just about the entire remainder of the roster was set to return, meaning another year of spring development and, if things went to plan, another jump for the Buckeyes in 2020.

Given the nature of 2020, it goes without saying that things did not go to plan. That spring development period never came because of the coronavirus pandemic, nor did the fall season for the experienced Buckeyes, at least not as originally planned.

"We knew we were doing the right things," Maisonneuve said. "It was just going to take some time until things were where we wanted. And this year, you throw a COVID year that really slowed some things down, just in terms of we really only had one spring, which is usually a great time for us to really teach and develop. The fall is so much about preparing for a game and recovery from a game and because we play so many games in a short period of time. The spring is really about developing and building, and we've only had one of those springs, because our second spring was taken away. COVID really slowed some things down on the field, but we're happy with where we're at right now. We still have a lot of

work to do, but we're really, really happy with where we're at right now."

Despite the COVID pause and a much longer offseason than usual, with all non-football fall sports being kicked back into the winter and spring, Ohio State did still find a jump on the pitch, even if the record doesn't necessarily reflect it yet. The Buckeyes started the year with a 3-1-1 record - the lone loss coming in game one to those pesky Hoosiers - and made their first appearance in the top 25 of the Maisonneuve era, debuting at No. 21. They've fallen back since that peak and sit at 3-5-1 entering Big Ten tournament play set to open April 10, but the step forward shows on the pitch. Even if it didn't, the opportunity to return to play has been one that no one in Columbus is taking for granted.

"Oh, man, it's unbelievable," Maisonneuve said of getting back onto the field after the extended layoff. "I mean it, and I think the players feel the same way. It just makes you appreciate all you have when something takes it away, and then to get it back, it just makes you appreciate everything. All the small things or big things, the things that sometimes used to seem like an inconvenience, you're honored to have them back. It's been great to be back on the field, to be the coach and to be around the guys. To have everything that you love, to have coaching back, it feels so good."

As Ohio State closes out this season unlike any other, it hopes for nothing more than an eventual return to normalcy, to continue its development both on the pitch and in the locker room. Indiana's greatest strength is its culture, and the Buckeyes can't chase that program if they don't have the opportunity to install that culture themselves, and that takes time more than anything else.

"I know a lot of people say it, but it's just building the culture that you want from a coaching staff," Maisonneuve said, "What are the expectations? How do you go about things on a daily basis? I'm a big believer that what you do on a daily basis really determines your success and that championships and NCAA tournament bids are all a byproduct of what you do every single day. Those habits, things that you do every single day, are really created by the culture that you have. X's and O's don't mean anything if we don't have the right culture."

"We really needed to establish that, to get that down in terms of what we want our championship culture to look like. And then we can really focus on the X's and O's after building that right culture. It takes time. We've turned some good corners, but we took some injuries and we just weren't quite as deep as we needed to be (last season). This year, thank God, we're deeper, but we're still taking injuries, we're still dealing with protocols. We've been really thin at times, but a credit to our guys. They've battled and are really taking to heart a lot of the culture expectations. Now, on top of that, we've started implementing some of the more advanced X's and O's."

Although the name of the game is development and progress for the Buckeyes in the early days of this new era, it's hard not to recognize those who helped to set the stage for what Ohio State hopes will be a jump into the big time. Ohio State's current senior class - populated by goalkeeper Noah Lawrence; midfielder Joe Ortiz; Jackson-Ketchup; defender Mitch Bergman; Bennati; and the lone redshirt senior, defender Samuel Buzzas - has seen it all during their time in Columbus. They joined the Buckeyes during the downswing of the Bluem tenure, welcomed a new staff after one season (or two in the latter's case), drew or lost all but one game in a season and then suffered through a pandemic that nearly ended their college careers early.

Despite it all, the class has never wavered, taking to Maisonneuve's personality and approach right away to set the bedrock for the burgeoning program.

"They've done an unbelievable job of really taking the program to that next level," Maisonneuve said of his seniors. "Their leadership, their expectations, the quality that they bring every day in terms of focus and commitment and mind-set - they've really done a good job of setting that standard."

No one from that group has taken up the mantle more than Jackson-Ketchup - who was one of three Buckeyes drafted in the MLS SuperDraft in January along with Lawrence and former defender C.C. Uche - but has remained in Columbus to finish out his college career with a bizarre senior season, but a senior season nonetheless.

"You can either elect to go out for the team that drafted you and try to sign a contract and you would forfeit your eligibility as a college soccer player, or you can elect to come back and finish out your season," Jackson-Ketchup told BSB. "Due to COVID, we were granted two extra seasons."

"Honestly, it was a blessing in disguise. It gave me some time to play my actual final senior season. And hopefully it will be my final season and I'll be playing with the Crew this summer and moving forward, I'll be onto my professional career."

It's been a wild ride both to Columbus and to the Columbus Crew (who selected him in the second round) for the star fullback. He originally committed to play at Wake Forest before flipping over and signing on with Bluem, spending one season under his tutelage.

"I first committed to Wake Forest, which was at the time the No. 1 team in the country," Jackson-Ketchup said. "They talked about all this stuff saying, 'Oh we can get you to the professional level,' and this and that. But some things fell through with financial aid, and so I had to turn them down. I had to decommit, and I had to find someone else. Ohio State came to one of my games. I went to Montverde Academy for high school, which is a private boarding school in Orlando, and they came out to my game. They had talked to me and my parents and offered me some scholarship money at the time, and they just said, 'Come up, just take a visit, and I promise you will be committing here.'"

"I was thinking, 'I don't really want to go to Ohio,' but then I came up for visit. Once I got here, it was history. They were right. The people, the staff, the way that they treat the players, they treat them like family. When you come in, it's not just about doing your four years and then you're gone, spread your wings and fly on your own. You're a Buckeye for life, and that's something they emphasized from the very get-go, from day one before I even stepped foot onto the campus. That's what they would always say on the phone whenever I talked to them."

Despite signing on to play for the old regime, Jackson-Ketchup, along with the rest of the roster, could tell that it was time for a change when Bluem stepped away.

"Really, it was just about having heart," Jackson-Ketchup said. "That was something that we kind of lacked in the couple of years before Coach was here. We didn't really have a purpose that we were playing for, we were just going out to play with John Bluem, and as always, I give my thanks to him, but in his last few years he was just on his way out. We didn't really feel motivated. It was something that we lacked."

"Once Coach Maisonneuve came in, he said, 'I can feel that you guys want to play, but you don't have that energy every day. We need to instill that drive into everybody. We need to make sure that everything is a battle at practice. That battle is preparation for the next game that's coming up. Even if it's a scrimmage, we're battling there as well. That's something that we always need to work on.' It was

a building process, and it was something that everybody was on board with, because we all felt that we needed a coach that was willing to give us drive and to keep pushing us forward, to get better each and every day. And that's something that we really didn't have (early in my career)."

The struggles in year one made Maisonneuve's message a bit harder to digest and portended more work on that front, but Jackson-Ketchup says that the new-look staff jelled with the Buckeye roster right away and that it was only a matter of time for everything to start to click into place.

"I would say, as far as relationship-wise, everybody loved him," Jackson-Ketchup said. "But due to our record in my sophomore year, we struggled. It was not even that we were playing bad games. We would have a great game, we'd just come up short. It really wasn't the quality.

"But as far as relationships, we really didn't miss a beat with Coach. He really rallied us up, and he kept us motivated every game. Even when we were at 1-9-2 or something like that, we still felt that we had a chance to keep fighting, keep going on through it and we didn't feel down about, 'Oh dang, we have to play another game,' or just playing not to lose. We still were going out there to battle each and every single time, no matter what our record was. We didn't care."

It certainly helped Maisonneuve's cause that he came in with a staff loaded with coaches who had played and coached at the highest levels of American soccer.

"I was kind of starstruck," Jackson-Ketchup said. "Really it was like, 'Wow, these guys are really a star-studded crew coming from top-tier colleges and the top-tier programs of the professional level,' especially with Maisonneuve's experience and (director of operations) Chad Barson, who is not really a coach but he still chimes in here and there with some points. He played the same position that I do now, and he played it professionally, and he's just such a great help.

"The whole staff is just incredible. They know what they're doing. The preparation, this is really next level. Honestly, it's top-tier, and Maisonneuve's experience, the way that he came in, he didn't miss a beat. He kind of hit the ground running, and everybody was rallying up with him because he just knew what he was talking about. It just seemed like he was ready to go, and you could just feel the experience that he was bringing in."

Even though he won't be a part of the future on the pitch for the Buckeyes, Jackson-Ketchup sees a bright path forward for the program that helped prepare him for the next level.

"I really think Ohio State could be a national contender," Jackson-Ketchup said. "I think we can definitely make the tournament and that could be a consistent thing with Maisonneuve, just from the culture that he's installing into this program. It's all about staying motivated and giving us the power to set goals for ourselves. That's something that we hadn't done, where he would tell us, 'What do you guys want to accomplish? Whatever you guys want to accomplish, I want to help you guys get there.'

"And of course, everybody wants to win but to what degree? With us being able to now say that, 'Yes, we want to be in the tournament, we want to contend for a national title. We want to win the Big Ten, we want to win the Big Ten championship just like everybody else.' Everybody else wants to win as well, but it was the way that he was saying that he would help us, the way that he would go out and ride for us and tell us, 'OK, if you want to do this, this is what it's going to take.' At practice, he'll bring that mentality, and he'll tell us exactly what we need to do. He'll break it down and keep it real with us, and that's something that we really needed."

As the Buckeyes improve that culture with another offseason - COVID-allowing - they're building up quite the roster as well. Ohio State's recruiting has seen a significant uptick under its new management, headlined by an excellent freshman class, with none more impactful from the jump than English midfielder Laurence Wootton, a product of the Cardiff City and Stoke City academies who came to America to play for the Buckeyes. He was one of three international products in the class and looks to be the future of the Buckeye midfield.

"Our staff did a great job of really identifying what we needed and then going out and finding it," Maisonneuve said. "At a school like Ohio State, we like to get the best Buckeyes in the state and then in the region. It's a school that has a draw even if you have to go out of the region or even out of the country. Because it's Ohio State, you can get some of those top recruits, and we are fortunate to do that."

Wootton hopes to be the man leading the Buckeyes into the future.

That word, future, is a big one at Ohio State right now. It's hard not to be swept up in Maisonneuve's energy and passion for soccer and for building up a program that can last at Ohio State. It shows on the recruiting trail and on the pitch, where the former United States Men's National Team standout often looks as though he could slip on a Buckeye jersey and dominate just as he did in Columbus as a member of the Crew. He doesn't see a ceiling for the program that he's been tasked with building, and through three seasons, there's no reason to doubt that assessment.

"We're (still) developing the big picture," Maisonneuve said. "There's no reason that Ohio State can't be one of the best programs in the Big Ten or even in the country with the resources, with the athletic department, in the Big Ten conference, one of the best conferences in the country. There's no reason why we can't be battling for Big Ten championships and national championships here in the near future."